**The Advertising and Profit Model of Leading Dating Sites in China: A Comparison of Jianyuan, Baihe and Zhenai’s Targeting and Advertising**

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**The Prosperity and Bottlenecks of the Online Dating Market in China**

In China, matchmaking is an ancient occupation, which plays a key role to the marriage mode in the traditional society. With the development of the Internet in China, matchmaking is switching to the Internet model. Chinese single users aged 18 and older are expected to reach 195 million by 2015, according to iResearch.com.[[1]](#footnote-1) The online dating market will reach 1.9 billion yuan (about 304 million dollars),[[2]](#footnote-2) with an average annual compound growth rate at 31.3 percent. Because of new single users and the changes from traditional media to the Internet, the dating sites have a prosperous market. Founded in 2003, Jiayuan.com was listed in the NASDAQ. On January 14, 2014, Jiayuan.com announced that the Internet registers had reached 100 million.[[3]](#footnote-3) In China, Jiayuan.com, Baihe.com and Zhenai.com account for about 70 percent of all the dating site business in terms of market share. By case studying these three sites, this article silhouettes the development pattern of dating sites in China.

Chinese dating sites began in the 1990s. In the first few years, because the Internet was accessible to limited users and the cost was high, the number of Internet users was only 8.9 million in 1998.[[4]](#footnote-4) Dating sites were developing slowly due to small scale and unsatisfying service advantage. The short period from 2003 to 2005 saw the increased penetration of the Internet among Chinese users and the burgeoning of online dating sites, some being the copycat of foreign websites such as Match.com. In the following years till 2012, Chinese online dating sites changed from free to paid and explored new profit models. Since 2012, online dating sites have been struggling with their bottlenecks.

Although the dating sites have sufficient potential customers, the leading dating sites’ growth suddenly deteriorated for nearly two years. The overall ceiling has begun in the dating sites. On December 24, 2012, Haiyan Gong, founder of Jiayuan.com announced her resignation out of operating pressure and occupation bottleneck. Fanjiang Tian, the CEO of Baihe.com, said, the single users, accumulated over the past 10 years, created a fast growth of members, but this growth would slow down with the development of dating sites to a certain extent, and online charging mode of 199-499 yuan,[[5]](#footnote-5) per person per year was near to the maximum which one could accept.[[6]](#footnote-6)

At the same time, the competitive threats from the social networking sites (SNSs)[[7]](#footnote-7) also affected the stability of the dating sites’ user group. For example, as a “real” social website like Facebook, Renren provides a search function to find friends. If "single" is entered as the filter, all the single users’ information will show up. This is a great threat to the dating sites. More importantly, these SNSs have greater users and the users are more fixed than dating websites. The listing prospectus of Sina Weibo showed that the monthly active users are 129 million.[[8]](#footnote-8) Many people begin to use Renren from high school or college, and will continue because this platform helps maintain the network and offers functions such as games to make users adhesive.

In this case, to attract new users is the most effective means to the dating sites. At present advertising produces the main income for several Chinese leading dating sites. They increased advertising efforts, expanded the advertising media (from the Internet to TV, outdoor and printed media). According to statistics of Market Research Center of CCTV, only from 2011 to June 2013, at the China Central Television (CCTV), the advertising time of dating sites was 53,530 seconds, up to 3,573 pieces. The total cost was 146,588,100 yuan (about 23.46 million U.S. dollars).

At present, Jiayuan.com spends most money on online search advertising, in which Baidu.com leads with tens of millions yuan,[[9]](#footnote-9) in addition to the portal websites,[[10]](#footnote-10) the vertical websites[[11]](#footnote-11) and navigation websites.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Spring Festival, or the Chinese New Year, is as important to Chinese as Christmas to Christians. It is a time for family reunion, togetherness, and leisure activities, and the best timing for advertisers. Baihe.com spent 30 million yuan (about 4.8 million U.S. dollars) only during the Spring Festival on buses, subway trains, television and the Internet in 2011.[[13]](#footnote-13) Zhenai.com also put a lot of advertisement on television and outdoor billboards in recent years.

Although the leading dating sites all spend money on advertising, their advertising aims, advertising media and the campaigns are different. Baihe.com used television advertising to enhance brand awareness. Jiayuan.com, the first advertiser on CCTV among dating sites, steered to new media in 2011. In contrast Zhenai.com and Baihe.com frequently advertise on CCTV.

**Jiayuan.com: the Multi-dimensional Strategy**

In the construction of the advertising model, Jiayuan.com adopted a multi-dimensional strategy. These include, but are not limited to, Internet marketing, topics marketing, and entertainment marketing.

***The Internet Media Marketing - Micro Film for the Single Youth***

In China, many young urban professionals are from the rural areas or small cities. Because of their limited circle of communication and tight work schedules, they have few chances to find their prospective partners. But according to traditional Chinese beliefs, if a woman remains single at 30, she is odd. Her parents will be very anxious about this because parents take children’s marriage as their responsibility. They will lose face in front of friends and relatives, especially during the Spring Festival, a time for visiting each other. Although the single group is under the psychological pressure from the family and the people around, and they yearn for affection themselves, they still pursue their own love, and don't want to lower mate-selection criteria. They are young, faddish and patient. They desire for the real love instead of the marriage form or sex.

This group is Jiayuan's target audience. The Internet marketing strategies are as follows.

The micro film (*Wei Dianying*) is a small film, produced by professional person, with movie narrative methods, played through the Internet or other new media platform.[[14]](#footnote-14) The micro film is no longer than 30 minutes commonly. Now, the micro film is a popular form among young people. It has the entertainment features of films and the commercial essence of advertising, which weave the corporate brand goals and business activities into a small story so that the advertising is more acceptable than ordinary commercials. Jiayuan’s target audience is aged 20 to 35, and they work alone in a strange city. These young people are the major audience of the micro film. Therefore, the micro film was the proper media in Jiayuan’s advertising strategy. Jiayuan.com launched a series of micro films such as "*Waiting (2013) ","Fear (2013)", "Busy (2013)"* and "*Dilemma (2013)". "Waiting*" is about a city girl. She was waiting for an elevator, a bus, a dinner, a green light, a reply, a courier, and her friends’ visits. She waited a lot, but most importantly, for love. *"Fear"* features the same girl but more determined. She insisted living independently in a strange city. In the end, she knew although she could face the pressure from work, actually, she had fear of loneliness in all forms. This film disclosed her vulnerability under a strong appearance. The theme is no matter how strong a girl is, she needs a partner. It shows a girl’s longing for a family as affected by traditional Chinese values. *“Busy”* is about “*no matter how busy one is, she has to stop and hunt for a personal companionship”.* "*Dilemma"* features "*love is not what you possess, but what you regard it as."*[[15]](#footnote-15)

Ranging from the life details to the psychological concepts, this series of micro film highlight the same theme of obstacles to love and marriage. The advertisement is an inspiration from concept of living to the idea of love for the urban wandering group *(Dushi Piaobozu)*. The urban wandering group is very common in big cities in China.

They were born in rural areas, and settled down in the city after college. They live in the city alone, far away from their families and relatives. In China, a person working far away from hometown often indicates that she has few friends and no house, both important to marriage. As one of the most basic conditions for survival, the house is usually ancestral property. When the children get married, the parents will provide the house for them. Even now, few young people are willing to live in a rented place after marriage.

By telling the stories in the advertisement, Jiayuan.com discovered the love predicament of the urban wandering group, broke their vulnerable psychological defense and moved them by love.

With the speed of the dissemination of information and the development of recording equipment, many young people like taking pictures to record and share their lives with others. In 2012, Jiayuan.com, cooperating with Kugou.com,[[16]](#footnote-16) launched "*My Time*" themed activities on the Internet, encouraging users to create a postcard about the wonderful moments in life and post it to the most beloved person. Users created, downloaded and printed postcards, with a Jiayuan’s stamp, then sent them to relatives and friends. This activity combined the Internet and the traditional media, from online to offline, and received about 4.58 million hits. These activities added about 45,681 new users to Jiayuan.

***Topics Marketing - Hot Topics from TV Dramas***

Hot topics are of human interest. If these hot topics are capitalized on in marketing, a very good marketing effect will be achieved.

In 2009, a TV drama *"A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era"* (*Xifu De Meihao Shidai*) was a hit. The hero, an ordinary guy, impressed many women with his understanding, tolerance, diligence and honesty. The TV drama returned to traditional values, which emphasize that understanding, tolerance and mutual support are more important than a solemn pledge of love in marriage. To love, one needs to express and take action. Thus, Jiayuan.com launched a big discussion on mate-selection criteria about *A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era*. Although it took the conventional way of advertising, such as music videos (MV), banners, clients, product placement, many young people responded. Nearly 300,000 people participated in 21 days, promoting registration and the awareness of Jiayuan’s brand. This activity facilitated the exploration of the significance of marriage in modern China where people feel baffled at the great social change. Jiayuan.com achieved good advertising effects by making use of hot issues.

***Entertainment Marketing - Joining Dating Reality Shows***

The fast-paced lifestyle and pressure force people to turn to entertainment for relaxation. Entertainment marketing emerges as the time requires. Many advertisers combine the brand image with different entertainments so that effects can be achieved in an invisible but effective way.

In China, male bachelors are generally referred to as *guanggun*, literally "bare branches". Originally pejorative only to men, now it has become a neutral word for both men and women, sometimes in a helpless and joking tone. In China, the technology to identify the sex of a fetus made the sex ratio unbalanced. “The sex ratio for children up through age 4 is over 120:100 (120 boys for every 100 girls), according to the 2000 census. By comparison, a normal sex ratio for this age group is 105 or less.”[[17]](#footnote-17) According to the 1 percent population sample survey data in 2005, birth sex ratio even reached 128:100 in Hubei, a populous province.[[18]](#footnote-18) These partly result in more bare branches. November 11th (11/11) of every year is celebrated as Singles Day in China because the figure "1" looks like a lonely person ("bare branches"). And the day is for people without partners.

Now Singles Day is used as one of the commodity promotion opportunity by many businesses. It even turned into an online shopping day. On November 11, 2013, Taobao.com’s[[19]](#footnote-19) sales amount reached 35 billion yuan (about 5.6 billion U.S. dollars). On November 11, 2011, Jiayuan.com launched the "Bare Branches Revolution"[[20]](#footnote-20) (*Guanggun Da Geming*) campaign, in which they called for single men and women to try to find their significant other, and make self-made marriage certificate in online games. This activity was again in cooperation with Kugou.com and had the significant effect: 2.49 billion users displayed the information on the Kugou.com platform with 32.61 million hits, users made 1.76 million marriage certificates and 323,246 new users registered at Jiayuan.com.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In addition, with the increasing popularity of dating reality show in China, Jiayuan.com used product placement in the hottest television dating program *“Romance in Car” (Langman Manche)*. It is imported and adapted from the British online dating reality show *“Date My Car”*. The program combines cars with human personalities by integrating global success into local culture. In the program, the guests guess the master’s character through his or her automobile brand, appearance and the interior of the car. In the program four male guests compete with each other, until only one is left. The competition gained high popularity in the audience. Later, the program changed to four female guests and one male, but also achieved good results. In the program, Jiayuan’s brand occupied the main position all the time. Because Jiayuan’s theme was accordant with the dating program, so brand implanting achieved good results. The search about Jiayuan.com was as high as 12,000 on Baidu.com one quarter, grew by about 137 times than the previous quarter.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Compared with Jiayuan’s diversified marketing strategies, several other dating sites were unwilling to lag behind.

**Baihe.com: the Model of Chinese Culture**

Baihe.com stands out with its unique name and advertising model. "Baihe" is the homonym of a flower, lily, symbolizing nobility and purity in Chinese culture, and *bai nian hao he,* a wish for a hundred-year-long harmonious marriage. This name of the website shows the characteristics of Chinese culture - marriage connotating more responsibilities and obligations than love. In addition, because Chinese tend to constrain their emotions rather than speaking out, many Chinese couples never say “I love you” to their significant other until death. Chinese pay more attention to the length and continuity of marriage. *Bai nian hao he* conveys the best wishes.

The series of Baihe’s campaigns also featured such consistent thoughts. In "*Father and Daughter* ", an old father was worried about the daughter’s marriage, but he lacked Internet literacy. So he asked neighbors to register on Baihe.com for his daughter. This advertisement reflects the traditional culture in which parents are one of the main driving forces of marriage. Because the theme is full of tender feelings, the advertisement tends to be more acceptable than the mandatory. In addition, highlighting advantages of a real-name registration system gives customers a sense of security. In another advertisement themed "*House*", a young man made a serious proposal in front of the girl’s parents because he had purchased a house for their wedding. In "*Pay Card*", a young man sent his pay card to a girl and the girl was touched. This series of advertisements reflect the courtship with Chinese characteristics, marriage in the life of the parents, housing guarantee and the financial power of women. Another long advertisement was full of interviews of ordinary people about the different understanding of love, the heartbeat-scene description, the expectations to marriage partner, and the interpretation of marriage. These remarks were appealing to the people who had no more illusions about love, but only want to live steadfastly.

Baihe’s advertisements are more traditional and populist, lack of fashion and fantasy. This is consistent with the traditional belief of love in the Chinese culture: love does not need a solemn pledge of affection and romance, but shared duties and mutual understanding of the couple. The husband and the wife live together through life. In the same vein, the male in the advertising is neither sleek nor romantic. He is pragmatic and down-to-earth, only preparing the money and the house for the marriage. On the other hand, the advertisements also reflect that the consumerism culture has a profound influence to modern Chinese marriage. Many single women lay emphasis on the materials men can provide rather than emotional elements. In addition, parents showed up in these ads, common in Chinese culture. Because Chinese pay more attention to the interpersonal relationship network, so the marriage is not only for two individuals, but two families. Family members, especially parents, have a big impact on marriage.

Even in the micro film advertising "*One Day of an IT Grassroot Man*"[[23]](#footnote-23) (*IT Diaosinan De Yitian*), a young man who was a typical ordinary single IT male lived his life like this: traditional, black-frame glasses, backpack, headset always in the ears, never changing shirts, mobile phone always in hand, getting up in the dream hastily, having breakfast on the way, subway... IT men are considered as social elites according to the income in China. But due to their heavy work schedules, they account for a large percentage of bachelors in large cities. Mu Yan, founder and vice president of Baihe, said, “I am a pure IT man. IT man is a special group.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Of course, the stereotype of young men who work in the information technology industry is dangerous, not all IT men are in accordance with this image. Although the man in the ad resonates with some IT peers, it may impose a wrong impression of IT man on the audience.

Consistent with the above style, the advertising features numbers for the reasons why IT men were single:

* 50.1% of IT man think "The IT circle is too small"
* There are 41. 8% of IT man think "the other half’s requirements is too high"
* 21.3% of IT man think that "IT is busy"
* According to the survey: IT man lives as follows
* The average sleep time is 5.6 hours every day
* The average working time is 12.8 hours every day
* The annual average time of “blind date” is only 3.5 times[[25]](#footnote-25)

This disciplined mindset and down-to-earth style may make the target audiences of Baihe.com more focused. To help resonate with such an audience, Baihe.com chose Honglei Sun, an ordinary-looking actor who gained popularity by playing brilliant, honest, and responsible characters, as its spokesman. Sun has played tough guys and reliable husbands in films and television dramas. To the single young people who want to find a partner to go through ups and downs, the image is very suitable. In general, Baihe’s slogan – Love Seriously, advertising style and the target groups are more consistent.

However, not all of Baihe’s commercials are successful. In another campaign, "*Through the Night*"[[26]](#footnote-26) *(Zou Yelu)*, a single female college student walked alone in a dark corridor. Then a ghost who covered her face with long hairs is here and there behind her back with horror music on. When the girl went to the washroom, the ghost came. When the ghost traced the hair covering the face, the audience saw that the ghost was a girl without a comb. This advertisement is neither appealing nor meaningful. It kicks up a cloud of dust. Obviously, it ruined the consistency and the cultural connotation of Baihe.com. In a word, it is a meaningless advertisement.

**Zhenai.com: From Romance to Consumerism**

Founded in 1998, Zhenai.com is another leader offering online dating services, which was named "*Best Chinese Dating Website 2010*" by China Internet Weekly.[[27]](#footnote-27) Zhenai’s target audience is white-collars between 25 to 45 years old. To be received by target groups, Zhenai.com collaborates with nationally well-known television dating shows, such as *"You Are the One (Fei Cheng Wu Rao)", "Only One in a Hundred Is Chosen (Bai Li Tiao Yi)",*[[28]](#footnote-28) *"Try Connecting Love (Ai Qing Lian Lian Kan)".*[[29]](#footnote-29) Because some users use false information to cheat online, single young users are doubtful to online information. Zhenai.com used the matchmaker offline as a countermeasure. In the mean time, the registers’ information needs to be verified by the Ministry of Public Security. In this way, Zhenai.com gained the fame of seriousness and discretion.

In the first several years, Zhenai’s advertisements featured romance and warmth, offering attractiveness to the single white-collar. It ran its advertisements on TV and outdoor media such as subway stations and trains. However, in recent years, shifts were seen in the theme of Zhenai’s advertisements such as "*Gold Digger" (Bai Jin Nu Pian), "For Only Love" (Zhi Ai Lang Man Nu Pian), "Appearance Association" (Wai Mao Xie Hui Pian),*[[30]](#footnote-30)which caused controversy. Zhenai.com changed its target audience from company white-collars to looks ordinary earners. The advertisements are the modern use of ridicule, from a few extremes to one common theme: no matter what values the registered user is looking for, she can find a suitable partner at Zhenai.com.

In the "*Gold Digger* ", an ordinary-looking girl with a Northeastern accent found her spouse. She said, "You are ugly and knock gritty. Never mind. You are twenty or thirty years old, even you are in your seventies or eighties. Never mind. As long as you have money, I will marry you." Then she mentioned the large house and the luxury car are also important. In "*For Only Love "*, a girl put forward, "Do not care about height or weight. Do not care about his looking. Do not care about his figure. Forget the family and schooling. Only if you are romantic, that will do." In the "*Appearance Association*", a girl presented another view, "A suitable man should be tall and slim with a handsome face. He’d better be as good-looking as an actor. Even if you are autistic, womanish, or [promiscuous in sex relations, I love you](http://fanyi.baidu.com/" \l "auto/auto/be promiscuous in sex relations " \t "_blank) as long as you have a pretty face."

Mate-selection criteria were externalized and materialized so the advertisements were criticized. Although the advertisements ridicule some people and exactly reflect their criteria, these criteria are external which do not comply with the traditional Chinese values and violated the basic human values focusing on inherent qualities. Both Baihe and Zhenai’s advertisements were about the external qualities of love and marriage, but Baihe.com highlighted responsibility and sincerity in marriage, while Zhenai.com emanated superficiality and irresponsibility for love. For thousands of years, Chinese always attach more importance to inner beauty than the external. Chinese men are supposed to be responsible and diligent, Chinese women warm-hearted and down-to-earth. If one focuses on appearance, he or she will be considered wanton. Self-cultivation is the main way to enhance oneself.

In this series of campaigns, the unabashed money worship, advocating of one’s physical appearance and the so-called romance contribute to a Zhenai that only values materialism, at least to some users. Although consumerism is prevalent in China, the lack of cultural connotation and a standard of value accepted by Chinese consumers does not bring good reputation to the site. Zhenai’s transformation is not successful.

**Problems and Suggestions**

Although the above leading dating sites of China used different advertising models to build their brand image and increase the number of registered members, their advertising models have common problems and affected their development.

One of the most important problems is that the advertising model lacks in-depth cultural values. The current marriage websites make externalized marriage matching criteria, such as Jiayuan’s "dream lover" that was overly materialistic and superficial. Zhenai.com also highlighted the pursuit of money and appearance in their advertisement. In the advertisements, romance was not the form of love but the standard for the young to select their partners.

The materialistic and external standard above is against the traditional marriage concept in China, traditional values and common human values. On the other hand, it is also the consumerism society's material extrusion on people. With the development of economy, a materialistic consumerism trend sweeps Chinese. The consumerism consciousness is strong. Marriage is no exception. Lisa Rofel argues that the “desiring subjects” is at the core of China’s contingent.[[31]](#footnote-31) With the spread of public culture, materialism has insinuated into every field. Materialism has encroached upon and eroded people's spiritual life, including the pursuit of love and romance. Affected by consumerism, mate-selection criteria have changed from focusing on the internal to external, from the spirit to substance.

Of course, Baihe.com tried to change the external standards. It used a personality assessment system, which matched the register users’ character with psychological characteristics and personality. Although there are some improvements, it needs highly specialized personnel for testing and evaluating results because the psychological test is professional. Current employees of the dating sites in China don’t meet such standards. So the match can produce limited effects.

The harmonious marriage is the fit of intrinsic values, and the involvement of emotional experiences. How to evaluate the deep values and make the customers feel the emotional experience is the most important challenge the dating sites are facing. The author believes that emotional experience is the main demand of dating website advertising. To do this, in-depth mining of the Eastern marriage values in advertising can be further explored. China is known for its high-context culture. Chinese are family-oriented and committed to a lifelong and continuous marriage and tolerance. Such values would be the guidelines for advertising. This way, the inner psychological experience of users and the information campaigns convey will resonate.

In addition, the profit model of dating sites not only relies on the advertising model, but strengthens the function of dating websites. At present, the main problem of Chinese dating sites is that the user viscosity is not enough and the users are not willing to pay for services on the website.[[32]](#footnote-32) The key to these problems lies in the dating sites’ service mode. If users can get high-quality services on the dating website, they will want to stay on the site and be willing to pay.

Although Jiayuan.com invested 20 million yuan (about 3.24 million U.S. dollars) on establishing the Magpies site, which provides one-stop service of marriage for just successful partners, a good start, on the whole it was incomplete. The author thinks the dating sites should offer a series of long-term service besides dating. They can provide the real information and advice services according to the different courtship stages, such as wedding planning, marriage program, parental advisory services and children's education. When customers have various emotional problems in love, want to get married, on the way to the altar, or have child-rearing problems, they will get professional advice and consulting services. So, won’t he want to revisit the website? Won’t he like to pay for the valuable customized service? If the dating sites do not have these services, they can cooperate with corresponding portal websites and traditional media to capitalize on each other's resources.

At present, 6 to 12 months is the longest retention time for the customers of dating sites. Once customers find the prospective partner, they will immediately leave the dating site.[[33]](#footnote-33) Therefore, the advertisers on the banner ads on a dating website will consider the long-term effects of advertising and may not want to advertise. Once the customer viscosity increases and membership information needs are met through the fee, profitability of website will also be greatly improved. Website banner ads also will increase profits. This would be a virtuous cycle.

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11. Vertical website refers to a certain industry professional website, refers to the profound development trend of industry-specific site. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Navigation website refers to a collection of many web sites, to classify the websites according to certain conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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24. Donews, ‘Baihe’s Micro Film: IT Male Need the Counteroffensive Courage in Love and Marriage’, 24 October 2012, <http://www.donews.com/net/201210/1683363.shtm> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Lines in the advertisement, translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *China Internet Weekly* was founded in Beijing in 1998, accompanied by China Internet industry. It is one of the China Internet and IT industry's most successful leading business magazine at present. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. These three ad names are translated by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Lisa Rofel, ‘Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture’, https://www.dukeupress.edu/Desiring-China. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ruoxi Lin. ‘The Dating Sites, Confused of the Fiancee’, China Internet Weekly, 5 April 2012, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ruoxi Li. ‘The Dating Sites, Confused of the Fiancee’. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)