



Zhao Mei (inset, right) assists a woman in finding her perfect match at a matchmaking event at the Wang Po Teahouse stage (left) which has evolved into a grand dating variety show. — IC

Repurposing an ancient matchmaker, a modern love broker wins hearts and minds

Yang Jian

The recent surge in popularity of “Wang Po’s Matchmaking” at a tourism spot in central China presents an interesting case study in how traditional culture can be repurposed to meet the contemporary needs of young people wanting to find a sweetheart.

The central figure, Wang Po, is a character lifted from the classical Chinese novel “Water Margin,” an ancient matchmaker who is cunning and somewhat nefarious.

However, Zhao Mei, 61, who has been playing the role of Wang Po at the scenic spot of Wansui Mountain in Henan Province, transforms this somewhat negative figure into a positive, warm-hearted matchmaking auntie.

Her approach is straightforward and devoid of any pretense, making the process both genuine and engaging.

At showtime, the venue is packed with enthusiastic tourists, as Zhao, dressed

in traditional attire, invites young singles to the stage for matchmaking.

Under Zhao’s aegis, about 50 couples match up each year, and some of them make it to marriage. Her service is free of charge.

Within 30 days, social media focus on the mountain matchmaking gained 200,000 new followers and received nearly 20 million views on live broadcasts.

Ctrip, China’s largest online travel agency, reported more than a fivefold increase in bookings for the site over the three-day Qingming Festival holiday from April 4-6.

The success of this modern-day Wang Po can be attributed to several factors. First, she provides a platform for single men and women to find partners in a fun and pressure-free environment.

Second, her method of matchmaking taps into the collective yearning for real-life experiences in the age of digital isolation. By offering a space where people can meet and interact face-to-face, Zhao

offers a stark contrast to the often superficial encounters found on dating apps and websites.

Moreover, in an era where cynicism and skepticism are all too prevalent, her genuine desire to help others find love resonates deeply with both participants and viewers.

Zhao oversees the proceedings with aplomb, providing on-site coaching to singles on how to chat and share feelings.

She rejects the intrusion of online influencers and once dismissed a woman who came on stage with a recording device, telling her, “Please leave this opportunity for those who genuinely need it.”

National marriage registrations have been on a decline for years, dropping from 13.5 million couples in 2013 to just 7.6 million in 2021.

However, 2023 saw a bit of a rebound to 7.7 million registrations, according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

According to the China Population Census Yearbook 2020, the average age for first

marriages has risen to 29 for men and 28 for women, marking increases of about 4 percent since 2010.

Economic pressures, busy work lives, reduced offline socializing and a shortage of credible, authentic friend-making platforms contribute to the lingering single status of many young people.

Traditional matchmaking practices often involve pushy family members who arrange meetings against the will of singles, amid an aura that they are so-called “leftover” men and women.

Yet, the popularity of the Wang Po phenomena suggests that young people who want marriage don’t reject matchmaking, but merely shun the traditional way it has been practiced. These young people are more independent and self-aware than preceding generations, and they know what they want in a soul mate.

At the matchmaking scene, Wang Po encourages visitors to bravely showcase themselves and listens intently to their preferences, creating a

relaxed, joyful atmosphere full of humor.

The supportive crowd in attendance and the online community’s happy expectations seem to further energize the young seekers of love.

A young woman from the eastern province of Shandong took a 7-hour train ride overnight to attend the event. With the help of Zhao, she ended up connecting with a man also from Shandong, and they exchanged phone numbers.

Some people even eagerly post their profiles on Zhao’s social media account in hopes of finding their match.

This points to a trend away from the “fast-food” style of matchmaking, which relies on less harmonious conditions.

As Zhao says, “Today’s youth have a practical view of love and face big pressures. But without mingling, they can’t find their match.”

Her success provides a template for how traditional elements of Chinese culture can be reimagined in a modern way that addresses and nurtures current beliefs.