

Big in China: License-plate marriages

Notes & Cues:

Article:

You can marry for love, you can marry for money, or, in Beijing, you can marry for a license plate.

As authorities try to cap the number of vehicles in China's car-choked capital, they dole out new license plates via a six-time-a-year lottery. The odds are daunting. This February, officials handed plates out at the lowest rate ever: one per 1907 entries.

The drawing is fair in principle. But the license-plate system has a big loophole. While private sales of license plates are banned, the rules allow transfers between spouses.

Thus one solution: sham marriages. In crowded forums and chat rooms, plate owners offer to tie the knot—for the right price.

At current rates, a fake-marriage license plate costs some 90,000 yuan. It's a steep price to pay for the dubious privilege of driving in Beijing, with its traffic jams and paucity of parking. But the booming middle class sees a car as a necessity, so demand is intense.

Enticements for matrimonial mischief extend beyond license plates. In Shanghai, people get sham divorces to take advantage of lower real-estate down-payment requirements for first-time buyers.

The recent nuptial shenanigans also appear to reflect a changing, and highly pragmatic, attitude toward marriage. Among middle-class Chinese, owning a house is seen as an "entry ticket" for male suitors to be considered eligible mates. Which raises an odd dilemma: To get a real wife, you need a house. But to get that house, you may first need a fake wife.

Summary: