

# For China's youth, money often trumps love

*Editor's note: This is the third in a four-part series of articles providing a snapshot of modern life in China in observance of Oct. 1, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Part one ran Sept. 20, part two ran Sept. 27 and the conclusion will be printed next Sunday.*

**BY JOCELYN EIKENBURG**  
*For The Journal*

**A**nya Wang, a 36-year-old human resources professional, used to believe in a loving marriage until earlier this summer. Just when she and her fiancé were going to get married within a month or so, he left her — for a woman with more money. “I once wanted to marry for love,” Wang ad-

mitted. “But I’m changing my ideas. Maybe I will simply marry for personal benefit.”

Wang is not alone. Caroline Jin, a 33-year-old translator, voiced a similar change of heart during a recent conversation about dating and marriage. “Before, I didn’t care about whether my future husband had money and a home,” she explained.

“But now, I think I would expect those things.” She giggled with her hand covering her mouth, as if embarrassed to admit the truth.

Jin and Wang are changing the way they look at marriage. For them, and many others in China, money has increasingly edged out love in marriage decisions.

In modern China, a lot about marriage has changed. Ar-

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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anged marriages have been on the decline since the early 20th century. Young people of college age and older now date freely without the fear of supervision. Strict rules surrounding marriage — including work unit approval, invasive family background questionnaires and physical exams — were repealed in 2003, so now couples

only need to show a valid ID and pay a nominal fee to say “I do.”

So, how did money become so important in China’s marriages?

At one level, China, where the economy is still growing by close to 8 percent this year, has been revolving around money ever since former Chairman Deng Xiaoping, who spearheaded post-Mao economic reforms,

uttered the iconic phrase “to get rich is glorious.” Jingji fazhan — or economic development — is such a priority in China that Chinese officials are often evaluated based on the GDP of their jurisdiction, and the country even boasts top MBA schools such as the China Europe International Business

*See China, C3*

# China

Continued from C1

School in Shanghai. China's newest architectural superlatives, from the ultra-modern Shanghai Pudong skyline to Beijing's Olympic-era marvels, are omnipresent reminders of the deep, ambitious pockets financing them. Anything seems possible in China — and it is, if you have money.

As China is redefining itself and its skylines, the middle class is getting a redefinition as well. One that often leaves out your “average Zhou.”

The United Nations considers housing cost-to-income ratios from 3:1 to 6:1 as reasonable (3:1 is the average for the United States). But in China's major cities, the average housing cost-to-income ratio jumps to anywhere from 10:1 to 15:1 — and higher. It's no wonder, then, that many young people call themselves “fangnu,” or “slave to the home.”

Yet, for many, there is no choice. If you get married, you're expected to own your home, because this has been the tradition in China for thousands of years. Add a car to that equation (increasingly considered a middle-class status symbol), plus school tuition for your future “little emperor” (in general, China's schools are not free), and you're lucky to have



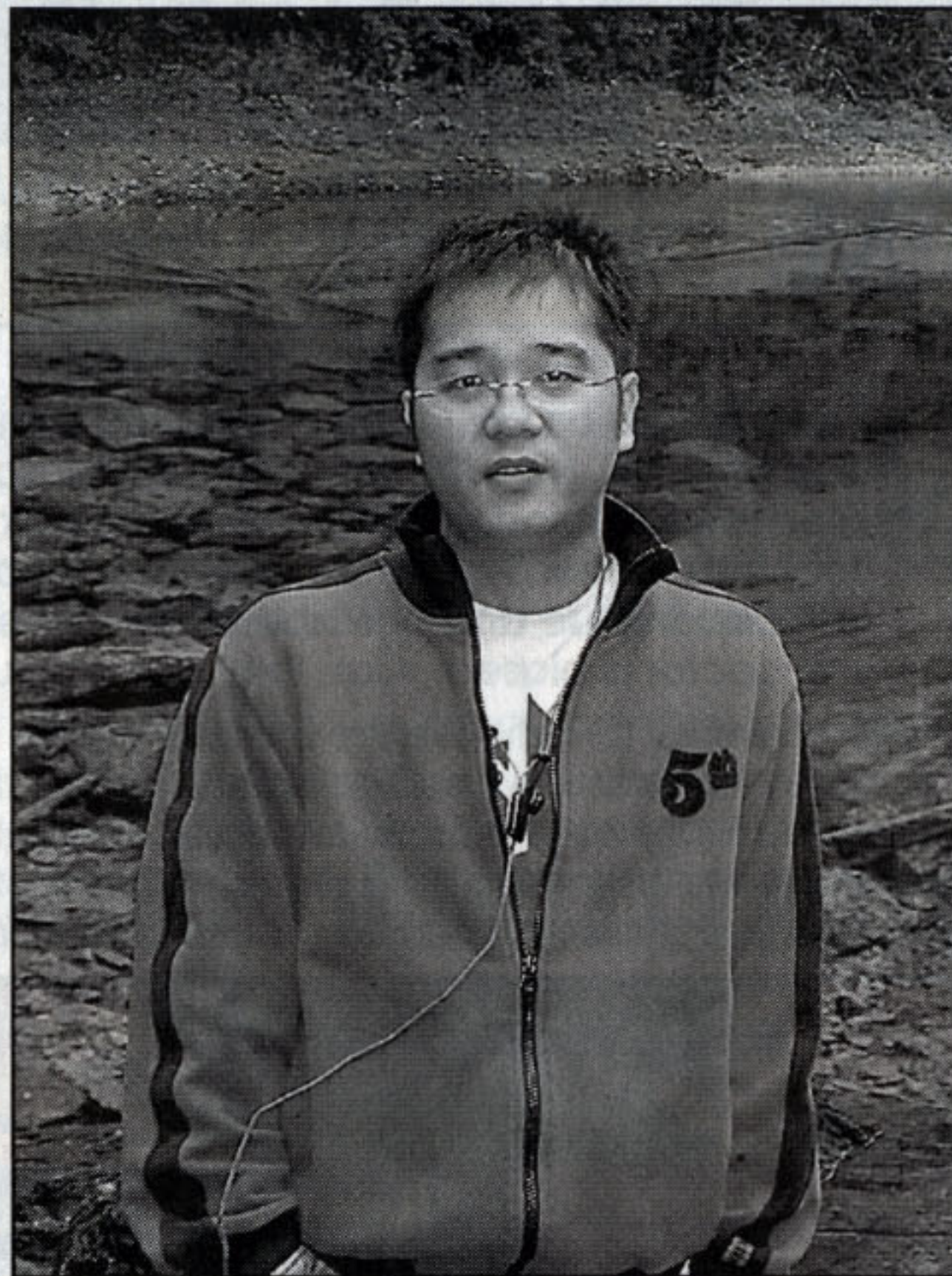
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**Can money buy love and marriage? Anya Wang's fiancé broke off their engagement to pursue a woman with more money than her.**

something left over to buy rice.

How can this be? One reason may lie in inadequate compensation. This is an era where college-educated people, even those with master's and doctorate degrees, are becoming the new “cheap labor” of China. People like Michael Pan, a 32-year-old college professor, and Zhang Guobin, a 31-year-old radio editor, are struggling to make ends meet, when their

jobs would provide a basic middle class existence in the U.S. Pan even gives evening and weekend classes to make up for his low salary. Meanwhile, today's wealthiest individuals in China — government officials, factory bosses and entrepreneurs — may not even have a college or graduate degree. It's no wonder, then, that the phrase “study is worthless” surfaces in conversations in China, and many women



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**Zhang Guobin, without an apartment or car, has trouble finding a mate in a China because marriage is often based on money. But he will never settle for less than true love, even parting with his girlfriend of three years because he didn't feel she loved him anymore.**

are advised with this saying: “It's better to marry well than study well.”

Nevertheless, while women might choose to “marry up” for financial benefit, it's generally not an option for average Chinese men without the means to “buy love.”

Zhang is one example. In early 2006, he eventually parted ways with his girlfriend of three years

when her family expressed disapproval of his financial situation — he had no home, car or high salary. Now, he still has no new girlfriend.

What about Peter Pi, a 34-year-old entry-level bureaucrat in Beijing's Education Bureau? He grew up in poverty in the countryside of Henan Province, lost his father when he was 26, and

lives in a rent-free government dormitory because he cannot afford Beijing's home prices. Plus, as the oldest son, he feels the pull of responsibility to care for his mother and younger brother's family. It was too much for his most recent girlfriend, who left him this year, just after Chinese New Year.

As long as real estate remains expensive, and cars continue to be a middle class “must-have,” young people — especially young men — may be priced out of their futures, or simply squeezed to their limits.

Nevertheless, love hasn't been completely divorced from marriage — especially for young men without money or status such as Pan and Pi. But when you do marry for love, it takes a certain understanding in a couple to make things work financially.

Pan can manage because his wife stays in the workforce, like many Chinese women, to help pay the mortgage. Pi recently mended ties with his girlfriend, who is now his fiancée. The fact that her parents offered to help them purchase a Beijing apartment didn't hurt their prospects.

As for Zhang, while it's hard to say if or when he can afford an apartment, or even a car, he still wants the one thing money truly can't buy — real love. Over coffee at Starbucks, the romantic Zhang shyly confesses: “I won't date a girl unless I have feelings for her.”