

# A New Interpretation of the Traditional Chinese Marital Concept of "Mén Dāng Hù Duì" in the New Era

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to find and analyze the new consciousness, interpretations, and understandings of the traditional Chinese marital concept of "mén dāng hù duì" (门当户对) in the background of the new era. In the past, this principle primarily emphasized harmony in class status, economic wealth, and family background. Nowadays, however, its meanings and denotations have been greatly expanded. Non-material factors, such as educational attainment, intellectual compatibility, similar worldviews, life philosophies, and personal values (collectively referred to as "san guan"), shared interests and hobbies, personality, lifestyle, and basic value systems, have taken center stage in the selection of partners, especially among younger generations. In the current context, these criteria have taken on more complex, rich, and diverse interpretations, despite the fact that socioeconomic situation and background unquestionably influence and determine them. At that point, the theoretical framework and practical application of "mén dāng hù duì" are undergoing a significant shift from a straightforward socioeconomic matching to a more comprehensive correlation of the spiritual and personal realms. Non-material factors, such as educational attainment, intellectual compatibility, similar worldviews, life philosophies, and personal values (collectively referred to as "san guan"), shared interests and hobbies, personality, lifestyle, and basic value systems, have taken center stage in the selection of partners, especially among younger generations. In the current context, these criteria have taken on more complex, rich, and diverse interpretations, despite the fact that socioeconomic situation and background unquestionably influence and determine them. At that point, the theoretical framework and practical application of "mén dāng hù duì" are undergoing a significant shift from a straightforward socioeconomic matching to a more comprehensive correlation of the spiritual and personal realms.

## Keywords

New Era; Mén Dāng Hù Duì (门当户对); Marital Concepts; Mate Selection; China.

## 1. Introduction

The traditional concept of "mén dāng hù duì" underlined a marital match between families of equal social status and economic prospects. The term derived from two architectural features which are very common in traditional Chinese house structures: "mén dāng" (门当), the stone drums or piers on each side of the house gate entrance, which are symmetrically placed, and "hù duì" (户对), the wood or brick carvings in cylindrical form on the doorframe above [1]. These structures represent the symbols of prestige, official rank, and material wealth of the family. As such, "mén dāng hù duì" gradually became a fundamental concept in traditional Chinese marriage, meaning that marriages were based on the grounds of equality in social and economic capital.

Yet, as societies continued to advance and evolve, new meanings have been ascribed to the construct. Building on its classical foundations, contemporary interpretations now encompass

elements of cultural literacy, similarity of values, shared interests, and harmony of character. Individuals are no longer satisfied with merely social status and economic metrics, but increasingly focusing on the harmony of intrinsic personal qualities. In this regard, the primary inquiry this paper attempts to address is: How and why is the traditional concept of "mén dāng hù duì" being reinterpreted and renegotiated by individuals in the new age?

## 2. The Traditional Meaning and Origins of "Mén Dāng Hù Duì"

In ancient China's feudal society, marriage was all about the social standing and economic influence of the two families. Its primary agenda was to prevent individuals from the lower classes from ascending the class hierarchy through marriage, thereby preserving the so-called purity and nobility of the bloodline of the ruling class. These multilayered status and class limits on marriage rules were, in effect, mechanisms for preserving the rigid political structure of feudal society. On the surface, marriage was an affair of "joining two families in amity"; in practice, it was often a political mechanism for mutual alliance between clans, operating to increase their combined strength. Marriages within families of the same status made for firm cooperative relations and reciprocal aid. Besides, marriages among the aristocracy enabled clans to unite their power and expand their areas of influence.

Differences in economic status, therefore, presented an almost unbeatable barrier to marriage. "Mén dāng hù duì" was a term that originally depicted features of entrance structures of traditional Chinese architecture. "Mén dāng" was a term used to refer to the stone drums or piers, whose number indicated the official rank of the owner. Similarly, "hù duì" referred to the carvings on the lintel, whose patterns and quantity reflected the household's wealth and prestige. Thus, one could roughly gauge a family's fortune and social position by examining its gate. It was customary for a gate with "mén dāng" to be also adorned with "hù duì." The design accorded not only architectural principles of harmony but also symbolized the ideal of spouse pairing and inseparable union in marriage—an ideal that was highly attractive to traditional aspirations of marriage happiness [1].

"Mén dāng hù duì" gradually transformed from an architectural theme into a social metric for determining the compatibility of identity, status, and wealth among potential spouses, becoming a major force that conditioned marriage culture and mate selection criteria in ancient China. As early as the Western Zhou Dynasty, when there were stringent rules in the royal court to maintain class distinctions, this institution began to manifest. To illustrate, feudal lords could only marry other lords, and marriage between individuals with the same clan name was prohibited; likewise, weak and small states could not intermarry with strong ones [2]. Emperor Gao Zong of the Northern Wei Dynasty stipulated that the nobles and the persons related to the imperial clan should never intermarry outside their class, under the threat of criminal punishment. The Tang Code legally enforced these distinctions, stipulating that lower-class members of the "miscellaneous households" (zà hù) were forbidden to intermarry with commoners of the superior "good commoner" (liáng rén) status under penalty of a hundred blows with the cane for transgressors. Subsequent dynasties perpetuated in great measure the system of "liáng jiàn bù hūn" (良贱不婚, no marriage between commoners and debased classes). The Song Dynasty legal codes, for example, stipulated that if a male servant pretended his status as a commoner and married a woman of commoner status, their children would be commoners; but if the woman was aware of his status, the children would inherit his debased status. It was not until the Qing Dynasty that edicts eliminating the "debased" status of classes became more numerous, and inter-class marriages gradually became more prevalent [3]. Even in modern Chinese society, there are cases reflecting the traditional notion of "mén dāng hù duì." The case of Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng, both intellectuals from intellectual families and educated in

foreign countries, is an instance of the continuation of the notion's emphasis on equal intellectual and family standing.

However, the drawbacks of the traditional notion of "mén dāng hù duì" have become increasingly obvious in modern society. On the one hand, these marriages excessively stressed family background and economic status, with parents arranging them without much concern for personal choice or autonomy. On the other hand, classical "mén dāng hù duì" was inflexible in not recognizing that a harmonious marriage needs not just the matching of family backgrounds but also the compatibility of emotions, interests, and values.

### **3. Influences on Contemporary Interpretation of "Mén Dāng Hù Duì"**

#### **3.1. Prolonged Economic Development**

Material wealth was the priority under the traditional setting. Ever since the reform and opening-up policy, China's prolonged economic development has successfully improved living standards and diversified lifestyles. The concerns of survival and financial parity in relation to marriage has diminished as a result of the overall rise in economic wealth. Nowadays, people place more value on emotional and intrinsic needs than on the material gains that are typically connected to "mén dāng hù duì." Although the traditional idea is still somewhat prevalent, its hold has loosened somewhat.

These days, people choose partners who share their intelligence and passion rather than forming partnerships purely for social or financial reasons.

#### **3.2. Widespread Access to Education**

The education levels keep rising, leading to a significant impact on modern attitudes toward marriage. Education brings people independent thought and self-awareness. Educated people are more focused on self-actualization over material and status issues, and they desire emotional fulfillment from relationships instead of marrying for the sake of convention. In addition to this, higher education promotes a more comprehensive and varied view of marriage. Modern marriages focus more on equality within the relationship, with communication, understanding, and mutual respect being key terms. Marriage patterns also shifted; the emergence of DINK (Double Income, No Kids) families, delayed marriage, and deliberate singlehood reflect a shift from the traditional, single pattern of "mén dāng hù duì" to seek a partner. Finally, education has also provided women autonomy in marriage choice. Educated women can economically live on their own, eliminating the necessity of economic dependence on men. They can choose to remain single or select partners based on their emotions and thoughts.

#### **3.3. The Impact of Cultural Diversity**

Chinese youth's thinking has become more liberal due to increased exposure to the outside world and cultural interchange. Western cultural influence has promoted Sino-Western synthesis, progressively undermining the conventional limits of "mén dāng hù duì." According to a survey on the reasons why young people date today, 65.46% of respondents said they were looking for a "life mate," but just 21.38% said they were dating because of "family or social pressure" [4].

This suggests that cultural interaction has increased the significance of elements like spiritual connection and value alignment in its contemporary interpretation, lessened the restriction of the traditional "mén dāng hù duì," and empowered youth autonomy to choose mates on their own.

### 3.4. The Role of the Internet and Social Media

Spread of social media has opened up access of communication immensely. In this case, the concept of spiritual "mén dāng hù duì" gets influenced by the diverse information on social media, producing several new meanings. Online dating sites and social media are examples of this, wherein detailed profiles spanning interests, personality types (e.g., MBTI), and personal characteristics are crucial filters. This integrative approach provides individuals with a more precise and useful means of accessing like-minded spirit partners who can match with their interests and outlook. For instance, the author's sister met her current boyfriend through social media; they first became friends based on the same MBTI types and shared interests on the internet, which were subsequently translated into a healthy real-life relationship.

In this manner, the internet and social media have not only provided more social platforms but also reshaped modern mate selection norms and patterns, making it easier to find the "true love" and "right person" by listening to their won heart.

## 4. The New Meaning of "Mén Dāng Hù Duì" in the New Era

As society and ideologies evolve, "mén dāng hù duì" has taken on a new meaning. Elements inconsistent with modern development have been gradually discarded, while the concept has been refined and evolved through new perspectives.

Shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 1950 Marriage Law (now included in the Civil Code) legally abolished the "feudalistic marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangement, male superiority, and neglect of the interests of children," creating in its stead a "new democratic marriage system based on free choice of partners, monogamy, equal rights between men and women, and protection of the lawful interests of women and children." As a cultural symbol imbued with the collective experience of the Chinese people, "mén dāng hù duì," through its ongoing social resonance, continues to hold a significant foundational position in contemporary Chinese conceptions of love, marriage, and family narratives. As reform, opening-up, and globalization have accelerated, Chinese attitudes toward marriage, mate selection criteria, and family concepts have all undergone dramatic evolution: the criteria have expanded from determining everything by matching status and wealth in the traditional sense to compatibility in personality and lifestyle. For example, the author's cousin prioritized personal compatibility over family status and wealth in choosing his partner; despite the tremendous differences in the latter two aspects, their relationship is successful, aided by their personal compatibility. Contemporary sociological research shows that such marriages on the psychological foundation of "mén dāng hù duì" bring together individuals who are more alike in economic foundation, educational level, and values, thereby leading to greater mutual respect and equality in their marital lives [5].

The two criteria adhered to in the contemporary application of "mén dāng hù duì" are: firstly, equality of economic and social standing; secondly, similarity of spirit and culture [6]. A survey undertaken by Luna (卢娜) found that when university students were asked about the most important qualifications in choosing a spouse or dating partner, "personality compatibility" ranked the highest (93.99%), followed by "emotional resonance" and "moral character [7]." "Economic situation" and "family background" ranked far behind at 38.61% and 20.57% respectively [7]. This indicates that most students attribute greater importance to the personal traits and compatibility of their partner, considering economic and family status merely as guidelines.

It refers to the greater autonomy and independence of contemporary young people in forming relationships, which allows them to set their own mate selection standards in accordance with their personal needs and traits. A survey of the attitudes toward love among Chinese youth revealed that in response to the question "select the top three factors you care about most in

choosing a partner," "personality and character," "family background and economic income," and "shared hobbies and communication" were the most selected items [4]. This datum reveals an increasing pragmatic and rational orientation among young people in mate selection.

Although they place greater emphasis on spiritual communion, they still retain certain facets of traditional "mén dāng hù duì," such as desiring comparable salaries or identical family backgrounds. To find out more, the author has conducted a sequence of interviews. Most of the young interviewees believed that personality and value compatibility ("san guan") take precedence in marriage choices.

Interviewee Zhang noted: "I think the most important thing for two people to be together is that their personalities click and they can communicate easily. My girlfriend and I come from very different family backgrounds, but we both love music and skiing, so this gives us a lot of common ground." Another interviewee, Li, commented: "I think nowadays 'mén dāng hù duì' isn't a matter of how much money you have or your status, but similarity of upbringing, personality, and values. If these aren't alike, in the future it will be very difficult to 磨合 (móhé, 磨合 - adjust to each other)." These findings echo Luna's research, with further confirmation of modern youth prioritizing spiritual and values-based compatibility over mere economic or social status matching.

## 5. Issues and Coping Mechanisms for the Modern "Mén Dāng Hù Duì" Concept

Although the concept of "mén dāng hù duì" has evolved greatly and is increasingly in keeping with contemporary trends, regional disparities remain. For instance, college students who reside in urban areas might hold different views on mate selection compared to students originating from rural areas. Urban students are more likely to be liberal, while their rural counterparts might be influenced by traditional concepts, leading to disparities in 择偶标准 (zé'ǒu biāozhǔn - mate selection standards) [8].

Liberal and egalitarian Western cultural values of marriage have contributed to the liberation of Chinese attitudes. Sino-Western cultural integration has, to some degree, fostered the development of the modern "mén dāng hù duì" concept, with individuals taking greater heed of their emotional needs and dispensing with the adventitiousness of the traditional concept, i.e., arranged marriages and selecting mates solely on the grounds of status and wealth regardless of emotional compatibility. However, together with the beneficial influence of cultural exchange, the adverse influence of Western culture—such as excessive individualism, social stratification, and consumerism—also has an influence on attitudes towards marriage. This has made some young people feel no sense of responsibility towards marriage. "Flash marriages and divorces," "online romance cheats," and entering into relationships merely because of loneliness without considering personality or values compatibility have become more and more common phenomena. In order to be influenced by Western concepts of freedom and openness, individuals' values on love and marriage have been diversified, to some extent challenging the clear presence of the contemporary "mén dāng hù duì" phenomenon.

Various marriage value systems seem to possess a certain legitimacy nowadays, and moral judgments become pluralistic. Nevertheless, learning to be able to respond accordingly can significantly alleviate the negative impacts of such dilemmas. For the online media, due to the wide and complex information given, media significantly contributes to youth mate selection. Media must therefore improve on promoting positive attitudes regarding partner selection, and individuals must be educated on how to recognize misinformation on the web.

In choosing a spouse, people should give closer consideration to their own emotional needs, rather than blindly follow the trends, carefully consider the different opinions online and offline, and make decisions that truly respond to their emotional needs.

## 6. Conclusion

In what ways, then, is the old-fashioned concept of "mén dāng hù duì" being reinterpreted in the new era? This essay argues that in redefining "mén dāng hù duì," people take (yánxù - continue) part of its traditional connotations. Originally an architectural term, "mén dāng hù duì" gradually became a marital convention replicated for millennia in China. Today, the focus is on "matching" in cultural literacy, values, and interests, rather than social status and economic power.

The article has elaborated on the exact meanings and constitutive reasons of the novel "mén dāng hù duì," along with its limitations, and provided suggestions for properly handling relevant questions. One of the most important problems in Chinese society has always been marriage. It was regarded as one of the "Four Great Joys of Life," the unification of two families, and as the main way of keeping the lineage in traditional society.

Choosing a spouse was therefore a very serious matter in ancient China, usually done in compliance with "the command of parents and the guidance of a matchmaker" (父母之命, 媒妁之言), with a focus on the "mén dāng hù duì" idea to maintain the stability of marriage and family reputation.

However, ideas about marriage have changed constantly as societal and historical developments have progressed. Individual freedom and choice have received greater significance in contemporary culture. Nowadays, marriage is based more on respect and affection for one another than it was on a family marriage arrangement. Compatibility in personality, interests, and ideals has become the new standard for "mén dāng hù duì."

When selecting a spouse, the conventional "mén dāng hù duì" is no longer totally relevant. Nowadays, people have to concentrate more on spiritual and values-based matching as well as a sense of duty in order to create a pleasant and fulfilling family. Teenagers should receive the proper direction from their schools, and online media should avoid exaggeration and spreading misleading information.

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