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Romance with Chinese Characteristics

An examination of the evolution of matchmaking in China

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í kínverskum fræðum

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Introduction

Ever since the People's Republic of China began opening its doors to the rest of the world, it has increased its exchanges with other nations in areas of trade and diplomacy. In the last several decades, China and specifically major cities like Beijing and Shanghai have transformed at an impressive rate. This can not only be measured economically, but socially as well. One inevitable change that occurs when such a drastic opening of an entire nation takes place is that, in addition to the formation of business and diplomatic relationships, social interactions concerning romantic relationships and marriage may change as well. China's culture can be described as being rather traditional and conservative. Its principles of family and the role tradition played with regards to it have usually had a lot to say when it came to love and marriage.

Recently, however, in the last several decades, that role has been changing and China is finding itself at a crossroads, with its historical culture fighting a battle with new values entering China. These changes include the "westernization" of traditional Chinese marriage as well as Chinese nationals marrying outside of their traditionally accepted circles. "Westernization", here and later in the text, refers specifically to mainstream cultural tendencies in North America and Western Europe. These tendencies do vary between countries and depending on other factors, such as cultural background, religion, population density and education.

Not only are Chinese nationals increasingly moving abroad for study and work, but expat communities in China have been experiencing steady growth in recent years. With these factors in mind, these two worlds will inevitably come together and begin sharing their cultures in friendly, as well as romantic, ways. An interesting factor to explore is the difference between romantic relationships and marriage amongst local Chinese, on the one hand, and, on the other, many of these "Sino-foreign" relationships. It is also worth examining whether the failures and successes of these relationships show a similar trend on China's home front as the country itself becomes more "westernized".

In this essay I will venture to explore the differences between traditional and contemporary dating and marriage in China. I then want to examine the different aspects

such as international integration and economic changes that might have affected China's culture of matchmaking.

One obviously cannot generalize something as meaningful as romance, as it is a personal matter and based on individuality as opposed to nationality. Nevertheless, when examining such an ancient civilization like China, it is important to include all of its cultural and traditional elements. Even politics and legislation have left a footprint in this area. One such example is the One Child Policy, which came into effect in the late 1970's. After family planning limited Chinese families in urban areas to a single child, a trend emerged where many families in China were favoring sons over daughters to either look after them or carry on the family name. This has now created a large gender gap, which might prove very problematic in the future as many bachelors in China struggle to find wives.

In order to understand the relationship marriage has with the country's culture, I will first explore its historical background. Once we have explored the historical significance it will be more comprehensive to understand how two individuals come together in China for the purpose of settling down. Later I will take into account how the demographics in the People's Republic of China may affect that process as well.

Despite occasional downturns, China has overall over the last three decades been experiencing a process of unprecedented economic growth. That economic growth has the obvious potential to have an effect on the country's society – including its culture of matchmaking. It has not only been outside influence and economics that have changed China. Domestic events such as the Communist- and subsequent Cultural Revolution took a large toll on the country's soul as Mao sought to eliminate concepts of gender roles and romantic relationships. Instead people would find partners and mate in service of the revolution.

What is interesting is that a new revolution seems to be taking place, which mainly young, urban Chinese are leading. Promiscuity and independence are also becoming more common, leaving an open debate as to what role their parents will play when it comes time to settle down – if they even decide to do so at all. Will the country's historical traditions put a stop to China's love revolution or will it mingle with these changes and form its own concept; "Romance with Chinese Characteristics"?

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Chinese Romance

An ancient Chinese fairytale tells of a young cowherd by the name of Niulang (牛郎, the Chinese word for cowherd) who came across a beautiful girl by the name of Zhinü (织女, meaning weaver girl). She was the seventh daughter of a Goddess, who had escaped heaven in search of excitement. The two fell in love, got married and had two children. They were very happy together but the Goddess was furious when she discovered that her daughter had married a mere mortal. She ordered Zhinü back to heaven to return to her duty of weaving colorful clouds. Niulang was devastated when he learned that his wife was gone. Miraculously, his ox began to talk and said that if Niulang killed him and put on his hide he could soar up to heaven and retrieve Zhinü. This move infuriated the Goddess who, using her hairpin, scratched a line in the sky in order to separate the two lovers forever. That is how the Milky Way was formed, with Zhinü on one side of it and Niulang on the other.

Once a year, however, all the magpies of the world would take pity on their situation and fly up to heaven in order to form a bridge, thus allowing them to see each other once a year, on the seventh night on the seventh moon. Now, every year on this date China celebrates the Qixi Festival (七夕節), a romantic holiday comparable to Valentine's Day. This is a day when young Chinese girls pray to Zhinü for wisdom, make wishes for finding a good husband and demonstrate their domestic skills such as weaving. This differs from the Western origin of Valentine's Day, which is a story of a saint who married people off in secret and then became a martyr of his religion. The story of Niulang and Zhinü is filled with mystic fantasy and heavenly involvement. In fact, this story is so popular that even the internet search engine Google made a doodle for it on its website reserved specifically for the day in question.

In order to better understand the concept of romance in a country like China, it is essential to understand its history. China is a 5000 year old civilization with a history of emperors, philosophy, innovation and projects that were undertaken on a grand scale. The average citizen lived according to a Confucian code that emphasized the respect for one's family and government. The concept of personal freedom and choices were very

limited and the purpose of one's life was to obey something higher than oneself. Even to this day, those ideas resonate in modern China. Parents still play a huge role in their children's love lives, continuously scouting for suitable partners wherever they may be. On Shanghai's People's Square for example, it is not unusual to find personal advertisements set up by parents in hopes of finding Mr. or Mrs. Right for their child. In Shanghai, this arena of match making has even earned a nickname: "The Shanghai marriage market". There a five-month advertisement costs about \$3.20. Unlimited phone numbers can be obtained from marriage brokers for a registration fee of \$16. (Tacon, 2013).

Thanks to China's vast sea of literature over the past 3,000 years, we are able to examine how romance in China was viewed throughout the ages. Two of China's most famous romance stories are *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦) from the 18th century and *Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅), which was written during the late Ming-dynasty (1368-1644). One describes the waning of two wealthy households in Nanjing, while the other is a story of a corrupt, lustful businessman who takes on six wives.

What may be surprising is that ancient Chinese romance novels had a tendency to be very sexually explicit. The main character in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* for example has 19 sexual partners, along with his 6 wives and mistresses. The novel has 72 detailed sexual episodes, it is also packed with sexual euphemisms and bawdy jokes. A point to be made about this novel is that it touches on the issue of morality as well as love and lust, suggesting that the author might have wanted to make a more important point than just detailed sexual activities.

The fact is, as conservative as China may be, the human element of lust and desire will always find a way of making an appearance. How it does that is really determined by the culture, and if it is perceived positively it will become part of the society and help take part in shaping it.

For many independent people in China's major cities, that way would be internet dating sites/apps and televised dating shows. Along with economic modernization, China's culture has seen an increase in materialism. Nowhere is this more evident than on dating

shows like “If you are the one”, where in 2010, female contestant Ma Nuo famously rejected her suitor by saying she would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle. As a result, the Chinese blogger sphere exploded with outrage toward the show with people expressing concerns about the degradation of their country’s values.

The show is set up with 24 women who are presented with a parade of eligible bachelors, who are each subjected to humiliating questions and then ego-deflating sound effects of rejection. Another woman on the show, who was asked for a handshake, responded by saying: “Only my boyfriend gets to touch my hand, everyone else, 200,000 RMB per handshake” (around \$32,000 USD). New York Times reporter Xiyun Yang described the show as being the result of what might happen if “The Bachelor” and “The Gong Show” produced an offspring with attention-deficit disorder (Yang, 2010).

However, those women on the show are not alone in their perception of love being something one can buy. In 2011, a video of a girl on a Beijing subway scolding her boyfriend went viral. In the video she was quoted as saying: “A man without money is garbage” and that he shouldn’t even dream of marrying her without money. Before storming off the subway she called her boyfriend useless for not answering her barrage of accusations. While many thought the video was a publicity stunt, it did reignite the conversation regarding the relationship between money and love.

As far as the TV show was concerned, it received heavy criticism from Chinese officials, and Ma Nuo was accused of spreading “wrong values” with her comments. In fact it wasn’t long until the authorities stepped in to regulate the TV show. What the government may fail to realize, however, is that they can regulate outlets of romance like these as much as they want. However, they cannot regulate the Chinese mindset that has changed after such enormous economic growth in a matter just a few decades. Romance in many of China’s major cities seems to now have become a conflict between traditions of match making for the sake of family preservation and an almost desperate search for materialistic satisfaction.

Dating and marriage in China

A gentleman walks into a café in Beijing, excited about his date who is supposed to meet him there. A smile on his face quickly turns to surprise as he finds his date sitting there with her mother. As soon as he takes his seat he is bombarded with questions like: “What do you earn”? “Where did you go to school”? “Does he have a house”? He is in effect being scanned by the girl’s mother who is trying to figure out whether or not this gentleman is a proper match for her daughter. Something like this might seem completely outrageous and possibly offensive to a westerner, but it’s not uncommon in China.

Even though China has changed tremendously in terms of dating and “hooking up” with the introduction of western culture and media, it is still very traditional. The vast majority of Chinese people born before 1970 had only known and dated their current spouse. The “western” system of dating is virtually unheard of and many Chinese, especially girls, simply feel uncomfortable with it.

Whereas westerners will generally “play the field” in order to figure out what it is they desire in a partner and then be able to make a more informed choice about a potential spouse, the Chinese will tend to approach this very differently. Usually the male prospect is examined by the girl and how she feels about his appearance, level of education, temperament, wealth and ability to take care of her and her family. Just to give an example of how predominant this perception is, a recent study found that only 38% of women disagreed with the statement that it is best to date and later marry only one man during their lifetimes (Mavrides, 2009).

The process of dating in contemporary China has a traditional procedure. Based on personal experience and inquiries, if a man or woman has a romantic interest in someone, they will often ask a mutual friend to arrange a dinner of six to eight people. The potential couple is not seated together, but will have at least two or three friends sitting between them. This gives them the opportunity to converse without seeming like they are a couple. During this time their friends will steer the conversation in a way that allows the guest of honor to talk about his education, current occupation, living

conditions and family history. Based on the conversations of that evening, the two parties might arrange to meet for a “first date”. If this happens, it means that the girl is considering the man as a possible candidate for marriage. If she agrees to a second date it means that she is consenting to the distinct possibility of marriage. In the eyes of a traditional Chinese girl, a third date is seen as mutual intent for marriage in the foreseeable future. Even if a date is set up independently through methods like social media, these rules still apply.

Another reason why dating and being “friends with benefits” isn’t very common in China is because maintaining one’s virginity is still very important. Nevertheless, once married the importance is still highly relevant. In 2003, China Daily reported that among the women in Chengdu city, Sichuan Province, over 80 percent of women surveyed attach importance to the quality of sexual life. The ratio exceeds 95 percent among those with a college education level and above. Relatively speaking, the middle-aged and older people, deeply influenced by traditions, are more likely to hold on to the traditional concept of sex (China Daily, 2003).

We have to bear in mind though, that there is a big difference between people who live in the countryside and those who reside in cities. Most of the rapid change that has been occurring in China in terms of economics and culture has taken place in the country’s metropolitan areas. There are still many girls who are far more open and will have no problem initiating sex even after the second or third date. It is worth mentioning however, that the girl may or may not view the act as sort of a “binding agreement” between the two.

Since students in China spend most of their teenage years exhausting over endless classes, studying for various tests in order to be able to compete once they become adults, they rarely gain a great deal of experience when it comes to approaching members of the opposite sex. The traditional method of “hooking up” at a bar or somewhere else through conversing face to face could prove very difficult for many young Chinese. However, through the miracle of technology, mobile texting and voice messaging apps such as WeChat and Momo, these practices have become more approachable. WeChat for example was first introduced by Chinese investment holding

company Tencent in January, 2011. During its first 24 months in use, this social networking app grew faster than Facebook.

The way it works is the user creates his or her very own account and by using the phone's GPS coordinates, the user can "look around" and view all of the other WeChat users that are within that user's vicinity. They are then able to send a message to somebody else and in turn establish a one-on-one dialogue. WeChat claims to have over 300 million subscribers. Momo, which operates under the same mechanics, but is said to have the sole purpose of "one night stands", has around 80 million subscribers. The vast majority of users are between the ages of 20-40, although there seems to be a growing number of older, unmarried people using the app as well. (Wu, 2013)

According to Ke Qianting, associate professor at Sun Yat-sen University, the sole de facto purpose of these apps is to find sexual partners. "The major change in the younger generations is they are comfortable with a temporary and open relationship". He also says they feel less pressured to conform to traditional moral norms. Even though China may be different from many Western countries in many respects, using social media as a means of establishing romantic relationships seems to be one area where people of different cultures can find common ground.

Whether the subject matter is one night stands or dating, neither are necessarily forced to be subject to any sort of cultural narrative. A study conducted in 2001 investigated the effect of culture on the quality of romantic relationships in couples from China, as well the United States. The researcher looked at love as a combination of intimacy, passion, and commitment. It found that the stage of the romantic relationships had an impact on the level of intimacy, passion and commitment experienced by the couples, regardless of the participant's cultures. The idea that the intensity of passion is more prevalent amongst western couples was only partially true. The study revealed that culture did not play as much of a role in romantic relationships as one might think, since society is becoming more globalized and cultures can indeed easily integrate into one another (Gao, 2001).

If we look further into romantic relationships, especially marriage, there are several contrasts where culture might indeed play a bigger role. In September, 2005, the Chinese government passed a law saying that university students could marry if they

were of legal age. Despite this, student marriages are extremely rare in China and students on campus who are engaged in romantic relationships would rarely engage in any public displays of affections, such as kissing or hugging. By the same token, it is practically unheard of to see a Chinese university student who is already a parent.

Romance may be a universally accepted phenomenon, but China's culture of stability is something that is here to stay. China's divorce rate is only 16% that of the US's and until but a few years ago couples in China first needed to obtain permission from their work unit if they wished to get divorced. If a supervisor had a problem with the couple's divorce plans they would not be permitted to go through with it. There were also examples of people waiting on their marriage until their supervisors felt it was the right time to do so. In researching this very topic, Carolyn Voskuil interviewed one of her female Chinese friends who told her that she had intended to marry her partner at 22. However her supervisors told her that she had to wait until she turned 23. She also never challenged their decision, knowing that her superiors had both her best interests and the interest of society at large in mind. Love in China is strong, but the Chinese are more willing than westerners to curb their desires for the benefit of those around them (Voskuil, 2011).

Male to female ratio and its ripple effect

On 1 November, 2010, China conducted its sixth national population census which concluded that the entire country has a population of 1.351 billion, the largest in the world. The ethnic Han majority makes up 91.51% while 8.49% are minorities. The only thing more staggering than the obviously oversized population figure is the ratio between males and females.

In 1979, China implemented its “one-child policy” in order to alleviate social, economic and environmental problems in the country. Ironically, some twenty-five years later the ripple effects of that policy are contributing to many of the problems in this area of discussion. In the early 1980’s China had a birth ratio of 108 males to every 100 females, which was only slightly above the natural rate of 105 to 100. In 2000, that ratio jumped to 116.9 males to 100 females and in 2010 it was as high as 118.08 males to 100 females. In fact, in some provinces like Anhui the ratio has soared to more than 130. By 2020, sociologists expect an “extra” 35 million Chinese men – males for whom there are simply no available female partners. That is slightly more than the population of Canada (McLaughlin, 2013).

Not only does this fact mean that there is now fierce competition amongst men to find a wife, but since the requirements for bachelors is so high, the ratio is affecting the economy as well. Property prices in China have spiked dramatically, making it unaffordable for many Chinese to buy. Studies have found that the rapid rise of China’s home prices is linked to its widening gender imbalance. Because there are many more men than women, China’s dating scene has become ultra-competitive. While nothing says “Will you marry me?” quite like a shiny diamond in the U.S., an engagement in China typically comes with a home. To be considered marriage material, men are expected to either own property or have enough for a down payment; as a result, between 2003 and 2009, as much as 48% (or \$8 trillion worth) of the rise in property values across China’s 35 major cities is linked to the nation’s gender imbalance, according to a 2012 study by Columbia University professor Shang-Jin Wei (Tseng, 2013).

Even today, we are able to see the amount of resentment originating in China on social media and popular Chinese websites. One popular perception is spearheaded towards foreigners. Many of the online discussion boards speak of a rising number of single men in their twenties and thirties coming to China, predominately from western countries to work as English teachers. Once they arrive they are immediately, for whatever reason, considered more attractive than their Chinese counterparts. They are also seen as being “seasoned veterans” in the art of dating. This situation has even been seen in the West, for example during the Cold War when the American military was stationed in Iceland. Many of the local Icelandic women were fascinated by these foreigners and ended up marrying them – causing resentment from the male population (Gunnarsson, 2012).

While American and Europeans teenagers are going on their first dates, the Chinese are chest deep in schoolwork and discouraged by their teachers from that type of behavior. This is where culture plays a big role as foreigners might not catch on to the true reasons for their attractiveness. According to the “rules of the game” back in their countries, people will “hit on” the ones they find attractive and worry about commitment later.

In 2012 a popular post regarding this issue circulated on the discussion forum Tianya. It focused on three major components; first the main differences between Chinese and foreign men that might help explain why foreigners are more successful with women. Second, the anecdotes and conversations with foreign men and their love lives; and finally some of the myths Chinese girls might have about foreign men. The piece was written, in what some might call an offensive manner, by a Chinese netizen as an open letter to his Chinese sisters. The unknown author begins by describing what he believes the main differences between Chinese and foreign men are. He makes a great deal of generalizations and uses borderline racist wording.

According to the post, there is also big difference between the type of dates Chinese men and foreign men will take girls to. The blogger mentioned that a foreign English teacher will take a girl to an upscale restaurant or at least Starbucks, giving the girl the impression that he is well off. This will in turn make it easier for him to get her into bed on the grounds that she might view him as someone she wants to marry. A Chinese man

however, will be a bit stingy on the first date and maybe won't take the girl to a fancy restaurant.

Another "friend" of the author was, as he put it, a poor but handsome French man. He was a bit more promiscuous, even impregnating a Chinese girl and leaving her when she refused to get an abortion. He refused to marry the girl on the grounds that when they were together, he was footing the bill for everything they did. He simply could not support two people on his salary if they went through with marriage. A year later, he apparently ran into his French friend who had recently gotten married to a very wealthy Chinese woman. This was the point he had been making about the foreigners living in China just being poor beggars.

Of course this article was written anonymously on a blog, which means that his "friends" might not even exist and the exact statements could range anywhere from 0-100% true. He is also very liberal with his statistics, stating in the third piece that 95% of foreign men who marry Chinese girls will go on to have extramarital affairs (Ren, 2013).

That being said, the comment section that followed the article received a fairly heated debate, with many young men reiterating his views and beliefs. China's culture and Confucian ideology teaches to be a polite, humble host and most of those who travel to China will undoubtedly experience that part of the culture. What cannot be forgotten, however, is that China is in many ways still a very conservative country, and until recently was closed off from much of the outside world. This means that although many of the foreigners living there might find their playful behavior harmless, they might be contributing to a cultural resentment in a society where finding a wife is a lifelong struggle for many.

Traditional Marriage

Traditionally, marriage in China has always carried with it a unique cultural significance that incorporates many of China's philosophical elements. According to Confucianism, it signifies the combining of two families of different surnames with the purpose of continuing the family lineage. Taking into account the importance of family in China and the filial piety that was required of people, marriage was an extremely costly and significant procedure and was seen as second only to funeral ceremonies.

Traditional Chinese wedding rituals are based on *The Book of Rites* (Liji 礼记), *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* (Yili 仪礼) and the *Baihu Tong* (白虎通), which together outline the "Three Covenants and the Six Rites," today known as the "Three Letters and Six Etiquettes" (San Shu Liu Li 三书六礼). The concept of the "Three Letters" is rarely observed today, but was historically essential. They are a combination of letters that would be sent to the bride's family. The first one would be a request letter, which was a confirmation of the formal arrangement sent by the groom's family to the bride's family. This usually included the initial gifts intended for the bride's family as well. A gift letter would then also be sent. This letter would contain a list of gifts sent to the bride's family. Finally the wedding letter would be presented to the bride's family on the day of the wedding to confirm the act of bringing the bride into groom's family.

The wedding process itself would then follow the "Six Etiquettes" which required an elaborate marriage proposal and acceptance. Unlike the "Three Letters," a part of this practice is actually still observed today. The second chapter of *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* details the very intricate procedure of arranging a marriage. A messenger on behalf of the groom's father would present a goose to the bride's father, beginning a dialogue and negotiation of terms for the nuptials. Today, however, this practice has been changed where instead a groom simply proposes directly to the bride (Steele, 1917).

After agreeing to the match the groom's family would request the bride's 'Eight letters of birth time' in order to check their compatibility. Birth dates bore a significant amount

of importance and this part of the process would make or break the potential wedding. If the union was found to be favorable then the two families would proceed with the match. Otherwise, the bride's family would find a more suitable groom and there would be no further contact between the two families.

If the bride's birthdate was acceptable, then the groom's family would move on the third etiquette, which was sending the initial gifts along with the gift letter. This is another example of something that is no longer practiced today. After that, the formal gifts would then be sent to the bride's family as a gesture of the sincerity between the two families and a promise to take good care of the bride. These gifts would include bottles of liquor, dragon and phoenix candles (symbolic in Chinese culture), matching his & her towels and a wedding cake. Also, in return the bride's family would send similar gifts that would also include something perhaps unconventional in the eyes of Westerners, but nonetheless very symbolic in China.

These gifts included things like Chinese lettuce, symbolizing lively and abundant descendants, as well as spring onions for wishes of financial wealth. To give an idea of the meaning behind the gifts, the Chinese word for onion (Cong 葱) sounds very similar to "plentiful". The last etiquette before the big day would be to find a wedding date. A fortune telling master would be hired to find an auspicious date and time according to the bride and groom's birthdates. Finally the ceremony itself would include the welcoming of the bride and paying respect to the Jade Emperor as well as deceased ancestors. Historically, marriage was more about necessity, rather than romance. Women would not be allowed to choose the man they married and matches were often based on the needs of reproduction and honor.

Marriage customs in China have changed dramatically over the centuries. Today many Chinese simply opt for a more Westernized wedding rather than a traditional wedding. More recently the changes, including the New Marriage Law which was signed in 1980 and the One-Child Policy which was put into effect the year before, have had a big impact on marriage in the country.

When the Communists took over in China in 1949, one of the initial changes they intended to make was on the practices regarding marriage. In fact, women's equality was of personal interest to Chairman Mao.

Starting in 1950 the first marriage act raised the minimum age of marriage to 20 for males and 18 for females. Both parties were required to consent to the marriage and some older practices, such as selling women off to landlords, would be halted immediately. To illustrate what a drastic change this was to Chinese society, we can examine an ancient Chinese proverb which reads: "Noodles do not make a meal; likewise women are not counted as human beings." Historically, as in many other places, women had been treated like slaves and been subjects of commercial transaction (Niida, 2010).

Chapter one, article one of the first marriage act stated that marriage should be based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children. Divorce would be allowed and polygamy, child marriage and taking concubines would be banned. Despite some resistance and ensuing problems, by 1955 over 90% of all marriages in China were registered. Many began to see marriage through the lens of "free love" and not arrangement or coercion. This would begin a major shift in the way the Chinese viewed marriage. In fact there has been a discussion regarding whether or not this has ultimately made the Chinese more materialistic and shallow when it comes to settling down (Diamant, 2000).

Communist China is still at a crossroads which is seeing its cultural traditions in many ways conflicting with the newly booming market economy. This has understandably affected romance and marriage as well. It was clear under the leadership of Mao that romance was "material-free" and those materialistic principles at that time were generally associated with Western values.

However, there is a cultural and historical connection that may have perhaps allowed for more of an acceptance of this change. In China, like many in many other countries the fear of "losing face" would often lead to women choosing husbands that were financially secure and had a good job in order to secure their social reputation and their family members. However, recently many scholars and officials have warned against "value deterioration" and expressed their concerns that this change is what is causing the increasing divorce rate and the resurgence of having mistresses (Er Nai 二奶). Although divorce remains low in China compared with many other countries, in 2010

nearly two million couples applied for divorce. This showed a 14% increase from the year before and was double the rate a decade earlier (Patience, 2011).

According to recent changes that were made to the marriage law, if the marriage should fail, property is then divided into how much each individual paid into it. In fact, a recent trend has grown in China known as a “naked marriage”. This is when a couple gets married without having any major assets and completely do away with any of the “must-haves” before getting married. This is of course a sharp contradiction to traditional marriage, but it has, nonetheless gained some support. In a poll that was done by China Youth Daily prior to the Chinese Valentine’s Day, known as the Qixi Festival, nearly 48% of 3,214 respondents said they supported the idea of a “naked marriages”, with only 23% opposing them (Zhang, 2011).

One couple that decided on a “naked marriage”, Wang Shaowei and Zhang Xin from Shijiazhuang paid only 9 yuan (little over \$1) to obtain their marriage certificate. They then had dinner in their two-bedroom rented apartment and nothing else. Undoubtedly this is upsetting to China’s older generation and the idea of marrying someone in this manner is unthinkable, especially to a generation that is used to lengthy formalities and symbolic rituals.

One example of this generation gap came in 2014, when Chinese dating company Baihe aired a commercial with the theme “Because of love, do not wait”. In the commercial a young woman is being persistently nagged by her grandmother to get married. The commercial received a lot of anger and criticism as many felt that they were promoting the idea of being held hostage by one’s family for the sake of marriage.

Another enormous industry that has sprung up in China is wedding photography. However, the difference between Chinese wedding photos and those in West is that the Chinese couples will usually not photograph the actual wedding itself. China is more conveniently finding ways to meld their own culture with an influence from the outside and this is one example. A couple chooses to have a Western wedding or a traditional Confucian wedding. If a couple goes for the Confucian wedding, the practice usually has them bowing to a portrait of Confucius and then they will show honor by performing 4 ceremonial bows. First for heaven and earth, second for their ancestors, third for their parents and finally the fourth bow is reserved for their spouse.

As China continues to battle over its traditions and newly acquired capitalistic mentality, it is unclear what the future of Chinese marriage will be. The nation has become more materialistic and particularly urban women are making more and more demands from men if they wish to marry them. There may however be some resistance as these "naked marriages" for example are making their way into society. People are perhaps becoming fed up with the stress of fulfilling both their parent's wishes of having a traditional wedding as well as society's dictated rules about needing a car and a house to find true love. It will ultimately come down to whether or not China redefines marriage yet again, from something that was arranged, to something that expressed free love and eventually to something that is bought.

Filling a void

Undoubtedly, one of China's most turbulent and horrific periods was the decade that preceded Mao Zedong's death. These years were better known as the Cultural Revolution, or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The aim was to preserve the true Communist ideology under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who had blamed the failures of the disastrous Great Leap Forward on bourgeois elements within the government and the society. From 1966-1976 China would descend into chaos as a class war was launched against those who were believed to be against the Communist leadership.

Throughout those years, people all over the country were purged and shunned from society. Millions were imprisoned, sent to reeducation and self-criticism sessions and an estimated 1.5 million were killed as a result of the revolution. Any aspirations of wealth and romance were heavily criticized and those who were thought seeking them would suffer the consequences. Despite the noble tone of the initial plans for gender equality, they were in fact in the service of overthrowing the old patriarchal system of governance and were intended to serve the communist revolution. It was all done in service to the state and its newly acquired ideology.

On a human level, it is more than understandable that after such an ordeal, an entire society would so openly want to redeem any feeling of human nature it lost in service to dogmatic ideology. During normal human development, stages of childhood and maturity are directly linked with natural feelings towards empathy and the ability to grow as individuals. When that is taken away from them, their ability to feel for not only themselves but a potential future partner may be compromised.

One of the greatest impacts the Cultural Revolution had on China was the impact it had on the education system. An entire generation was left abandoned, scarred and in fear. This nightmare would surely take its toll on those who experienced it and their ability to love and trust.

Before the revolution, China had demonstrated its ability to show it could express its emotions of love and lust through methods such as literary works, but still maintained its conservative nature and traditions. China did not experience the same sexual revolution as its Western counterparts and events like the Cultural Revolution would only push it further towards emotional repression. How China would later redeem that feeling would be an open question.

First of all, the concept of love is not universally defined. It is an individualistic feeling that carries with it an omnipresent and mysterious complexity. With that in mind there is no way to argue that love in the east and west are one and the same. When examining Western culture, love is often defined as the primary foundation for relationships that may eventually lead towards marriage. Love is, indeed, the most compelling reason for "taking the plunge" (Voskuil, 2011).

Throughout history, both in the west and in the east, marriage was an institutionalized bond that came about from necessity rather than love. It was done in the service of political, religious or societal needs. As we have analyzed, China held marriage in high value as a pillar of traditional family values and when two people got married, the entire family would take part in ensuring that it was in the best interest of everyone involved.

What we see now is a slow transformation of personal aspirations taking over the family role, as well as an entire generation taking back their culture of love. In other words, they are attempting to fill a void, a void that was left unfilled after the turmoil of the previous century. China may have a unique history and a conservative society, but it is no exception when it comes to romance. Caryn Voskuil, who worked as a professor at several Beijing universities points out that most young adults seem to have boyfriends or girlfriends at a very early age – often as early as their teens.

There is still a difference when examining their western counterparts. Those same couples might find love at a young age, but there seems to be a more serious attempt to maintain that relationship for a much longer time, later culminating in marriage.

In China, people who "play the field" and have many romantic partners can be viewed as capricious or disloyal. This is where we can see one of the most obvious cultural differences. In the west, dating has practically become a sport. A westerner who dates

only one person is seen as foolishly limiting their pool of candidates for love, and thus their chances of finding the "right" person. Youngsters are generally advised to date as many people as possible, to look for that "ideal" partner. Sexual activity also seems to occur much earlier among young people in the west, another result of a culture focused on personal pleasure and happiness (Voskuil, 2011).

Anyone who has travelled to the major metropolitan areas of China cannot avoid the emerging appearance of love that exists all around. The lyrics of popular songs playing in shopping malls and grocery stores talk of it endlessly and even on the western Valentine's Day, there are events planned for lovers and giant hearts are placed outside bars and restaurants. China's youth is eager to be able to say the words: "I love you". Despite the opposition faced by that particular dating show mentioned earlier, there are still plenty shown on television with the same theme.

Previous centuries in China have been marked with revolutions that included the religious fundamentalism of the Taiping Rebellion, democratic hopefulness with the overthrow of the Qing Empire, Communism against Nationalism and of course the political turmoil of the late 1980's. With all that behind them, China has launched a more benign romantic revolution, which has made its presence well known. Despite the possible confusion of its participants, there seems to be very little that will prove powerful enough to stop it.

Conclusion

We know more about China's history than any other nation on earth. Looking at China's historical accounts, including its philosophy and every day stories, we are able to draw up a picture of a civilization that prides itself of traditional family values and obedience towards those who ruled heaven and earth. Ideologies like Confucianism not only dictated the practices of the ruling elite, but also how families were made. Marriage was sacred as it symbolized the combining of two family names for the purpose of a continuing family lineage. The traditional practice of bringing two people together maintained its presence in China.

The 20th century has transformed the country in such a dramatic way that not only has China's landscape and urban outlook changed to an almost unrecognizable point, but also the people who live in it are beginning to question the very nature of their existence and what it means to come together for the purpose of falling in love and getting married.

In terms of successful marriages between Chinese nationals and foreigners, it is heavily reliant on a willingness to accept cultural differences and the ability to integrate into another society. As mentioned earlier, cultural differences cannot be ignored and despite strong feelings of love and affection, the differences are much larger and carry a far deeper historical significance than lust and desire.

After China began opening up to outside trade and investment, the country undoubtedly became more materialistic and since the shift came with such speed and intensity, the value system was sucked into it as well. China is diverting from its proletarian principles into a country where material wealth and financial stability is a requirement for marriage. Practices such as "naked weddings", while romantic and defiant to the status quo, are insufficient to resist the fusion of financial prosperity and love.

The aftermath of the Cultural Revolution gave China a cultural blank sheet which it filled with a desire of personal wealth. While the country's traditional values are still in place, materialism is taking on a bigger role within the society. This is going to prove

problematic since they are not compatible. Chinese traditional values are geared not towards individualism, but rather towards the Confucian idea that family and society come first. Marrying someone for material wealth and personal indulgence is a selfish practice and simply cannot be couched with China's traditional value system.

That being said, love is an entirely different story. While marriage in China is still largely seen as a practice that surrounds the stability of the family rather than a romantic pursuit, the question that should be asked is whether or not love will play a larger role in matrimony. If love finds a suitable and stable place in the country and then becomes the sole driver for marriage in China, then it will not matter whether or not China's traditional values are engulfed in its new economy.

As far as China's future is concerned, there seem to be two distinct possibilities that may come from all of this. One is that China's economic miracle will see a decline, which removes all of the materialistic elements from dating and marriage. The implication is that all of China's traditional factors, such as the parents' roles in matchmaking, which had previously been declining, would be likely to make a comeback and become even more prevalent. The other possibility is that China's dating/marriage culture is currently in a transformation phase. In other words, even if its economy begins to decline, the cultural and perhaps international changes that China saw after the reform and opening up period have left such an imprint on its society that independence and free love will simply become the new norm – something that can be called 'romance with Chinese characteristics'.

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