

How the Ideology of “Romantic Love” Affects Chinese Women’s Understanding of Intimacy

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Abstract

This paper uses “life course” perspective to compare three kinds of Chinese women: 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s. The 1950s have experienced several major historical events, such as: Cultural Revolution, the movement of educated youth to go and work in the countryside or mountain areas, the resumption of the entrance examination system for higher education, and one-child policy. These life events not only affected 1950s’ understanding of sex and intimacy, but also affected their children’s attitudes towards intimacy. The 1970s have experienced the Reform and Opening event, they began to read the Qiong Yao romance novel and foreign romance. The 1990s have experienced the impact of Chinese market economy, and they had their attitudes about love. During their different but related life course, this paper want to depict how the ideology of “romantic love” has been constructed by politics, and how this ideology affects women in different age understanding of intimacy.

Keywords

Ideology of “romantic love”, Chinese women, intimacy

People make love every day , but many may not really know what love really means. People long for intimacy, but may not know its true meaning. A good intimate relationship makes us better understand ourselves, be truly ourselves, and grow with our partners.

Intimate relationship and its content change as human society’s views and behavior change. Broadly defined, intimate relationships include relationships between family members, lovers, spouses, and friends. This paper focuses on the relationship between lovers and spouses (mainly spouses). Presently, marriage is the most common, basic relationship among intimate relationships. Others such as lovers, sexual partnership, or parent-children are either the ones formed around it or an extension of this relationship.

This paper is not intended to define “intimate relationship”, but endeavors to understand how the ideology of “romantic love” affects three generations

(the 1950s, 1979s, and 1990s) of Chinese women and their perception of “intimate relationship”.

How to comprehend romantic love as an “ideology”? Romantic love has been perceived as a political phenomenon. Different political voices have their own politically correct interpretation of romantic love. The romantic love introduced into China during “The May 4th Movement” was that the love is the end itself (vs. a means). However, the Chinese culture believes in the eventual marriage of lovers, just like what Mao Zedong had said “Any love without getting married as the aim is a hoodlum behavior”. Though monogamy or the one husband and one wife family system was enforced in China in 1950, adultery was

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not legislated as a crime. In the Chinese Revolutionary Operas, romantic love was denounced as “a petty bourgeoisie sentiment”. This politicalized ideology reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution.

This paper will adopt the ideal context as recommended by Weber to discuss intimate relationship. This ideal context is an assumption that there is a correlation between the practical “view” and the ideal “view” of the time that are established as complementary concepts. It is an ideal context that reflects the social conditions of the time and is derived from a representative social phenomenon of the time (Weber 2013: 51).

The people who dominate an age, that is, the ideas that play a role in them, as long as it involves any more complex connected structure, can only be taken in the form of ideal types which we can grasp with precise concepts. Because these ideas in fact exist in many uncertainties and changes of the individual in mind, and their form and content, clarity and meaning in these individuals also have extremely complicated level difference.

The author quotes this statement to show that the intimate relationship of this paper is a kind of “conceptual structure” or imagined image (Weber 2013: 49). As we all know, academic research cannot reveal the real scene or the complexity of everyone’s concept. But in order to understand a pattern of intimacy, such a pattern of genetics and causality is needed.

When Weber set up his ideal type, he emphasized in particular the reality of chaos and contradiction that can only be the ideal type through logical sorting. Because when it has a realistic average, it can reflect the values and ideals that the people of this generation pursue.

A total of 69 women living and working in Shanghai had been surveyed for this research, of which 20 are from the 1950s’ generation, 26 from the 1970s’, and 23 from the 1990s’. The survey (interview) was conducted through post messages on the author’s

wechat public number and several reading clubs. Only women with Shanghai residence were sampled.

THE EPOCHAL DIFFERENCES OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Women of the 1950s went through a few major political and social events, such as the Cultural Revolution, the massive movement of urban high school graduates dispatched to live and work in the remote countryside as peasants, the reinstating of high education system through equal entrance examination, and the one-child policy. The mainstream ideology for women growing up through these events was “equality of man and woman” and “women are holding up half of the sky”. However, the real outcome is really a gender oppression. It is an equality in form but not in substance. Behind this equality is an inequality of character nourished in Confucian culture.

Fei Xiaotong expresses his view on intimate relationship.

In a society where affectional evolution is based on parent-children relationship, sexual love is often discarded. Though I don’t completely recognize that sex is at the root of affection, and anything else is just its direct derivatives, affection between the opposite sexes is the most original and natural one. In a relationship of inequality of man and woman, unequal character, and lack of mutual respect, romantic love will not occur. Our traditionally emphasized practicality and desire to possess prevent us from getting the significance of love. (Fei 1985: 100-103)

Women of the 50’s would accept a formal equality without an equality of character. It is understandable that when asked about intimate relationship, they would often respond that this does not belong to the topic of a marital relationship, but it is rather an extramarital affair or an condemnable unethical relationship. Why is intimate relationship regarded as equal to extramarital affair? This is because in Confucian culture, the Chinese regard intimate relationship as a complex, obligatory relationship

relating to the parents of both sides of a couple, and the couple with their children. And it is more expressed as family bond and repayment obligation. If you are aware that the Chinese would normally rank intimate relationships in the order of family bond, friendship, and the love between a man and a woman, and regard the affection of a couple in marriage as family bond, and if you can interpret the classic Chinese ethical puzzle that the wife asks the husband whom he would rescue first, his wife or his mother, if they fall in the river at the same time, then you will understand why they do not marry for sexual pleasure, or because of mutual attraction, but for forming a family to carry on the family line. Marriage is an important measure of the value of a woman.

In the Confucian culture, a good marriage does not only have to come from the love of the couple, but also has to completely meet the traditional criteria, such as compatible age and horoscope (eight characters in four pairs, with each pair consisting of one Heavenly Stem and Earthly Branch, indicating the year, month, day, and hour of one's birth, used formerly in fortune-telling). This traditional criterion of sexual depression originated from the idealist philosophy of the Song Dynasty naturally regards sex as something untouchable. Sex is a taboo and beyond the instinct to the women of the 50's.

In the West, according to the embryology of romantic love, love includes fraternity, motherly love, and sexual love (Fromm 1987: 34-58). In ancient Greece, love was the affection of a man to other handsome men. In the Middle Age, love is the affection of a knight to a noblewoman, or all kinds of extramarital affairs (Miller and Perlman 2011: 241). Yalom says that the foundation of the knights' love is a strong lust uncontrollable by the social norms. Passion prevails over everything, including relationships with the husband, family, or feudal lord, even the rules of the Catholic Church. No wonder that the glorification of secular love had caused strong

resistance from the Church. The love of the knights ignored the religious prohibitions, and created a stereotype of three characters: the husbands, wives, and lovers (Yalom 2016: 31). Gradually, the Chinese equal romantic love is viewed as a reckless extramarital love (Fei 1985: 104). The most significant connotation of romance is passion. It is a physiological awakening. It is obvious that this connotation is contrary to the idealistic marriage of rather starving to death than losing chastity and loyalty to only person, and lifelong marriage bonding that has become the idealist philosophy since the Song Dynasty.

Romantic love has gradually become a synonym for the touching and shocking feelings between a man and a woman. After the founding of People's Republic of China, romantic love was regarded as a bourgeois sentiment from the Western culture, and should be eliminated from people's conscience.

Therefore, even when their marriages are in extreme bad shape, or when their husbands are having an affair with other women, their strategy is to keep the marriage at all cost. The superficial rationale is to give the children a seemingly wholesome family. The real reason behind is more of economic and the so-called dignity. They would rather sacrifice their career than pursue love and intimacy. This just does not conform to the prevailing value. Among the women interviewed who had been dispatched to the rural areas to work as peasants, three women went to college through competitive examination, and all others gradually came back to their home town and work at low-ranking jobs after the government reversed its policy. These women would be allocated to work as manual workers or administrators in the subsidiary departments of the same work unit such as colleges of their husbands. They were among the first to let go while China went through the economic reform. These women of the 50's went through layoffs or their jobs were marginalized at their 40's. Family is their only place to rely on.

After having interviewed the women of the 50's, we learned that almost all women had entered a stage of marriage without sexual activities after their babies had been borne, even though they still have strong sexual desire. They would say "I guess everyone is pretty much in the same situation". When asked whom they refer "everyone" to, they would say all the women of their similar age.

When asked if they had ever thought of a divorce, their responses are "then what about my kids". When their husbands are having affair with other women, they would say "All men are like this. I can have a fight with my husband, but life has to go on". Even when their marriage is in trouble, they would comfort themselves that "Other couples have all done through the same situation. Things will get back to normal as we get old. It is much easier for a divorced man to find a new wife, but is difficult for a divorced woman to find a new husband".

Women of the 1950s are the victims of this value, and the strong advocates of this value as well.

The generation of the 70's grew up during the period of economic reform and opening up to the outside world. They experienced tremendous social changes coming with the rapid economic development, and underwent a change in the mainstream value system of "gender stereotype". Contrary to the generation of their mothers, they believe love is the foundation of marriage. The problem they face is that though love is romantic, a majority of them would settle into a marriage of fate. They appreciate romance, and long for the cultural progress brought about by the economic reform and opening up to the outside world. In the 80's, Hong Kong and Taiwan culture became popular in mainland China, especially the novels of love stories by Qiong Yao of Taiwan. Her novels were made into TV series and became a big hit. The young women of that time were huge fans of Qiong Yao's novels, but did not realize that by doing so, they have reinforced the gender stereotype. In Qiong Yao's novels, the heroines are always beautiful, gentle, and

soft, and the heroes are always handsome, considerate, and loyal. Even bigotry is a virtue.

When asked about their understanding of intimacy, almost all women of this generation mentioned Qiong Yao and other sentimental novelists of the time. They said they started reading Qiong Yao's novels from middle school, and were deeply moved by the romantic love stories in her novels. They hoped for a love and marriage just like those in Qiong Yao's novels. The amatonormativity under the value, and system of gender stereotype is the way how the women of the 70's see intimate relationship. Elizabeth Blake created this vocabulary. This is how she defines it. "It is a hypothesis. A loving relationship focusing on the two people concerned and with exclusivity is a natural human relationship. It is commonly acceptable and regarded as the norm". To certain extent, this relationship is superior to other relationships. The popular view is that marriage is seen as a huge success in life, and should be pursued by everyone. In fairy tales, the heroines will usually be happy only after they get married. For the couples in intimate relationships, they hope they will get engaged, and married in a few years.

Women are often taught that they will never be happy unless they are married to the destined one. To the married women, divorce is often seen as failure, even if they are the victims of the family violence. They are expected to repair the relationship. "Normalization of love" makes everyone feel the pressure of marriage imposed by the society. The pressure also comes from the legal system and government policies. For example, it is much easier for the married couple to adopt a child than a single person. Hospitals only give the right of visit to the married spouse, not to a intimate friend. The entitlement of immigration is also extended to the spouse.

Even when they have problems in their marriages, their strong belief in a intimate relationship still remains unshackled. They would wonder why men are

like this, and would rather spend the night crying than figuring out what the real problem is. As a group, they are not good communicators. This has to do with their life experience. China enforced the “one couple, one child” policy in 1981. This unintentionally made “sex and reproduction” relatively separate. The generation of only child of the 70’s has no brothers or sisters. There is no sex education at school. They do not know how to cope with the relationship even after they are married.

Some conscious women want to end the unhappy relationship, but they meet the roadblock of their dominating mothers. The argument is for the good of the children, but the real reason could be their face. Many women struggle in their dead relationships, and gradually become resigned just like their mothers, complaining about their men, trying to control their men, becoming tolerant, and blaming that fate has been unfair to them. Among the women of the 70’s interviewed, not many are calmly able to describe their marriage situation. They would resort to violence to resolve problems in their troubled marriages. Five women said they fought with their husbands and the police were called in to mediate. Four women said they suffered from domestic violence, and called the police. But in the end, the matter was unsettled “for the sake of the children”. A woman suffering from a severe domestic violence told us that the reason she did not divorce her husband was that she would not know how life would be like after divorce and she was afraid to face the pressure of life alone, even though she had no sexual intercourse with her husband, and his husband had an affair with another woman. Another woman gave up after she had prepared a divorce agreement. The reason was simply her worry of her livelihood. “Even though I have a stable income, raising a family with a single income is too big a pressure. At least he can pay for the rent”.

Women of the 70’s have generally been educated at a higher level. Among the 26 women interviewed, 14 have PhD degree. These highly educated women

are more likely victims of cold violence in their marriages. One woman with a post doctorate degree had a baby while pursuing her post doctorate program, and wanted to report to work during her lactation period. Her husband believed that taking care of the baby was the duty of the mother, and ridiculed her for hustling and her inability to handle both work and family at the same time. It made her feel depressed. Her major is psychology. Even so, she still could not avoid being gender stereotyped. The higher educated the women are, the more likely will they take an extreme approach in the intimate relationship. They either become like their mothers, trying to balance between family and work, or get out of the unequal relationship, learning to interact and grow in the intimate relationship.

Others would choose having an affair with other men. Among the 20 women of the 70’s who the author has interviewed, almost half of their husbands had an affair. The wives would choose to put up with their husbands’ act. While among the 26 women of the 70’s, almost half of the wives would choose to have an affair with other men when their marriage have problems. They have an affair with other men not because of true love, but rather a vent to their dominating mothers and being held hostage by the social moral. These women used to believe “virginity is the best gift that a woman can give to her husband”. To the author, this kind of extramarital affair is just a resigned defense, and in the end, they hurt other people and themselves.

Not all women of the 70’s indulge in the Utopia of this kind of “romantic love”. In China, some women are called “3S women” (single, seventies, and stuck) or leftover women. They do not reject marriage. They just do not want to get married just for its own sake. They do not look to marriage as security for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, their dominating mothers born in the 50’s not only live by the value of their time, but also want their children to live by the same value. As mentioned before, Chinese couples under the

traditional cultural pressure have strong endurance. They have to take account of the perception of their parents and relatives. They are concerned about their children's feeling, and the impact on their growth. This explains why ratio of marriage through marriage seeking is so high in China. Marriage seeking is a process of bargaining. In the People's Square in Shanghai, you will see that parents post their children's photos and resumes on the umbrellas trying to find a match for their children just like selling a commodity.

Women of the 50's maintain the family relationship with endurance. What makes them to endure is the pressure of commonly accepted perception based on the traditional value system, and the role of women as prescribed by internalization. In the intimate relationship, women of the 70's suffer from a depression that the gender culture imposes on women and do not have a voice in building a new gender guidelines on one hand, and try to maintain their status using the tyranny of the intimate relationship thus being caught in their own trap on the other. Two TV series in the 90's well depict the women of the 50's and 70's. Liu Huifang in one of the TV series called *Aspiration* represents the traditional value of "an understanding wife and loving mother". In traditional Confucian culture, the value of a typical Chinese woman is to live her whole life for the good of others, not herself. A true traditional woman has no self. Liu Huifang is a such ideal type. She sacrifices herself for the family without complaints or regrets. She even sacrifices herself for her husband by proposing a divorce so that her husband can marry his first love girl. In his book *A Country With a Gigantic Population of Babies*, the Chinese psychiatrist named Wu Zhihong proposed a concept of Chinese males' desire for the motherly love. They need protection and being taken care of. They are more like the sons of their wives, not husbands. Liu Huifang depicts exactly such image. This image of "an understanding wife and loving mother" in the minds of the male is similar to

the imaging sex of the ancient Chinese scholars towards the seductive fox witches.

Achun, a character in the movie *Beijinners in New York*, is unpopular with men. A strong woman who only cares about her career at the expense of the family is undesirable. A strong woman who can balance career and the role of a wife and a mother will be recognized. A woman without family is incomplete. The fashion magazines for female readers which started to gain popularity in China have been trying to paint the women of the 70's a new image. They should not only be successful and happy, but also sensual. They should become an object to satisfy the male desire. Those elder women are called "auntie".

In 1963, Masters and Johnson published *Human Sex Reaction*. They summarized an experiment with real people that the female may not have a refractory period after orgasm. Therefore, they have unlimited ability to continue with more sexual intercourse with orgasm. The male, on the contrary, are constrained by the refractory period, and had limited sexual capability. Associating this scientific explanation with the dual moral standards in the traditional Chinese culture, can we derive that there is a fear of the female unlimited sexual capability behind this dual moral standards?

People of the 90's grew up under the market economy and globalization. They have experienced culture shocks while exposed to other cultures. They have experienced collisions and frictions with various ideas and trends which the previous generations have never had. To women of the 50's, stability is of paramount importance. All problems should be concealed. To women of the 70's, marital friction means imperfection. They cannot accept the demand for perfection from women under the "gender stereotype", and this demand is unrealistic and inhuman.

People of the 90's try to align themselves to the values in American and Korean dramas. Female characters in American dramas are becoming tougher. They have cast off the original sin of female's role in

the kitchen and bedroom. They are not distracted between the kid's parents' meetings and conferences about matters of national and people's importance. They are not worried about not being able to satisfy their husbands in the bed or the gender difference in the office. The female image on the screen has evolved to not having to conceal or neutralize their body. They are even entering the once male dominated arena with their sensual body. This has provided women of the 90's a direction of reference. The plural resources of the information age have enable this generation to have their own thoughts and judgment. Adequate information is the prerequisite of rationale thinking.

They have seen their parents' struggle in their marriages, and sensed the limitation of their mothers' generation. They are able to perceive the limitation of their mothers' generation from a bigger perspective, unlike the people of the 70's who would torture themselves by an unrealistic, idealized standard.

People of the 90's have changed their thinking mode of "black and white". The class struggle ideology of the 50's has left some marks on the 70's. The class struggle theory regards the relationship between people as one of life and death fight, ruling out any other possibilities or alternatives. This theory will not even accept a state of "peaceful coexistence" or "never agreeing with each other and never reconciling". People of the 90's has begun getting outside this bound, and thinking about the human relationship from a humanistic viewpoint and practising intimate relationship.

They respect their own sexual orientation, and have self-awareness. They know what kind of life is right for them, and can tactically deal with it. Among the 23 women of the 90's who the author has interviewed, six are lesbian and three are bisexual. One woman told the author that people around her understood her for her having an extramarital affair. It is only because she has not met the right man. When asked about how she feels about it, she said "I can understand why they think this way".

They are able to face and enjoy sexual love rather than having to resort to revenge. They would create an intimacy they want. They know that an intimate relationship needs to be built. They realize that there is social unfairness towards female, and would take action, change it, and build a new one. They would not indulge in a day dream. Because of this, they are more inclusive and adoptable

CONCLUSIONS

The Hours by the American contemporary writer Michael Cunningham interweaves three women's single-day stories in different stages in twentieth century with the thread of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: Woolf, the writer of 1923, who eventually committed suicide; Laura, a housewife in 1949, who chose to leave her husband and son; and Vaughan in 2001, who chose to live well with her same-sex couples.

If Woolf lived in 2001, would she choose to commit suicide? And if Laura lived in 2001, may she have other options? A person is inevitably affected by times. This paper examines how the ideology of "romantic love" infiltrates the personal space from the perspective of the life course of Chinese women and thus affects the understanding of intimate relationship. If we describe three Chinese women's single-day stories in different stages in twentieth century, the story is:

Women of the 50's maintain the family relationship with endurance. They equate intimate relationship with parent-children relationship, and sexual love is discarded.

Women of the 70's suffer from a depression that the gender culture imposes on women and do not have a voice in building a new gender guidelines on one hand, and try to maintain their status using the tyranny of the intimate relationship thus being caught in their own trap on the other.

Women of the 90's have changed their thinking mode of "black and white". They are able to face and enjoy sexual love rather than having to resort to

revenge. They would create an intimacy they want.

Only when romantic love is not regarded as an ideology, will we be able to take a more ritualistic rather than a power based view to build intimate relationships between people. By that time we can discuss some issues further, for example, if women of the 90's face the Cultural Revolution and going to the countryside, will they repeat the life course of 50's? Or if women of 50's living in the twenty-first century, can they live happier?

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