

If You Are The One: The crazy Chinese dating show

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My wife watches 非誠勿擾, a Chinese dating game show. The title literally translates as “If not sincere, then do not bother”, but that doesn’t really convey what the title means. It follows in the Chinese tradition of the cryptic four-character phrase. The less cryptic version would be “If you are not sincere, then don’t waste my time.” The English equivalent would be something like “Serious inquiries only.”

Here are the rules of the show as I understand them:

- The bachelor contestant could be handsome, or he could be a nerd.
- The bachelor faces a panel of 24 women, most of whom are conventionally attractive Chinese women, although the producers toss in a few wildcards like a foreign student or a someone who is a little chubby or homely.
- The bachelor secretly reveals to the host (and the home audience) the woman he has preselected based only on her appearance, known as the “heartbeat girl”.
- Each woman starts out with her podium light lit green.
- If a woman decides that she is not interested in dating the bachelor, she turns off her light (which actually just turns it red).
- If all the women turn off their lights, then the game is over, and the bachelor goes home.
- In the first video, the bachelor introduces himself.
- The host invites the bachelor to do a brief talent demonstration, be it dancing, singing, playing a musical instrument, whatever.
- In the second video, the bachelor’s romantic history is dramatized.
- In the third video, the bachelor’s friends and relatives describe him.
- Throughout, the host and two additional consultants banter with the bachelor and the women on the panel. This is where most of the bizarre statements come out.
- A woman who is particularly attracted to the bachelor can activate the “burst light”, thereby guaranteeing a position in the final round. (I’ve never seen it activated more than once. I don’t know if that’s a rule, or that’s just how it works out.)
- After all the videos and banter are complete, if there are more than two women with their lights still green, the bachelor eliminates all but two by turning off their lights.

- All of the women with their lights still turned on, plus the one who activated the burst light (if any), plus the heartbeat girl advance to the final round.
- The bachelor selects a question from a menu, and prerecorded video responses from each finalist are played.
- The bachelor asks a question of his own choosing, and each finalist gives her answer.
- The bachelor selects the woman he wants to date. In the special case where the bachelor selects the heartbeat girl, but she had turned off her light earlier in the round, then she has the opportunity to reject the bachelor.
- The women who did not win a date return for the next round, or the next show if this was the final round of the day.

Anyway, my wife enjoys watching the show. Me less so, seeing as I don't understand Mandarin beyond being able to count to one hundred and maybe a dozen other vocabulary words.

And then I learned that the show has been subtitled in English by Australian broadcaster SBS Two, and the show has taken the country by storm. Unfortunately for me, I'm not in Australia, so in order to understand the show, I have to ask my wife to translate what's going on. (Which she does, if I ask.)

If you don't understand Mandarin and you aren't married to a translator, you can follow the Commemorative Fashion Shoes Tumblr¹ which is devoted to screenshots of the more bizarre things said on the show. The Tumblr if you are the gif does the same thing, but does not appear to be active any more.

Bonus chatter: One should be careful not to assume that what happens on television dating shows is how dating actually works in the country of origin. After all, you wouldn't want people to base their knowledge of dating in the United States on what happens on The Bachelor or Studs. (Yes, that's Bill Nye.)

Bonus bonus chatter: An undercover story: If you are the one. A woman describes the experience of being on the show. Covers, among other things, the careful arrangement of the 24 women on stage.

¹ Apparently, the winning couple win a cruise and fashion shoes, hence the strange name for the Tumblr.

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