For Many Chinese Men, No Deed Means No Dates

By ANDREW JACOBS

BEIJING — In the realm of eligible bachelors, Wang Lin has a lot to recommend him. A 28-year-old college-educated insurance salesman, Mr. Wang has a flawless set of white teeth, a tolerable karaoke voice and a three-year-old Nissan with furry blue seat covers.

“My friends tell me I’m quite handsome,” he said in confident English one recent evening, fingerling his car keys as if they were a talisman.

But by the exacting standards of single Chinese women, it seems, Mr. Wang lacks that bankable attribute known as real property. Given that even a cramped, two-bedroom apartment on the dusty fringe of the capital sells for about $150,000, Mr. Wang’s $900-a-month salary means he may forever be condemned to the ranks of the renting.

Last year, he said, this deficiency prompted a high-end dating agency to reject his application. In recent months, half a dozen women have turned down a second meeting after learning that he had no means to buy a home.

“Sometimes I wonder if I will ever find a wife,” said Mr. Wang, who lives with his parents, retired factory workers who remind him of his single status with nagging regularity. “I feel like a loser.”

There have been many undesirable repercussions of China’s unrelenting real estate boom, which has driven prices up by 140 percent nationwide since 2007, and by as much as 800 percent in Beijing over the past eight years. Working-class buyers have been frozen out of the market while an estimated 65 million apartments across the country bought as speculative investments sit empty.

The frenzy starts with the local governments that sell off land at steep prices, and is frothed up by overeager developers who force residents out of old neighborhoods, sometimes prompting self-immolations among the dispossessed. But largely overlooked is the collateral damage to urban young professionals, especially men, who increasingly find themselves lovelorn and despairing as a growing number of women hold out for a mate with a deed.

Although there are few concrete ways to measure the scope of involuntary bachelorhood, more
than 70 percent of single women in a recent survey said they would tie the knot only with a prospective husband who owned a home.

Among the qualities they seek in a mate, 50 percent said that financial considerations ranked above all else, with good morals and personality falling beneath the top three requirements. (Not surprisingly, 54 percent of single men ranked beauty first, according to the report, which surveyed 32,000 people and was jointly issued by the Chinese Research Association of Marriage and Family and the All-China Women’s Federation.)

The marriage competition is fierce, and statistically, women hold the cards. Given the nation’s gender imbalance, an outgrowth of a cultural preference for boys and China’s stringent family-planning policies, as many as 24 million men could be perpetual bachelors by 2020, according to the report.

Zhang Yanhong, a matchmaking consultant at Baihe, one of the country’s most popular dating sites, said many disheartened men had simply dropped out of the marriage market.

“This fixation on real estate has twisted the popular notion of love and marriage,” she said. “Women are putting economic factors above everything else when looking for a mate, and this is not a good thing for relationships or for society.”

The nation’s real-estate obsession is especially noteworthy given China’s relatively recent embrace of home ownership.

The sale of residential property was not allowed until the late 1980s, and even then under a leasehold system that gives buyers 70 years of ownership. Today, about two-thirds of all Chinese under 40 own their own homes, slightly higher than the average for Americans of the same age group.

With few other outlets for investment (those who park their money in a Chinese bank effectively lose money, given low interest rates and high inflation), many families have been plowing their savings into apartments, spurring what some economists describe as a bubble.

Han Han, one of China’s most widely read bloggers, frequently assails the government policies that he and many economists say have contributed to rapidly rising prices.

In an interview, he said one consequence of the single-minded focus on real estate, or on earning the money to make mortgage payments and repay family loans, is that young people have little time for anything else. “We’ve created a generation of young people whose sole ambition is to have a piece of property under their name,” he said.
Like many anxious bachelors, Yang Xuning, 29, a sportswriter from Beijing, said much of the pressure comes from parents who feel taunted by the wealth around them.

He recalls his first meeting with his girlfriend’s parents in Shanghai last winter, when he was asked about his salary and his nesting plans. “I tried to reason with her mother, explaining that it’s not practical to buy something at this stage in our lives but she wouldn’t hear it,” he said.

He stood his ground, she stood hers, and a few months later, on the second anniversary of their relationship, Mr. Yang’s girlfriend called it quits.

“A lot of girls, encouraged by their parents, see marriage as a way of instantly changing their status without the hard work,” he said bitterly.

Many women are unapologetic about their priorities, citing the age-old tradition in which men provided a home for their brides, even if that home came with a mother-in-law.

There are also other concerns, including the instability of starting a family in rented premises and the endless badgering of parents.

Status also plays a role, but so, too, do fears that those who put off buying will be priced out of the market indefinitely.

Gao Yanan, a 27-year-old accountant with a fondness for Ray-Bans and Zara pantsuits, said the matter was not up for debate. “It’s the guy’s responsibility to tell a girl right away whether he owns an apartment,” she said. “It gives her a chance not to fall in love.”

With such women on the prowl, even men who do have their own homes have come up with techniques to weed out the covetous and the inordinately materialistic.

Liu Binbin, 30, an editor at a publishing house in Beijing, said he often arrived at first dates by bus, even though he owned a car. “If they ask me questions like ‘Do you live with your parents?’ I know what they’re after,” he said.

Mr. Liu said he went on 20 unfulfilling blind dates until finding a suitable girlfriend last year. He said he knew she was the one after passing the three-month mark.

“The whole time she thought I didn’t own an apartment and she still wanted me,” he said. “Someone like that is rare.”

Zhang Jing contributed research.