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THIS paper aims firstly to summarize some of my research on the pattern of change in the process of mate choice, in particular the shift from arranged marriages to "love matches," in Chengdu, Sichuan. Secondly, I want to address the "so what" question. Does it make any difference for the nature of marital relations whether a couple experienced an arranged or a free choice marriage? Finally, since I conducted research from Hong Kong earlier on changes in mate choice in the People's Republic of China (PRC), I want to summarize some thoughts about the relative advantages and disadvantages of research in Hong Kong versus work on the same topics within the PRC.

The data for this paper come from a survey I conducted in collaboration with two Chinese sociologists, Xu Xiaohu and Yuan Yayu, from Sichuan University in the two main urban districts of Chengdu in 1987. The questionnaire for that survey was based in part on an earlier study I directed in the Detroit area, so in some instances I will be able to make comparisons with the situation in a major American urban area.¹ In the Chengdu survey we interviewed a probability sample of 586 ever-married women in that city. (In the Detroit research I was unfortunately unable to obtain funds to interview the husbands also, and so the Chengdu replica-

tion was restricted to women.) Most of the questionnaire focused not on attitudes and values, but on reports of behavior and experiences, currently and in the past. The recollections of premarital and mate choice experiences of these women are the primary concern here. These women first married over a span of 55 years, from 1933 to 1987, and by dividing them up into groups according to when they first married, we can get a rough indication of how much the process of mate choice has changed. The groups formed in this way I will refer to as "marriage cohorts," and in keeping with most research on the PRC, I will divide them by important political turning points, rather than simply by decades. Thus I will focus on the mate choice experiences of five marriage cohorts of Chengdu women: those who first married before 1949 and then in the periods 1949-57, 1958-65, 1966-76, and 1977-87.

It is assumed that the readers are quite familiar with the dominant mate choice customs of pre-1949 China and with what the official reform goals were in regard to marriage. One of the issues of concern in my research is gauging to what extent the actual changes that have occurred can be explained by officially directed change efforts or whether they are the result of other change mechanisms. Here are the results of the Chengdu survey.

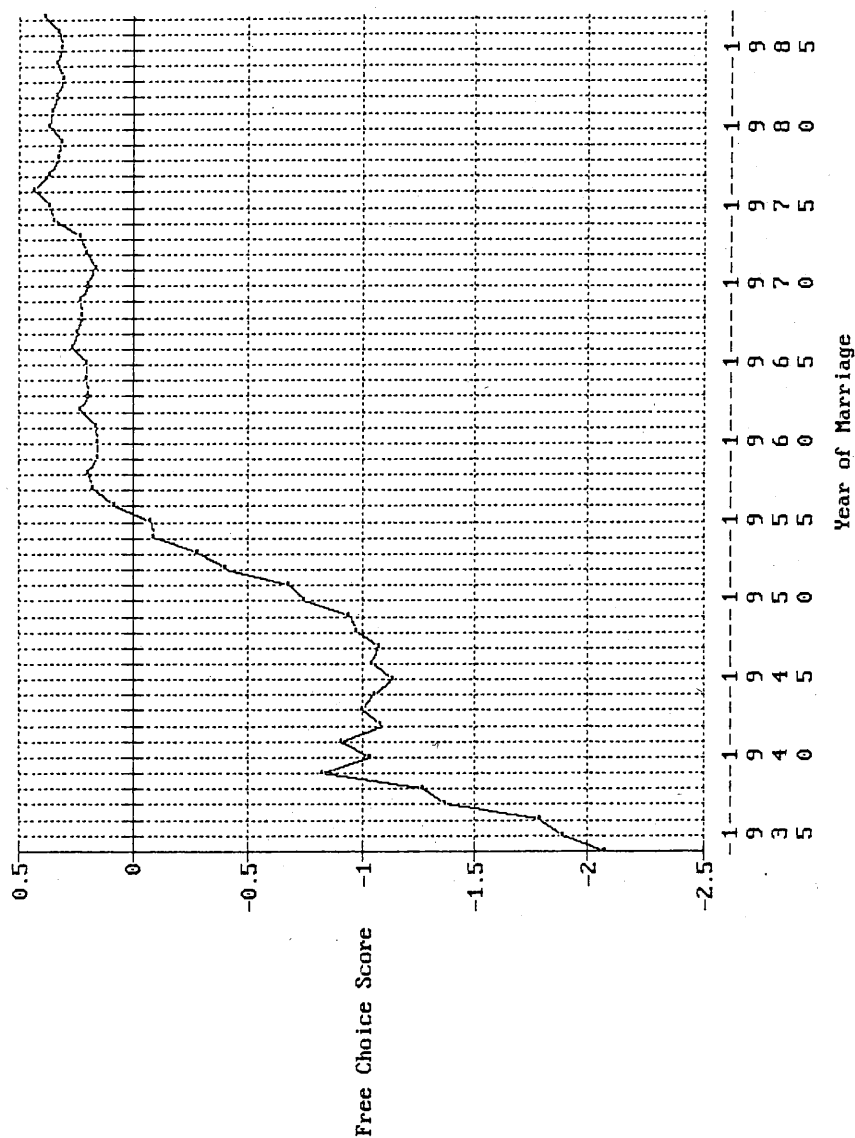
Several general patterns are visible in the figures presented in Table 1. First, it is obvious that a major shift away from arranged marriages, and toward free choice marriages, has occurred. The youngest women we interviewed, those who were members of recent marriage cohorts, were more likely than older women to have played a major role in the decision to marry, to have met their husbands directly or through an introduction from peers, rather than parents, to have dated prior to marriage, to have had one or more romances, and to recall feeling in love prior to marriage.

A second pattern is not so apparent from these figures: despite the dramatic changes noted, even for the youngest women there is still something considerably short of a fully developed dating culture in Chengdu. Introductions and parental influence still played some role, many women we interviewed rarely or never dated their husbands prior to marriage, and most women did not have other serious boyfriends or marriage prospects besides the men they eventually married. The Detroit study provides some basis for comparison here. In that sample, consisting of American

Table 1 Changes in Aspects of Freedom of Mate Choice in Chengdu (%)

Item	Year First Married				
	1933-48	1949-57	1958-65	1966-76	1977-87
1. Traditional Arranged Marriage	69	22	1	0	0
2. Type of Marriage					
Arranged	68	27	0	1	2
Intermediate	15	33	45	40	41
Individual choice	17	40	55	59	57
3. Dominant Role in Mate Choice					
Parents	56	30	7	8	5
Mixed	15	11	6	3	6
Respondents	28	59	87	89	89
4. Introduced to Husband	91	76	54	59	60
5. Who Provided the Introduction					
Own generation	38	43	75	75	74
Parents' generation	53	40	18	19	17
Others	8	17	7	6	9
6. Dated Husband Prior to Marriage					
Often	12	17	24	40	48
Sometimes	6	18	27	13	21
Rarely	23	22	30	31	24
Never	59	44	18	16	7
7. Number of Romances					
None	73	29	9	5	5
One	24	63	74	66	67
More than one	3	8	18	29	28
8. Had Other Marital Prospects	4	5	2	6	9
9. How Much in Love When Married					
1. Completely	17	38	63	61	67
2.	26	29	22	26	19
3.	35	20	9	11	10
4.	9	4	4	1	3
5. Not at all	13	9	2	1	0
(N)	(71)	(107)	(82)	(116)	(210)

Figure 1 Freedom of Mate Choice Moving Average



women between the ages of 20 and 75, 66% had other boyfriends besides their first husbands, and 45% seriously considered marrying someone else, compared to percentages of 28% and 9% for even the youngest Chengdu women. Virtually all Detroit women dated their husbands prior to marriage. Dating, then, plays a different role in contemporary Chengdu than in the West. It is mostly seen as a practice that allows you to get better acquainted with the person you plan to marry. It is not a device to help you decide whom you want to marry. To state the matter in a different way, even though young people in Chengdu for the most part made the decision themselves about whom to marry, most did so without prior dating experience, and they had to get acquainted with prospects and made up their minds in other ways, since dating only occurs once the decision had been made. After the decision is made, it also seems very difficult to change your mind and decide to marry someone else. Particularly for women, there is a common presumption that fickleness prior to marriage may indicate infidelity after marriage.

A third pattern in the figures in Table 1 pertains to the fact that for most of these questions, there is little sign of much change in recent marriage cohorts. The most dramatic changes are concentrated among women who married prior to 1958. In order to investigate this pattern more precisely, I created a freedom of mate choice summary scale (from items #1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9 in Table 1) and graphed values of this scale against the exact year of marriage. The results are shown in Figure 1. (A three year moving average has been used to smooth out random fluctuations, in order to see the overall trend more clearly.)

The graph in Figure 1 shows several interesting features. First, as the work of scholars such as Olga Lang and Marion Levy should have led us to expect, we see clear signs of dramatic changes away from the arranged marriage system even before 1949. Although this change appears to have stalled in the 1940s, further dramatic shifts toward greater freedom of mate choice occurred in the lives of women who married during the 1950s. Since that time, however, only very minor further shifts toward greater freedom of mate choice have occurred. Neither the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution nor the economic changes and cultural open-door to the West of the reform period has had much impact on the process

of mate choice in urban Chengdu.

How would I explain this pattern? I refer to the trend visible in Figure 1 as “stalled convergence.” What this means is that the process of mate choice began to shift away from the traditional custom of arranged marriages, but since the 1950s it has become “stalled” in an intermediate pattern that still falls short of the degree of free choice and development of dating that are visible in more modern societies (not only in the West, but also in such places as Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). I argue that this pattern of stalled convergence indicates that neither Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pressure for marriage reform nor Western influence is the primary influence on changes in the mate choice process. Rather, the explanation is to be found in the altered grassroots social structures of urban China.

In studies of a variety of societies by William Goode and others, freedom of mate choice arises with modernization as the family’s ability and desire to control the coming into adulthood of their children diminish. Property and dowries controlled by parents become less important, as does parental training in work skills. Increasingly, formal education and placement into jobs through non-kin and bureaucratic routes dominate the process of acquiring adult status. This transition is gradual, however, as the slow process of modernization reduces the proportion of families that are units of production and increases the proportion of individuals employed outside the home. In Western contexts it is also assumed that educational authorities, employers, and other “gatekeepers of adulthood” of the external, bureaucratic world are largely indifferent to the private lives and marital choices of young people. In this sort of context, power over mate choice lost by parents and kin groups is power gained by the young.

The situation in the PRC is in several key respects different. Parental power has declined, to be sure. In fact, the socialist transformation that occurred in urban China during the mid-1950s meant that parental control of adult resources (property, housing, education, jobs, work skills) declined suddenly and sharply, rather than over decades and even centuries, as in the West. But much of that power was lost to bureaucratic work units, neighborhoods, and other agencies of the state, and these organizations were decidedly not indifferent to the private lives and mate choice

practices of the young. Young people did not gain that much autonomy as a result. State authorities attempted to foster freedom of mate choice, but at the same time they followed practices that inhibited the development of any sort of dating culture, and they effectively squelched the beginnings of a dating culture that had existed prior to 1949. As part of the general spartan atmosphere fostered after 1949, a variety of recreational venues and leisure time pursuits of the young were closed down. School and work organization spare time activities became decidedly utilitarian and controlled. Students in middle schools and colleges, as well as apprentice workers in factories, were forbidden to “talk romance.” An atmosphere was created which made it quite difficult for urban young people to engage in romantic exploration and experimentation.

I am arguing, and the figures in Table 1 and Figure 1 support this view, that this situation of stalled convergence, with bureaucratic agencies taking over from parents as primary checks on the premarital autonomy of the young, has continued with little change to the present (or at least up through 1987, the last year for which I have data). What about the new trends of the reform era? During this period the efforts of the state to tightly control all popular behavior have been relaxed. Western ideas and influences have been flooding back into China after an absence of more than thirty years. Through Western films and television shows, contact with foreign teachers, travel abroad, and in other ways, Chinese are being exposed to alternative models of behavior involving much greater youth autonomy, casual dating and premarital intimacy. Recreational venues catering to the young are on the increase, and the Chinese media are featuring discussions of “puppy love” among students, romances that do not work out, sexual desire and other formerly forbidden topics. In addition, some urbanites are leaving the comforts and control of state employment and engaging in private enterprise, a shift which should make them more independent of the bureaucratic arms of the state. Should not these trends be expected to produce a new shift toward the emergence of a dating culture and greater freedom for the young? Perhaps, but if so there is not much sign of such a new trend among those women we interviewed in 1987.

My claim is that the figures discussed here show that in

Chengdu, at least, the changes in urban social organization produced by the reforms, as of the late-1980s, had still not been of great consequence. Most young people still saw the bureaucratic agencies of the state as the primary determiners of what kinds of adult lives they would lead. In this context they still had not gained much more autonomy or ability to engage in romantic experimentation and exploration than their elder siblings or parents had possessed. Perhaps Chengdu is in these respects more conservative than other cities. I am currently involved in new projects designed to carry out similar surveys in Beijing and in Baoding, Hebei, and I plan to use these to see whether reform era changes in the direction of greater freedom of mate choice have been greater in other locales than in Chengdu.

In our Chengdu survey we examined a number of other aspects of the mate choice process, including premarital sexuality, ages at marriage, how the wedding was celebrated and where the couple lived after they married. As these features have already been discussed elsewhere,² I do not want to go into them in details here. Instead, let me keep the focus on the issue of the transformation from arranged to free choice marriages and raise the “so what” question. What are the implications of this transformation for the nature of relations between husbands and wives in urban China? Most Westerners, as well as most Chinese reformers, assume that the shift to free choice marriages is “progressive” and leads to better relations between husbands and wives. Individuals will be happier and marriages will be more harmonious, if they are the result of individual choice rather than parental arrangement. Arranged marriages, in contrast, force people to marry individuals they may never have met and who are selected for family reasons with little regard for personal compatibility.

I submit that this “progressive” view of the matter is incorrect. Let me first review the contrary view, one that might be espoused by Chinese traditionalists and advocates of arranged marriages. In this alternative view, love matches “start out hot and grow cold, while arranged marriages start out cold and grow warm.” The claim here is that free choice and romantic love produce intense attraction and idealization of the partner prior to, and possibly in the early stages of, marriage. However, this “heat” cannot be sustained, and daily married life must inevitably pall against the

idealized expectations established by premarital love. The result is that marital happiness can be expected to decline over the course of the marriage, as things “grow cold.” In fact, there is a considerable amount of research conducted in Western societies that shows a common pattern of decline in marital satisfaction and feelings of love for the spouse over the course of the marriage. Traditionalists also point out that it may not be accidental that societies with marriage through romantic love also tend to have high divorce rates. Again, the argument is that romance is not a reliable, long-term basis for a stable and satisfying marriage.

Arranged marriages, argue the traditionalists, are quite different. Since the couple do not have a romantic relationship to start with, their relations “have nowhere to go but up.” Perhaps an arranged marriage couple will never reach the level of excitement and romance of couples in the premarital stage of love matches – they may become “warm” but not “hot.” Even so, at any point in their marriage couples can look back favorably, rather than unfavorably, upon where their relationship started. On this basis a more enduring and satisfying bond will develop. An additional argument of the traditionalists is more along the lines of “mother knows best” – that parents, in their wisdom, are in a better position to select a partner for long-term compatibility than are love-smitten young people.

This sort of arguments by advocates of arranged marriages is illustrated graphically in Figure 2. It shows what a hypothetical summary of the argument of the traditionalists would look like, with the claimed decline from initial high levels (growing cold) of love matches and the more modest improvements (growing warm) of arranged marriages. Which is the reality, though, this arguments of the traditionalists or the views of free choice marriages as more harmonious? This is a very important question, particularly for individuals living in societies in the midst of a transition from arranged to free choice marriages, but it turns out that this question has rarely been addressed empirically.³ With the data from our Chengdu project, we can investigate the issue. In Figure 3 I display a graph of mean values of what I call the “marriage quality scores” of women in arranged and free choice marriages for various lengths of marriage.⁴

Figure 3 shows patterns which are quite different from the

Figure 2 Hypothetical Trends for Marriage Satisfaction in Love Matches and Arranged Marriages

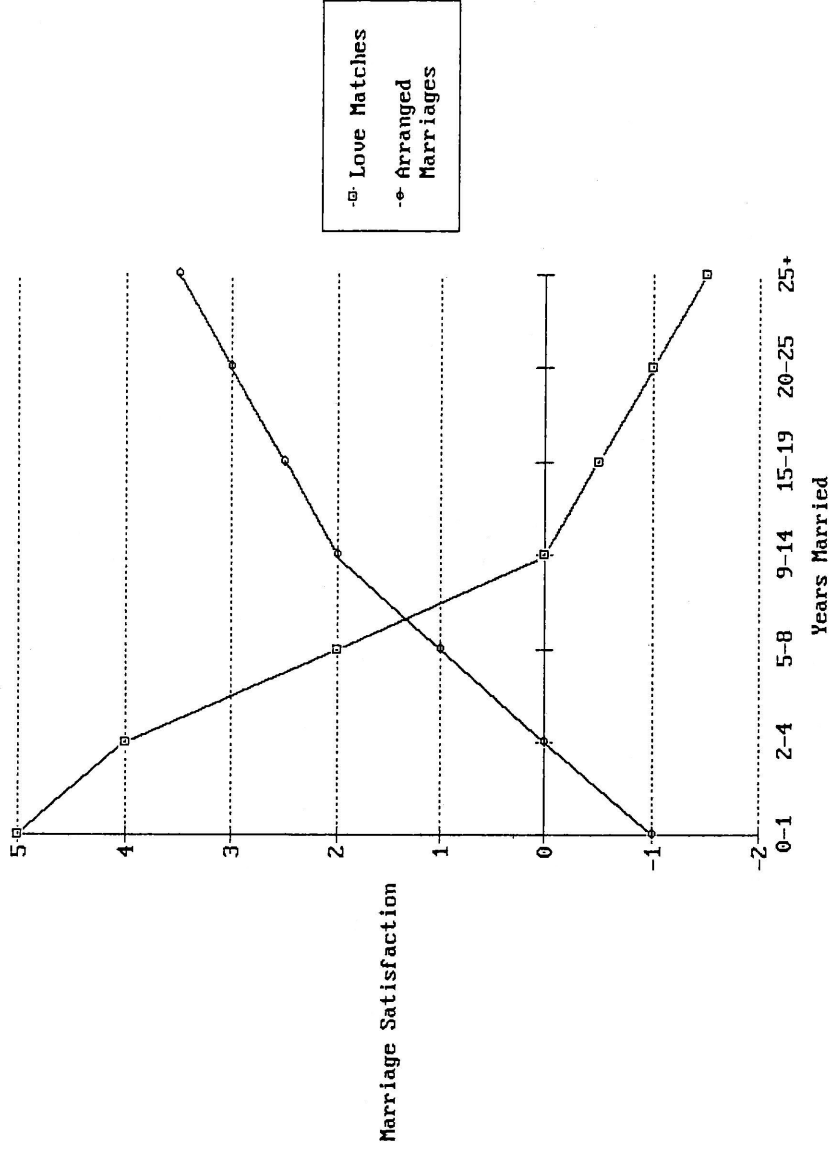
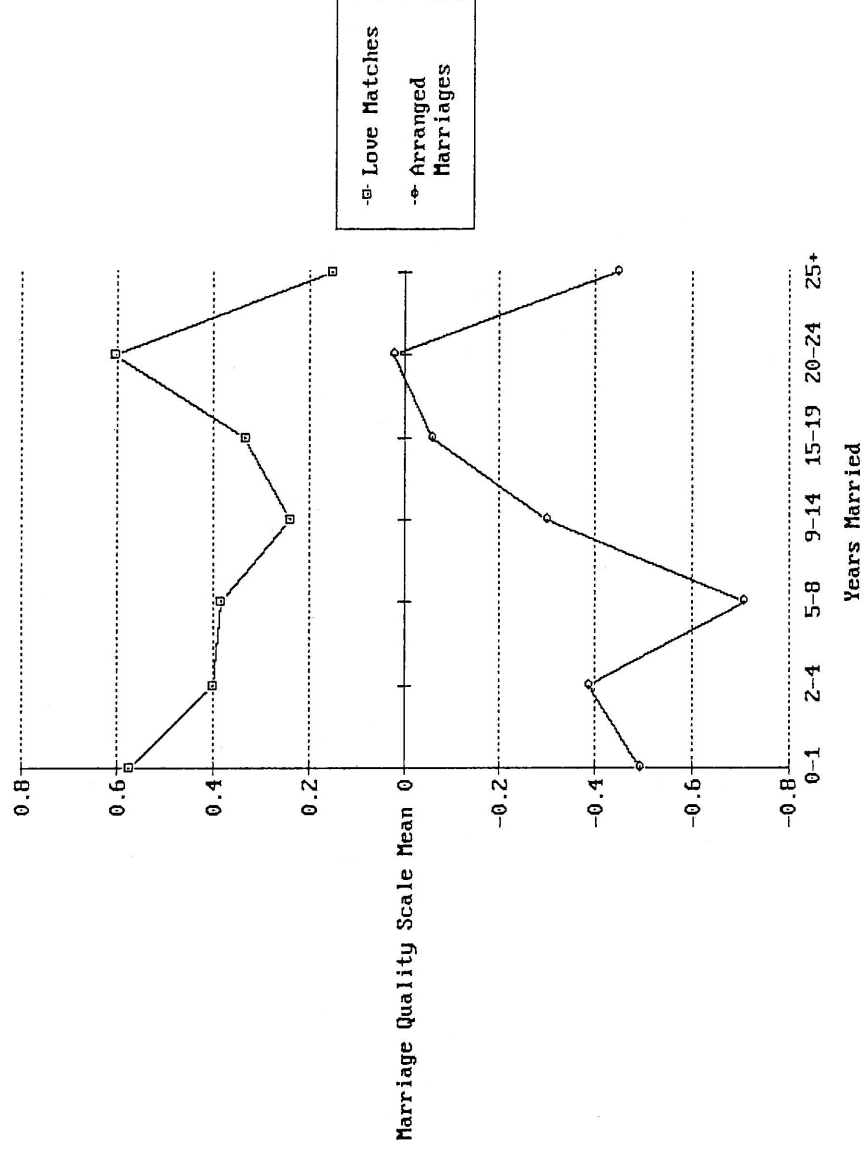


Figure 3 Marriage Quality by Mode of Mate Choice in Chengdu



hypothetical summary of the traditionalist arguments shown in Figure 2. In our Chengdu data it turns out that, at each length of marriage, the women who had experienced "love matches" rated their marital relationships more positively than did women who had undergone arranged marriages. (Unfortunately, we were not able to interview the husbands, and we do not know if we would find the same pattern of preferences among men.) It is also important to note that in our Chengdu sample, likelihood of divorce was associated not with love matches but with arranged marriages. Divorce is still relatively uncommon in urban China, with only 3.9% of the first marriages of women in the Chengdu sample having ended in divorce, compared with 25.9% of the first marriages of my Detroit sample. However, there was a statistically significant tendency for divorce within the Chengdu sample to occur more often to women who had experienced arranged than free choice marriages. So in this regard as well free choice marriage appears preferable. The one puzzle shown in Figure 3 is that there is not much sign of the general trend observed in other societies for marriages to "grow cold" with time, either for love matches or for arranged marriages. My Chinese colleagues and I are presently examining our results further to see whether Chinese extended family organization, distinctive cohort experiences, or some other factors might explain why women who have been married for a considerable time are as satisfied, or even more so, than relatively new Chinese brides.

In conclusion, it does make a noticeable difference whether a marriage occurred through parental arrangement or individual choice. The data from the Chengdu survey refute the claims of the traditionalists, and support the views of most Westerners and Chinese reformers that free choice marriages are generally "better," in the sense of producing marital relations that are viewed as more positive and satisfying (at least by the wives).

The final issue I want to address concerns the relative merits and problems of doing research on Chinese society within the PRC as opposed to from Hong Kong. Since I conducted earlier research (in collaboration with William Parish) from the old Universities Service Centre in 1977-78 on changes in mate choice and marriage in urban China, I have some basis for making a comparison. Let me organize my ideas on this topic into three categories - condi-

tions favoring work within the PRC, conditions that are neutral, and considerations favoring work in Hong Kong.⁵

First, in terms of the pluses of doing research on sites within the PRC, several considerations deserve mention. Of prime importance is the fact that within the PRC you can design probability samples and interview from a known population, so that you can have some confidence in generalizing your findings to that population. In these respects the process of "refugee interviewing" in Hong Kong is less ideal, since you take individuals as they come to you and have no clear idea how representative or unrepresentative they might be of some underlying population back in the PRC. It is also possible, as in our Chengdu survey, to utilize standard survey research techniques and carry out enough interviews to make possible fairly systematic quantitative analysis. The results are more likely to be acceptable to "mainstream" sociologists and other social scientists than the sorts of unconventional procedures utilized to analyze data from Hong Kong interviews with emigres. In addition, you can of course study locales in the PRC remote from Hong Kong, whereas interviewing in the colony works best if your topic allows you to focus on people from Guangdong or at least from coastal locales. (Bill Parish and I did not locate any individuals from Sichuan to interview for our urban study, although we did have some former residents of Kunming, Zhengzhou, and other non-coastal locales.) Through work in the PRC you can also collaborate with sociologists in that society and perhaps contribute in a small way to the development of the field of sociology in the PRC. Finally, there are advantages to being able to live for a period in the site you are studying and see with your own eyes the settings described by your interviewees, rather than having to reconstruct them mentally from verbal reports.

The most important point to be made on the "neutral" side of this weighing of the relative merits of research in Hong Kong versus within the PRC is that it is not clear that one site is clearly preferable, in terms of the desire to obtain accurate information about social life in the PRC. Research in each site has to contend with distinctive biases and constraints, and a switch from one site to the other involves a trade-off of one set of problems for another. On balance, though, I would argue that my research within the PRC has not yielded "surprises." For the most part the project in

Chengdu has reconfirmed and added details to what I knew about urban family life and urban society more generally in the PRC, based upon my previous work in Hong Kong. It has not forced me to rethink or modify in any major way conclusions reached from that earlier research. Of course, insofar as interviews in Hong Kong with former residents of the PRC have become more difficult to arrange and carry out since my last attempt in 1978, and assuming that they will become even more difficult to pursue as 1997 approaches, the issue of selecting one site or the other may become increasingly moot.

A final set of considerations argue in favor of the value of research, and particularly emigre interviewing research, in Hong Kong. The most important consideration here is that there are fewer constraints on topics and questions one can research in Hong Kong, compared to the PRC. Even research within the PRC on quite mundane topics that would seem not to be politically sensitive can be derailed, with many months of work wasted, when China's volatile politics takes an unexpected turn. I can testify personally to this problem, since one of my new projects, designed to carry out a survey in Baoding, Hebei, very similar to the one in Chengdu was postponed for a year after the Tiananmen Massacre, then resumed, and now has been "suspended" indefinitely once again. For the moment, at least, one does not face this sort of uncertainty in planning research within Hong Kong. There are some other considerations favoring Hong Kong, such as the availability of the well-organized and readily accessible library collection on contemporary Chinese society at the Universities Service Centre and the fact that one can talk to foreigners and Chinese with experience in multiple locales within the PRC, thus helping to set research on any particular Chinese site in a broader perspective. For me a final very important point in favor of Hong Kong is the opposite side of the coin I mentioned earlier in talking about the advantages of fieldwork within China. To do work in the PRC requires you to live there, often for extended periods, and one is thus denied the considerable pleasures and stimulation of living in Hong Kong. On this ground alone I would recommend that as many researchers as possible at least find ways to combine stints in Hong Kong with fieldwork in China, if not selecting Hong Kong as their primary site!

Notes

1. The results of the Detroit survey are reported in my book, *Dating, Mating, and Marriage*, New York: Aldine, 1990.
2. Martin K. Whyte, "Changes in Mate Choice in Chengdu," in Deborah Davis and Ezra Vogel, eds., *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 181-214.
3. An exception is a study conducted in Japan in the 1950s, Robert O. Blood, Jr., *Love Match and Arranged Marriage*, New York: Free Press, 1967. The analysis I present in the following pages is a condensed version of a recently published paper from our Chengdu project. See Xu Xiaohu and Martin King Whyte, "Love Matches and Arranged Marriages: A Chinese Replication," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52 (August 1990):709-722.
4. The marriage quality scale is a mean of seven different questions contained in our survey, including how much of their free time was spent together, how often the husband told the wife of his feelings, how often she told him of her feelings, how affectionate he was toward her, how affectionate she was toward him, how much concern he showed for her problems and feelings, and how much overall satisfaction the wife felt with her marriage. In separating out cases of arranged and free choice marriages we used summary freedom of mate choice scale scores (which were graphed in Figure 1) and omitted roughly one-third of the sample who had intermediate scores, in order to compare relatively "pure" cases of arranged and free choice marriages.
5. I have previously presented a more extended discussion focusing on the relative merits of Hong Kong interviewing. See my paper, "On Studying China at a Distance," in Anne F. Thurston and Burton Pasternak, eds., *The Social Sciences and Fieldwork in China: Views from the Field*, Boulder: Westview, 1983, pp. 63-82.