

Dating agencies can advise women on how to nab a marriage partner

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Bernice Chan



Matchmakers tell Bernice Chan why so many of the city's career women seek their help to snare a husband

Mei Ling Ng Liu is not one to mince words. She became a sensation last year after TVB's controversial reality dating show *Bride Wannabes*, in which she appeared as a matchmaker telling female participants what she really thought of them, and their chances of finding a partner.

In one episode, a participant is encouraged by a life coach to have plastic surgery to improve her looks. She declines, saying it is not the key to true love. But Liu tells her, "No man likes an ugly woman", suggesting that she should have gone under the knife.

When I ask women what they like, they say, 'Chanel handbags'. I tell them I don't have a man who likes Chanel bags in my database Mei Ling Ng Liu, matchmaker

The show generated interest and outrage, pulling in an estimated 1.7 million viewers.

The founder of dating service Hong Kong Matchmakers, which gives no-nonsense advice to clients - all of whom are female - seems to imply that Hong Kong women are all self-obsessed snobs.

"Hong Kong women should shut up and not complain so much," she says. Liu first summarised insights from her matchmaking experience last year in a guide, *How to Find a Husband*. She has followed it up with *The Man Manual: A Guide to Understanding Men*, which was launched last week at the Hong Kong Book Fair. It's available in Chinese and English.

She believes women aren't in a position to make many demands when the gender ratio is so skewed towards men. University of Hong Kong demographer Paul Yip Siu-fai estimates there are about 876 men for every 1,000 women in Hong Kong. In 2011, there were 209,000 single women, more than double the number in 1996. So females have tough competition finding a mate.

Violet Lim Seow Yan, co-founder of Lunch Actually, agrees.

When Lim first entered the industry in 2004, she thought all women had a fair chance of finding love at any age. So she was shocked to learn that men have a cut-off point of 35 years old or above. Now, she turns away clients in their late 30s and early 40s.

Faye Wong of Dateday agency.

"Men, in general, are visual, but Hong Kong men have an even higher standard for beauty. It's because of the celebrity culture and all the ads with beautiful people. I've had male clients reject women after a date or two because they think they are not beautiful enough. They know there are more women than men, so they can choose who they want," says Lim.

Liu believes Hong Kong women are too successful for their own good, and puts this down to their upbringing. "When we were young, we were always told, 'Study hard, don't wear lipstick, don't date now', and so a lot of successful career women don't have much dating experience. It turns out the ones who did wear lipstick and didn't study much got the husbands. You don't have to be the best," she says.

"We've had female clients who meet men on the first date and say, 'I graduated from Stanford, what about you?' Their arrogance and expectations irritate men. We also have women who are managing directors, but can't cook. Their achievements are a deterrent, because men want a good wife. If you can't cook and clean, he might as well marry a domestic helper."

But Lim plays down the prerequisite for domestic skills, saying most modern women don't cook. Faye Wong, founder of Dateday, says that if a woman can cook, it's now considered a bonus.

All three matchmaking companies offer makeover services, including fitness training, weight loss, date coaching, image consulting, and even make-up classes to help them improve their looks. The next step is modifying attitudes.

Dateday's Wong says that when women go on dates, they need to change their mindset from the boardroom to the dining room.

"Most of them have been in the workforce for more than 10 to 20 years in executive roles, and they have a business style. They are often demanding and have high expectations of themselves and others, including their soul mate. I have to remind them that it's a date, not a board meeting."

Lim advises women to avoid going on a date after a long day in the office, and instead meet the man on a weekend. "The women can pamper themselves with a massage, get their hair done, or have afternoon tea with their girlfriends before going on a date. That way they are more relaxed," she says.

"When you're on a date, avoid topics like politics, sex, religion and ex-boyfriends. Remember you are presenting the best of yourself."

Liu also finds many of her clients demanding when describing what kind of man they want. She throws it back at them, asking: "If you were a man, why should I marry you? What are you ready to invest in the relationship?" She reminds clients that being a wife takes practice, in terms of domestic skills and relationships.

"Women have become very specialised in their work, so they are very boring and ignorant out of the office. They have nothing to talk about and aren't interesting," Liu says. "When I ask women what they like, they say, 'Chanel handbags'. I tell them I don't have a man who likes Chanel bags in my database." She concedes that local women dress well, which is important because "if you do, it changes the way you walk, you become more beautiful and have more confidence, and you become more attractive".

Lim agrees, although she says many of her clients feel that men should like them just the way they are.

"Like it or not, dating is like a job interview. We always tell our clients to put the best version of themselves forward. This doesn't mean they don't have to be authentic. But it helps if they indulge in their femininity, though not to the point of looking too sexy.

"If someone wears trousers all the time, we may suggest they wear an A-line skirt, or wear some make-up if they don't normally. We want them to accentuate their features to maximise their success rate."

Many women rely on "the list" - writing down what they seek in a partner. "I don't believe in 'the list'," Liu says. "Throw it away." She believes it limits women in their opportunities for finding a compatible mate.

Lim, the author of *Lessons from 15,000 First Dates*, disagrees. But she says that the list should only contain up to three things a woman is looking for in a man: "It's like setting goals, things that are really important to you. This helps to give you some parameters to work with."

Liu regularly has to remind her clients that the best marriages are more about giving than receiving.

"A lot of Hong Kong women think, 'What can I get from him?' That's the wrong attitude. Think about it - you can't play tennis, you don't like to watch football and you can't cook. Why would he want to go out with you?" Once clients decide to listen, Liu says, there is a high success rate.

Wong and Lim are more diplomatic in advising their clients.

"Once women graduate, a lot of ladies focus on their careers, and getting a good job," Lim says. "Time passes quickly. So it's encouraging to see younger ladies making finding a mate a priority."

Su-Mei Thompson, chief executive of the Women's Foundation, a local NGO dedicated to the advancement of women, finds the matchmakers' views to be distinctly old-school.

"It is critically important that women are encouraged to be self-reliant, not just economically but in all aspects of life," Thompson says.

"We think women who lean in to life - by doing a job they enjoy, who have hobbies and are involved in sporting or social activities, who keep up with a network of family, friends and colleagues - have a better chance of sustained happiness in their lifetime and of forging relationships with husbands or partners which are based on mutual respect. Any other approach leaves women economically and emotionally vulnerable, and that cannot be a good thing."

Thompson adds that the traditional cultural attitudes that prevail in Hong Kong limit the opportunities available to women. "But we are optimistic that generational change will blow away a lot of these constraints," she says.

Liu founded Hong Kong Matchmakers five years ago to keep herself occupied after she retired.

Many of her girlfriends were still single, and she had accompanied them to see matchmakers.

"I was very disappointed with what I saw," she says. "They were charlatans making a buck, and that's because the industry is not regulated."

Liu decided to get certification from the Matchmaking Institute, New York, and gained more practical experience working as an assistant in offices around the world.

She returned here and tested her skills on her single girlfriends; they are now all happily married. Then she opened Hong Kong Matchmakers.

Liu herself is married with three daughters. Two are happily married, but one is going through a divorce. Did they follow any of her advice?

"They are my daughters. Do you think they do what their mother says?"

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