Chapter 1

Love stories in contemporary China: cultural production in the new millennium

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Abstract

In the introductory chapter we present the moral and intellectual justifications for a book dedicated to the cultural politics of love and intimacy in contemporary China. We outline the background, scope and distinct approach we are taking. We also provide an historical overview of the ways in which narratives of love have evolved in Chinese culture, as well as an overview of some of the most popular discourses in contemporary cultural expressions. The chapter ends with a summary of all chapters.

Since the 1980s, China has been undergoing modernization at an unparalleled pace, resulting in dramatic social, cultural and economic impacts in the daily lives of Chinese people. This volume brings together scholars who are interested in the ways in which the multitude of political, economic, social, cultural and technological forces currently at work in China are (re)shaping the meanings of love and intimacy in public culture. The contributors to this volume focus on a

range of cultural and media forms such as literature, film, television, music and new media. They also examine new cultural practices such as online activism, virtual intimacy and relationship counselling.

By focusing on love and intimacy, this book seeks to shed light on texts and textual practices in China's media, literature and popular culture that are not easily accessible to those outside the Mainland but which express meanings that have profound significance in the lives of individuals. Love and romance have been the subject of many previous academic studies in various cultures and societies, including in China. Romantic love, as Jankowiak defines it, refers to 'any intense attraction involving the idealization of the other within an erotic context' (1995a, p. 4; 2008). The notion of romantic love is believed to be 'near universal' and is by no means just a 'modern subjective experience' (Jankowiak 2011). Research approaches to the study of love range from the social and cultural to the biochemical, psychophysical and neurological. Despite differences in research methods and purposes, there seems to be consensus on a number of points. First, it is difficult to separate sex from romantic love, even though the latter refers specifically to the process of emotional bonding. Second, the emotional experiences associated with romantic love are highly valued and the romantic couple is cherished as the ideal social relationship in almost all societies, even though in some contexts such relationships have to be conducted in secrecy (Jankowiak 2011). Thirdly, as with other types of emotional experiences, romantic love in capitalist societies is linked to consumption habits and is therefore increasingly subject to exploitation by the market.

In both commonsense and academic usage, the word 'love' is applied to a broad spectrum of relationships, ranging from conjugal and familial relations to friendship. 'Love' is also a concept that can be explored from a variety of approaches—sociological, religious, philosophical and

psychological. In this volume, the term 'love' is deployed in a relatively specific sense to focus on relationships between two adult individuals that have a potentially romantic, intimate, sexual and/or marital dimension.

Chinese cultures and societies, as elsewhere, hold a rich repository of moving and poignant love stories. From the folk legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai—who turn into butterflies to continue their forbidden love—to the ill-fated romance between kindred spirits Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in the *Dream of Red Chamber*, powerful love stories have always enthralled, overwhelmed and inspired Chinese people and transported them to a different world. However, until the beginning of the 20th century, in China notions of love and romance and ideas about what constituted intimacy were shaped to varying degrees by an entire array of cultural forces including Confucianism and other religious and philosophical traditions. These traditions determined that the individual's practices in matters of intimacy and love were shaped primarily by age-old cultural values including patriarchy, filial piety and a sense of duty to the family. Similarly, understandings about what love meant and what constituted appropriate forms and levels of intimacy were dictated by culture-specific feelings and emotions including guilt and shame.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, China has witnessed both diversification in the modes of expression and permutation in the meanings of love and romance in literature, film, television and music, across a wide range of digital spaces and platforms. However, despite profound changes, there is little understanding of how myriad political, economic, social and cultural forces shape the production of contemporary love stories. Nor we are clear whether the expressions and practices of intimacy have come to assume new shapes and forms in the new

millennium, amidst the tightening of authoritarian control, the deepening of socioeconomic inequality and the proliferation of social identities.

Addressing these questions has become a matter of urgent intellectual concern for at least three reasons. First, answering these questions is integral to the process of producing knowledge about 'deep China'. As Arthur Kleinman and his colleagues eloquently argue:

> If government policies, social institutions, and market activities constitute the *surface* of a changing China, the perceptual, emotional, and moral experience of Chinese, hundreds of millions of them, make up what we refer to as *deep* China. (Kleinman et al. 2011, p. 3)

Knowledge of deep China is not possible without asking how the perceptual, emotional and moral experiences of Chinese people are shaped by government policies, social institutions and market activities. In other words, research into textual expressions of love, romance and intimacy allows us to explore the interface between the personal and individual on the one hand, and state power and social forces on the other. In this way we are able to assess the extent to which the state continues to exercise ideological control and attempts to regulate the moral behaviour of its citizens. Textual research enables us to identify key state-authorized narratives and politically expedient ways of telling love stories in official discourses, as well as understanding the acceptable range of themes and discourses of romantic love in mainstream popular cultural production.

Second, the study of romantic love provides insight into an important and overlooked dimension of socio-economic inequality. As practices of love and romance are key moments of socioeconomic exchange, they are often burdened with the task of mediating and negotiating

structural and material inequality (Illouz 1997; Clarke 2011; Watson 1991). For this reason, an examination of the ways in which love and intimacy are produced in cultural texts and practised in everyday life promises to furnish valuable insights into the cultural politics of inequality along a range of social markers such as gender, class, sexuality and the rural-urban divide.

Thirdly and equally importantly, studying social change through the prism of intimacy opens up a new space in which to explore the intricate interplay among state, market, tradition and patriarchy. In this critical space, we can set about identifying emergent new emotions and affects (e.g. anxiety, lack of emotional security, cynicism) that underscore contemporary narratives of love, romance and intimacy. We can also delineate the dominant, emerging and residual moral grammar according to which romantic love is defined and narrated in the millennial decades of economic reforms and market economy.

Privatization and intimate life in China

The most logical place to start this critical project is to ask how social change has impacted on the remaking of the Chinese individual. If the three decades of socialism in Mao's era from the 1950s to the 1970s were marked by a high level of collectivism, from the 1980s the post-Mao Party-state is characterized by having launched of a series of privatization processes in the public sector. These include the rollback of the Chinese state as the provider of public health, education, housing and other goods and services. Equally importantly, the changes also include the fact the state has to a considerable extent retreated from its role as mediator in personal, familial, neighbourly and civic relationships. For instance, state-authorized figures and institutions that used to embody the moral legitimacy and leadership of the paternal Party-state have largely disappeared. In urban China, this process has effectively turned the individual from an institutionalized 'workplace person' into a 'social person' (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). It has also

largely dissolved the mechanisms of the workplace socialization, ideological 'thought work' and ethical guidance typically associated with socialist forms of moral education.

In these changing times, individuals have found themselves unshackled from the social norms and commitments associated with socialism, with a hitherto unavailable space of personal freedom in which to experiment with different modes of self-formation. The Maoist state determined the parameters of a 'proper' life, leaving little room or need for individuals to make their own decisions (Farquhar and Zhang 2012), including decisions about whom to date and how to love. Since the economic reforms, the ethos of individual choice—the basic tenant of neoliberal ideology—has secured a foothold in regulating the realm of the private and the personal. As Rofel (2007) has argued, and as the chapters in this book will show, the cultural formations of post-socialist China are largely anchored in the production of the 'desiring', self-governing and reflexive subject.

Privatization has also had a profound impact on how intimacy is perceived and practised. Once defined through what Featherstone (1995, p. 229) calls 'face-to-face relationships amongst kin and locals within a bounded known world', intimacy, as Chinese individuals knew it, emerged out of a range of interpersonal bonds such as those with friends, colleagues, neighbours, partners/spouses and family members. Nowadays, however, interpersonal relationships are increasingly considered more a source of economic benefit than of emotional intimacy. As a result, the relationship of the couple has become the main source of intimacy for individuals in post-Mao China (Sun and Lei 2017).

Individualization is conceptualized by classical sociologists as the social surfacing of the individual as a unique intersection of social roles, responsibilities and functions. It is also

understood as the cultural accentuation of the individual as an independent, separated and original being (Sassatelli 2011). In their discussion of second or late modernity, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) argue that since industrialization in the twentieth century, individual behaviour has become less bound by traditional norms and class-based collective identity. One's life is increasingly a reflexive self-programmed project. Central to the conceptualization of the individual is the notion of choice, the taken-for-granted belief that individuals are free to make their own choices in pursuing their desires and goals in life. As choice has become the ultimate source of value, the notion of individual choice has become a normative framework, within which experts produce and deploy knowledge to evaluate consumer practices and their moral worth. What is often missing from this expert knowledge is the fact that choice-making is limited by deeply rooted and multilayered ordinary practices, social relations, structural hierarchies and institutions. Furthermore, as the ongoing debate in China arounding the fraught phenomenon of extra-marital affairs testifies, the notion of choice is often in conflict with notions of responsibility and obligation.

While China's embrace of privatization and modernization means that, when it comes to love and intimacy, we need to consider the impact of individualization, it is equally important to ask how individualization works in authoritarian states such as China. Both informed by and in dialogue with China scholars, Beck and Grande (2010) point out that individualization, which is central to the language of justice and law in Europe, is enforced in China by a strong one Party-state that at the same time does not tolerate individualism. Echoing Beck and Grande, Yan (2010, p. 509), believes that the Party-state engages in the project of managed individualization as a 'means to the end of modernization'. It is, therefore, an individualization that nevertheless does not lead to individualism (Yan 2009).

Neoliberal logic under socialist rule

It is widely understood that economic reforms since the late 1970s have seen China dramatically transformed from a socialist to a largely capitalist economy. However, it is equally clear that the everyday lives of Chinese people continue to be shaped by an ambiguous and paradoxical process that has witnessed the progressive application of neoliberal strategies on the one hand and continuing and intensified (re)articulation of China's socialist legacies on the other (Zhao 2008). To be sure, China has never officially and openly pronounced itself a neoliberal state. Indeed, some may find it odd that neoliberalism is used to describe a country such as China, where the government still holds a considerable portion of the country's fixed assets and where strong institutions, rule of law, transparent markets and democracy—the hallmark of neoliberal structure—are largely missing. Having said that, it can be argued that many of China's economic, social and political strategies of governing are indeed neoliberal. It is for this reason that some scholars believe that we are now witnessing 'China's selective embrace of neoliberal logic as a strategic calculation for creating self-governing subjects who will enrich and strengthen Chinese authoritarian rule' (Ong and Zhang 2008, p. 10).

The myriad impacts of this paradoxical process have been explored from a number of angles (Rofel 2007; Zhang and Ong 2008; Anagnost 2008; Yan 2008; Hoffman 2010). It has also been observed that a number of differences between China and the liberal-democratic societies in the West remain firmly in place. In addition, although the state has shifted the burden of providing public housing, education, health and essential services from itself to the market and individuals, the realm of cultural production, especially the Chinese media, continues to operate according to the principle of both the 'Party line' and the 'bottom line' (Zhao 1998). If anything, in the regime of Xin Jinping in the new millennium, the Party intends to maintain a keener interest in setting,

maintaining and policing the boundary of what is permissible in the realm of cultural production, particularly in the area of entertainment media and popular culture (Bai and Song 2015). We are therefore confronted with two central questions. First, has China's selective embrace of neoliberal socio-economic policies and practices led to some kind of neoliberal cultural politics? Second, if China is situated in the constellations of socialist rule, neoliberal logic and self-governing practices, how do these constellations shape the ways in which love and intimacy are understood and practised?

Revolution in the intimate sphere

There is a growing body of research on the topics of love, sexuality, family and marriage in reform-era China. This literature includes anthropological and sociological works on kinship, family and marriage in Chinese society (Farquhar 2002; Farrer 2002; Rofel 2007; Yan 2009; Brandtstädter and Santos 2009; Davis and Friedman 2014; Zhang 2011; Wang. P. 2015; Pan and Huang 2013; Pan 2006; Jeffreys 2006; Santos and Harrell 2017; Pan 2017). Harriet Evans's (1997) *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* stands out as one of the few books that approaches gender and sexuality through the prism of state and market discourses. Also worthy of note is Farquhar's (2002) book, which argues for the use of literature to enhance ethnographic endeavours; very few anthropological studies take a cultural studies approach and consider the role of media and popular culture in shaping romantic or intimate relationships.

We know from this growing body of work that, for instance, educated urban Chinese people now conduct intimate relationships in the context of greatly reduced state oversight of sexual relationships. Sociologists point to the 'deinstitutionalization' of marriage and intimate life in the reform era (Davis and Friedman 2014). On the one hand, there has been a tendency to delink sex

from reproduction and marriage. Sex for reproduction has in part given way to sex for pleasure (Pan 2006). On the other hand, sexual pleasure is no longer necessarily tied to romantic love (E. Zhang 2011). This process has afforded Chinese citizens more freedom to 'script their lives' than before (Davis and Friedman 2014, p. 3). New means of expressing and achieving sexual intimacy have emerged, which in turn pose challenges to the normative, traditional modes of sexuality.

The ways in which these changes affect the intimate lives of young people in urban China have been carefully documented in anthropological literature. James Farrer's ethnography in Shanghai uncovers a proliferation of 'multiple sexual subcultures' in large Chinese cities, which provide an anonymous social backdrop to urban life (2014). In their fieldwork in Hohhot and Nanjing, Jankowiak and Li (2017) identified a shift from a culture of courting to a culture of dating. Young people in educated urban circles have come to view equality between couples as paramount in an ideal relationship, and the language of love, complete with an 'emotionally involved model', is contesting the language of duty, which favours a 'dutiful spouse model'. The notion of intimacy has to some extent replaced marriage as a worthy goal in relationships, and educated urban young people are increasingly aware of the need for 'constant communication' as a way to achieve and maintain intimacy in an 'emotional terrain of increasing ambiguity, risk and fluidity in intimate relationships'. It is now widely understood that communication is especially important for couples due to the increased level of geographic mobility in contemporary China (Farrer 2014, p. 91).

While the field of Chinese queer studies has started to take shape (Kong 2010; Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Bao 2018), anthropological work has confirmed an increased level of 'affective individualism' (Donner and Santos 2016) in navigating heterosexual marital

relationships, especially in big cities. For instance, individuals in Shanghai are putting more emphasis on 'personal choice and self-fulfilment' (Cai and Feng 2014, p. 114). Among educated young people in Shanghai, premarital sex has become increasingly acceptable, as long as commitment and intimacy are present in the relationship. These days, young people in the city have the option of marrying late (Cai and Feng 2014) or not marrying at all (Zhang and Sun, 2014; Davis and Friedman 2014). Marriages between individuals from different provinces and regions are increasingly common due to increased geographic mobility (Xinhua 2005), as are inter-racial and cross-border marriages (P. Wang 2015). Chinese citizens also have more opportunities to 'enter and exit relationships' and more variations in the models of relationships have become available to them (Farrer 2014, pp. 90–91).

Increasingly, educated urban individuals in China have become caught up in in what Beck (1992) describes as 'dis-embedding and re-embedding' in the paradoxical process of 'individualization'. That is, these educated urbanites are gradually being dis-embedded from a traditional context in which marriage, sex and intimate relationships are practised, and re-embedded in a modern one. As Giddens (1991, p. 16) points out, a key element of becoming modern is adopting a new understanding and practice of intimacy, and the quest for intimacy is at the heart of modern forms of established sexual relationships. Defined as relationships that are voluntary, personal, emotionally authentic and love- and care-based, intimacy has grown more desirable. Yet intimacy thus defined is even harder to achieve than before. On the one hand, individuals have become more 'mobile, unsettled, and "open"' in their behaviour and feelings about sexuality and love, creating 'unexplored territory to be charted'—territory that is fraught with 'new dangers' (pp. 12–13). On the other hand, along with the freedom to develop a new 'life politics' comes an increased level of anxiety, and a sense of risk in the private sphere of

love and intimate relationships. In their efforts to minimize risk and cope with the new anxieties and uncertainties thrown up by a more open and mobile life, growing numbers of Chinese middle-class consumers are turning to professional advice given in the form of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (L. Zhang 2014, 2015; Yang 2015). They are also actively seeking advice from talk shows on radio, reality shows on television and from experts who regularly deliver advice through subscription accounts on social media (Sun and Lei 2017).

While these changes are clear evidence of the triumph of modernity over tradition, anthropologists caution against a clear-cut and dichotomous approach to such a dualistic framework in making sense of individuals' actions. Ethnographic data, for instance, suggests that on matters of love and marriage, women exercise often quite limited agency against larger social forces, including the material imperative of home ownership on the one hand, and the interpellation of the 'ideal wife' promoted by both the state and patriarchal culture on the other. Rather than becoming a new modern subject, women looking for Mr Right continue to engage in bargains and negotiations with structural forces, whether patriarchy, the state or materialist necessity (Zavoretti 2017a).

The unhelpfulness of the modernity versus tradition framework is clear if we consider the social pressure to get married and have children experienced by urban educated 'left-over' women. It is also evidenced in the experience of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities. Some researchers are seeing rural migrant women—long cast in the image of backwardness—in a new light. These women's new mobility, adoption of urban consumption and search for love and a marriage mate are being viewed through the prism of becoming modern (Beynon 2004; Pun 2005; Gaetano 2015). Yet, traditional ideas of match-making and marriage may not be totally incompatible with ideas of romance and love. Migrant women's embrace of love and romance

may also be understood as the individual's desire to fulfil her role in her lifecycle rather than her desire to reject tradition (Zavoretti 2017b).

The extent to which an individual succeeds in negotiating the cultural and material changes in contemporary China depends on one's class position. Class inequality significantly shapes the extent and ways in which individuals from different socio-economic groups engage in intimate relationships. In their search for an emotionally fulfilling marital relationship, individuals from the marginalised groups in China face a market that stratifies their emotional experiences; they also confront the enduring structural discrimination designed by the state. Far from benefitting from the process of individualization, rural migrant women in the mobile regime of industrial modernization are torn between conflicting values and expectations.

Love stories before the 21st century

Like everywhere else in the world, in Chinese culture love is the most central leitmotif in literature and story-telling. Despite claims that the notion of romantic love does not exist in Chinese traditions (Beach and Tesser 1988), studies of Chinese literature, especially of folk stories and narratives, suggest that even though Chinese narrative traditions emphasise companionship and enduring love, there is ample textual evidence in historical literature pointing to the pathos of romantic love (Jankowiak 1995b). Jankowiak's survey of love stories on Chinese television in the late 1987 convinced him that Chinese stories are not dissimilar to American stories (Jankowiak 1995b).

Undeniably, ideas about what constitute proper and legitimate attachments between men and women have been shaped by culturally specific traditional values and practices. In the case of China, orthodox Confucian discourses have accorded great importance to the institution of

marriage because marriage is key to the continuance of the patriline. In *The Book of Rites* (*Liji*), one of the core texts of Confucian literature, Confucius (551–479 BC) was recorded saying ‘By means of the grand rite of marriage, the generations of men are continued through myriads of ages’. Due to this strong emphasis on the reproductive function of marriage, the inability to produce an heir was considered a major moral failing. Mencius (c. 372–289 BC), a famous Confucian sage second only to Confucius himself, once claimed that ‘There are three ways to be unfilial; having no sons is the worst’. Deep concern of procreation and filial piety had been used to justify polygamy and a clear distinction between wife and concubine (H. Liu 1996, p. 27). Since marriage was understood as a union of two families, or ‘two different surnames’, to borrow the words of *The Book of Rites*, it was commonly arranged according to ‘parental order and matchmaker’s advice’ and young people generally had no say about their own marriage (Davis and Friedman 2014, p. 6; Liu 1996, p. 26; Yan 2003, pp. 47–48). While in Confucian classics the husband–wife relationship was preached as the most common form of human relationship and the foundation of social order, this relationship was maintained through distinct gender roles and gender segregation, rather than through mutual respect and affection (Liu 1996, p. 28). Hence, traditional heterosexual romance usually took place outside the family, ‘on the margins of society’, such as in a brothel or during a journey (Lee 2007, p. 31). The Confucian dictum ‘Between men and women there are only differences’ and the subsequent development of same-sex emotional attachment (Fei [1947] 1992, p. 92) had also led to a flurry of writings on male same-sex attraction throughout imperial China (Hinsch 1990; Zhang 2001; Shi 2008; Wu 2004).

The scholar–beauty (*caizi jiaren*) romance is undoubtedly the most celebrated and influential narrative pattern of love in pre-modern China. Archetypes of the model can be traced

all the way back to '*Guan ju*', the opening poem of *The Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*, 11th to 6th centuries BC) that depicts a young nobleman's longing for an idealized fair lady (Su 2006, pp. 2–3). The love story of Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun is also widely viewed as an early precursor to the scholar–beauty romance (Su 2006; Song 2004; Wang 2010; Zhou 1995). First appearing in Sima Qian's (c. 145–90 BC) *Records of the Historian*, the story recounts how Zhuo Wenjun, the widowed daughter of a rich merchant, falls in love with Sima Xiangru because of his great literary and musical talent and she boldly elopes with him. The impoverished couple finally win the approval of Wenjun's father and live a comfortable life. *The Western Wing* (*Xixiang Ji*) by Wang Shifu (1260?–1336?), a dramatic re-creation of a Tang Dynasty (618–907) story, offers the first paradigmatic scholar–beauty narrative. Focusing on the love and marriage between the handsome young Student Zhang and the beautiful aristocratic girl Cui Yingying, the play contains all the standard elements of the romantic model, such as a fortuitous meeting between the two lovers who fall in love at first sight, communication of their love through poetry, encountering objections and obstacles in the way of marriage, assistance from a helper, forced separation and eventual reunion after the scholar's success in the imperial examination (Song 2004, p. 20). The most famous line in the play—'May all lovers (*youqingren*) in the world be united in wedlock'—firmly connects romantic love with marriage and asserts the former as the basis of a desirable union. Because this notion of a love marriage challenged the legitimacy of the orthodox practice of arranged marriage in imperial China, the script of the play was frequently banned in later periods.

This narrative model of love evolved into a highly formulaic fictional genre in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and served to promote conservative 'gentry-class notions of masculinity and femininity' (Song 2004, p. 20). However, some of the more progressive scholar–beauty

narratives in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties articulated a fairly 'modern' vision of relationship by stressing the importance of affection, compatibility and equality in love and marriage (Wang 2010, p. 187). While the beauty was once characterized merely as a physically attractive young woman and the scholar was mostly noted for his literary talent, from the late Ming dynasty both the beauty and the scholar were required to possess talent, *qing* (feelings, sentiments) and good looks so that they could be the ideal partners for one another. *Qing*, in particular, gained primacy over the other two qualities in the construction of a happy marriage (Wang 2010, pp. 248–249; Zhou 1995, p. 16). Tang Xianzu's (1550–1616) masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan Ting Huanhun Ji*) vividly represents the mysterious power of *qing* and women's autonomy and agency in love. The heroine Du Liniang, 'a quintessential symbol of *qing*', first dies of lovesickness and is later revived by the power of *qing* (Huang 2001, p. 77). Throughout the play, it is Du Liniang 'who has been taking the initiative' and is eventually reunited with the object of her desire (Song 2004, p. 31).

The scholar–beauty model has had a far-reaching impact on Chinese literary tradition and popular minds. The great classic novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou Meng*) by Cao Xueqing (c. 1715–1763) is said to have borrowed many elements from scholar–beauty novels, even though it also voices criticism of the genre (Wang 2010; Zhou 1995). The model's contemporary manifestation can be discerned in novels that feature a talented rural man who settles down in the city by passing the college entrance exam and obtaining higher education. The rural-born intellectual then abandons his beautiful, faithful lover back in the countryside and starts a relationship with an urban woman (Qiao and Li 2011; see Guoqing Zheng's and Yanwen Li's chapters in this volume for more discussion of rural–urban romance).

As Haiyan Lee (2007) argues, concepts such as love, desire and intimacy reliably constitute the narrative about the formation of the modern subject. Lee's genealogy of sentiment in the first half of the 20th century in China makes it clear that 'emotion talk' is necessarily about identity, morality, gender, authority, power and community. For instance, left-wing writers in the 1930s, faced with the question of how to negotiate the potential tensions between individuals' erotic desires and the demands of the revolutionary cause, mostly adopted a revolution-plus-love formula in their representation of romantic experiences. Despite various permutations of this formula, it is clear that revolution presents itself as both a motivation and a social milieu in which lovers can relate to one another while participating in revolutionary activities. In this sense, personal love is mobilized by revolution, and individual love stories necessarily unfold within the grand narrative of class, nation and revolution.

As a literary formula, revolution-plus-love is believed to have evolved from the political novel of the late Qing period, which is known for its concern with questions of cultural, national and racial identity (J. Liu 2003). This theme continued in the discourses of a new modern China that emerged during the May Fourth period, which began in 1919 and which saw women's emancipation. But it was during the revolutionary period that writings following the revolution-plus-love formula emerged and proliferated. Some attribute the rise of this literary genre to the radicalization of the intelligentsia in the 1920s, and the need for patriots from both the left and right ends of the ideological spectrum to reconcile the tension between 'revolutionary fervor' and a 'reluctance to relinquish the discourse of love' (Lee 2007). One particular way of resolving this tension was to postpone love and subordinate the sexual relationship to the revolutionary agenda. However, as David Der-Wei Wang (2004, p. 91) observes, while some—such as writer Mao Dun—see revolution and love as in conflict, others—such as Jiang Guangci—see the dynamics

between the two as part of a 'coherent agenda through which the revolutionary subjectivity progresses from the domain of eros to that of polis'.

This does not mean that all literary works on romantic love in modern China subscribe to the revolution-plus-love paradigm. In fact, literary works such as those of Eileen Chang and Qian Zhongshu, who wrote in the 1940s, exist outside the leftist revolution-plus-love paradigm and are widely read by readers of both their own period and of today.

Literary history also tells us that romantic love did not disappear in post-1949 socialist literature. The revolution-plus-love formula continued to evolve, albeit in various permutations. For instance, *Xiao Erhei's Marriage* (小二黑结婚), written by Zhao Shuli, transplanted the revolution-plus-love formula from the social space inhabited by urban, elite intelligentsia to a rural, peasant and grassroots milieu. Here, political stories often took the form of love stories (Cai 2010, p. 147). While this framework for narrating romantic love greatly influenced socialist fiction of the 1949 to 1966 period, only the 'true love of the proletariat,' which puts socialist values before private pleasure, was valued as legitimate (Evans 1997, p. 91). This formula was put to further political use during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), except that during this period, class struggle became the only narrative framework. Gender relations and individual affect were submerged beneath the theme of class identity and were portrayed only in ways that served the 'repressive power of the revolutionary discourse' (J. Liu 2003, p. 174).

New genres of love in post-Mao China

Not surprisingly, when China emerged from the Cultural Revolution, writers, and the public in general, were eager to embrace another way of telling love stories, one in which the individual and the personal were privileged over the collective. To anthropologist Judith Farquhar (2002),

Zhang Jie's short story *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, published in 1979, signaled the beginning of an era when the romantic love between individuals opened up a domain in which people could 'explore the possibilities for a personal life within the broader social transformation' (p. 178). In what came to be called 'scar literature' or 'wounded literature', love was used to critically reflect the trauma of the political movements during Mao's era, especially those of the Cultural Revolution. 'Avant-garde' writers such as Mo Yan and Su Tong used sex to deconstruct the myths of the nation and revolution (J. Liu 2003, p. 24). In the decades since the advent of economic reforms, a split has emerged between official and market-oriented cultural expressions. Public discourses have all but abandoned revolution except as a trope to be parodied and deconstructed or preserved in the television adaptations of revolution-themed literary classics—now often referred to as 'Red Classics' (Gong 2017). Expressions of sexuality, private pleasure and individual desire such as those by Wei Hui have tended to come more or less exclusively from the market sector, combining consumerism with a postmodern play on female sexuality, representing the ultimate rejection of the revolution-plus-love paradigm.

Interestingly, while the search for love has never been more fervent, love has never felt more elusive. One cultural commentator in 新周刊 (*New Weekly*)—a leading chronicle of cultural trends in China—laments:

> Love suffuses our Internet, dominates television dramas, and is dished up everywhere as chicken soup for the soul. But this linguistic excessiveness only highlights the fear and anxiety that real love has vanished. (Sun Linlin 2015)

As China heads for the third decade of the 21st century, cultural texts suggest that it is no longer a case of 'love must not be forgotten'. It seems more likely that, at a time when intimacy is increasingly commodified, 'love can no longer be found'.

The new millennium has seen the growing popularity of the *xianxia* genre, a type of narrative that involves immortal beings and the cultivation of immortality. Romantic love has thus been increasingly mystified and deified. The most passionate and undying love tends to happen between immortals in a spatially and temporally remote otherworld rooted in Chinese mythology, rather than between mortals in the real world. For instance, Tangqi Gongzi's online novel *To the Sky Kingdom* (*Sansheng sanshi shili taohua*, 2008), which was adapted into a wildly popular television series in 2017, narrates the love and loyalty between two immortals in their past lives and later reincarnations. The 2015 hit television series *The Journey of Flower* (*Hua qian gu*) depicts the tragic love between an orphaned girl with access to the power of the demon and her saviour and master, an immortal being committed to protecting earthly beings. The 2018 popular web series *Heavy Sweetness, Ash-Like Frost* (*Xiangmi chenchen jinrushuang*) details the awakening to love of the daughter of the flower deity through her love triangle with the Heavenly Prince and his step-brother.

Compared to the intensity and purity of love between immortal beings, love stories set in contemporary China are often compromised by earthly concerns and appear to be more banal and calculating. The *Ode to Joy* series (*Huanle song*, 2016, 2017), one of the most watched and discussed urban dramas in recent years, concerns five young women living on the same floor in an apartment block in Shanghai. Each woman represents a different social role and faces particular problems in her love life. Take the character Fan Shengmei, for example. Despite her charming appearance and decent job, the 30-year-old 'left-over woman' is forced by her sexist

and exploitative birth family to become a gold digger, as she has to provide for not only her parents but also her brother's family. The box office hit *The Ex-File 3: The Return of The Exes* (*Qianren 3: zaijian qianren*, 2018) offers an honest portrayal of the painful breakup between two estranged lovers, Meng Yun and Lin Jia. Having lived together for five years, Lin Jia is eager to secure a husband, yet Meng Yun still wants to focus on his career. They break up after a squabble over trifles. While both harbour the hope of getting back together, they are eventually drawn apart by other suitors.

Two notable web series in 2018, *Women in Beijing* (*Beijing nüzi tujian)* and *Women in Shanghai* (*Shanghai nüzi tujian*), further reveal the complexity of love and marriage and their entanglement with entrenched gender inequality and the unevenness of economic development. Both shows are local remakes of the Japanese web drama *Tokyo Girls Picture Book* (*Tokyo Joshi Zukan*, 2016–2017), and both employ the narrative formula of 'a city full of possibility + a striving woman' (Ai 2018, p. 55). In line with the recent trend of the 'big heroine drama' (*danüzhu ju*) that centres on the life trajectory and ascent to power of an obscure female protagonist (Li and Li 2018; Wang 2017), the two 'women in city' series feature ambitious provincial young women, showing their struggles for a better life in the metropolis over the span of a decade. Chen Ke, the heroine of *Women in Beijing*, has relationships with a variety of men while climbing the career ladder. She breaks up with one boyfriend after he disapproves of her pursuit of professional advancement in Beijing and warns her that men do not like 'women who have desires (*you yuwang de nüren*)'. Driven by the anxiety to settle down in Beijing, at the age of 30 Chen Ke marries a man who has a Beijing *hukou* (household registration), a stable job, and an apartment, all of which are coveted assets in the contemporary marriage market. Her marriage, however, soon ends in divorce when she finds out that her husband is a mummy's boy and her

parents-in-law distrust her financially because she is not a native Beijinger. The show ends with Chen Ke's decision to start her own business in Beijing and her initiation of a relationship with a caring eye doctor from her hometown who fully appreciates her ambition. For career women like Chen Ke, love and marriage is by no means the only or ultimate goal in life. In addition to a fulfilling relationship, they are also searching for personal freedom, economic and spiritual independence, self-realization and material comfort.

Television and web series like *Ode to Joy* and *Women in Beijing* are part of an ongoing boom in women-oriented literature and culture (女性向文学和文化). This boom first emerged and then blossomed in internet literature, before sweeping across other cultural industries, including comics, television, films and, most recently, online games. Since the beginning of the new millennium, Chinese internet literature has split along gender lines, with male and female writers each having built up their own writing communities and readership. To fully represent women's notions of romantic love, women's literary websites have fostered a number of new genres, tropes and styles (Feng 2013; Yang and Xu 2015). For instance, *danmei*, a genre of male same-sex romance, has become extremely popular in women's online writings (see Xiqing Zheng's chapter in this volume), because it provides a more egalitarian model of intimacy than heterosexual romance and facilitates women's exploration of queer sexual identities and desires. In addition to the rise of new types of romance, significant changes have also occurred in traditional heterosexual romance. Due to female netizens' widespread discontent with male infidelity (see Yi Zhou's chapter in this volume), one-on-one relationships have gradually replaced love triangles and extramarital relationships as the mainstream relationship pattern in online urban romance (Zhou and Sun 2018, p. 31). Since the mostly female readers of online romance are seeking relaxation and emotional comfort through their reading, they tend to prefer

light-hearted 'sweet stories' (*tianwen*) that depict the affectionate interactions of a loving couple, and 'pampering stories' (*chongwen*) that demonstrate how one character, usually a powerful male, lavishes care and attention on his romantic interest.

Another domain in which women are becoming a market force is the Chinese video game industry, which used to be dominated by male gamers. The phenomenal success of *Love and Producer* (*Lian yu zhizuoren*, 2017), a mobile role-playing game catering to a female demographic, signals the growing number and purchasing power of female gamers. Aside from its exquisite artwork and sophisticated plots, the game creates four attractive male suitors for the heroine: a genius scientist, a protective policeman, a domineering CEO and a charismatic superstar. Female players can develop romantic relationships with these perfect virtual boyfriends (for more discussion of virtual boyfriends, see Chris K. K. Tan and Xu Zhiwei's chapter in this volume), although it costs them a large amount of money to do so.

Fifty years ago, investigations into the cultural politics of texts and textual practices would have called for limited empirical investigation. Haiyan Lee's genealogy of love from 1900 to 1950 needed to look no further than literature and public narratives in the print medium. Similarly, Cai Xiang's investigation of the cultural production of narratives of revolution in socialist China from 1949 to 1966 needed only to consider textual material from literature, drama, short stories and cinema. In contrast, China's cultural productions in the last several decades, especially in the new millennium, have been increasingly shaped by globalization, commercialization and technological change featuring digitalization. These processes have inexorably transformed the ways in which the 'love story' is told in the domain of public culture. This is due to three factors: (1) the new genres, forms and styles through which love and sexuality can be approached in the domain of the internet, reality television, and social media;

(2) the emergence of new public spaces, cultural practices and forms of knowledge of intimacy; and (3) the changing formation of subject positions and the emergence of new social identities (e.g. experts, virtual lovers, fans, celebrities). We therefore need to ask a different range of questions, such as: What are the new public spaces (both physical and discursive), cultural practices (e.g. virtual, performative) and new forms of knowledge (scientific, expert) about intimacy? How do these relate to traditional intimacy practices (embodied, marriage-oriented, and based on family and kinship)?

This volume's focus on millennial China provides a much-needed empirical update to our understanding of the relationships between cultural forms, public discourses and social change in China. Existing scholarship has gone some way towards documenting the discursive and narrative developments in the first two decades of China's economic reforms. But publications to date offer few insights into China during the last two decades. Yet the economic reforms during these two decades have been accompanied by a revolution in the ways in which love and intimacy are expressed and practised, thanks largely to the digitalization of everyday life. These later decades are also those during which the Gen Ys and the Millennials (those born in the 1990s and later) have come to assume dominance in public arenas of cultural production and consumption. The last two decades have also seen the rise of an 'intimate economy' of services, practices and platforms that enable individuals to seek guidance and advice in negotiating personal dilemmas in a manner that was largely unavailable in the 20th century.

In light of the increasingly complex spaces and proliferation of practices and cultural forms, a deep and thorough investigation of the cultural politics of love and intimacy in the 21st century calls for a hybrid approach, synthesising research methods from a number of disciplines. This includes an institutional study of the production and consumption of media and cultural products,

as well as textual and discourse analyses of media and cultural expressions in the mainstream and non-mainstream, state and market spaces. It also requires empirical work to uncover emerging, new and changing social spaces, media forms, communication platforms, cultural practices and social and economic activities in the domains of intimacy. We also need ethnographic insights into the ways in which individuals—government officials, media professionals, citizens, consumers, activists, fans—adopt deliberate response strategies and/or make independent choices in the state-sponsored neoliberal order of post-Mao China.

Structure of this book

The volume is divided into four closely connected and thematically overlapping sections that attempt to piece together a complex and nuanced picture of expressions of love and romance in the intimate sphere of contemporary China. The first section delves into expectations around marriage and the handling of relationship problems in post-Mao China. Drawing on ethnographic data and historical review, Roberta Zavoretti's chapter analyses the ambivalence and contradictions embedded in post-Mao discursive practices of courtship and marriage to show how class positions, gender roles, generational differences and 'Chinese tradition' work to produce conflicting notions of modern marriage. While Zavoretti's chapter highlights urban middleclass men's anxiety in seeking a suitable spouse, Liu Haiping's chapter dwells on the societal pressures on single women to find their Mr Right and the rise of relationship experts who specifically target these anxious women. Combining ethnographic research with a critical analysis of 'husband hunting' manuals, Liu's chapter illustrates the ways by which relationship experts provide action strategies and shape new subjectivities in intimate romantic relationships. Yi Zhou's chapter details the gender and social ramifications of women's digital literary practices in response to growing male infidelity and the rising divorce rate in contemporary

China. Rather than seeking advice from profit-driven counselling services, users of women's literary websites have turned to creative writing and reading, constructing what Zhou argues an 'ethical practice' for self-healing, group support and collective action.

The second section of the book investigates how the institutionalized urban–rural inequality critically impacts on the sex and love lives and relationships of rural-to-urban migrants. Guoqing Zheng's and Yanwen Li's chapters both draw on a wide range of literary and media texts to examine the genealogy and public imaginations of 'archetypal' figures that embody the negotiation of rural–urban, gender and class divides. Zheng focuses on the figure of the 'phoenix man'—a rural man who marries an urban woman. Li explores the rural-to-urban maid, whose search for intimacy often leads to involvement—voluntary or involuntary—with an urban man. Similarly, Tingting Liu's chapter deals with the sexual lives and romantic relationships of rural-to-urban migrant male workers but employing a different methodology and research focus. Liu's chapter offers an ethnographic study of rural migrant men's gendered longings and wounded masculinity, also exploring the crucial role of digital media communication in shaping their life experience and desires.

The third section of the book traces dominant, emergent and unconventional forms of intimacy in popular culture and public discourse and their entanglement with gender, class, and race norms. Through a case study of the longest running rural-themed television drama in China, *Rural Romantic Love Stories* (*Xiangcun aiqing gushi*, 2006–present), Huike Wen's chapter examines televisual representations of romantic (or unromantic) love in the countryside, where patriarchal social order remains strong. Through a close reading of two literary bestsellers, Ling Yang's chapter analyses the writings of the post-1980s generation to illustrate the search for alternative sources of happiness and meaning among urban youth. The persistence of gender

stereotypes in the show studied by Wen form an interesting contrast with the revised gender scripts in the texts discussed by Yang and suggest a considerable gender gap between the urban and the rural. Chris K. K. Tan and Xu Zhiwei's chapter also touches on the dismantling of traditional gender roles. Drawing on the theory of the 'social factory', the chapter explores the immaterial affective labour performed by male virtual lovers, whose engagement with care-for-money transactions breaks the long association of women with care-giving jobs. Pan Wang's chapter offers a genealogy of the narratives of international romance and love in China from the 1980s to 2010s, revealing how historical, social and political forces have altered public perceptions of the foreigner and intimacy between Chinese and non-Chinese people. Just as virtual loving pushes the boundaries between (online) play and (offline) work, international romance also transcends geographical and racial boundaries.

The last cluster of chapters examine cultural practices that challenge the legitimacy of heteronormativity and the institution of marriage. Both Jamie J. Zhao's and Xiqing Zheng's chapters document queer online female fantasies in post-2010 Chinese media and popular culture. Zhao's chapter examines how female 'national-husband' (*guomin laogong*) figures in Chinese televisual, music, and celebrity industries open up progressive, albeit limited, gender-transgressive spaces for their female fans. Zheng's chapter analyses how *danmei* fan fictions based on *The Disguiser*—an espionage thriller set in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during WWII—enable their female writers and readers to re-envision communist revolution and homosexual love as a shared utopia of equality. Using ethnographic approaches and textual analyses, Maud Lavin's chapter explores fans' usage of Li Yuchun's images to imagine female singledom and 'differentiating' normativities outside the hetero-marital. Like Zhao's and

Zheng's chapters, Lavin's chapter reveals the creative and transformative use of popular culture by female consumers to articulate their non-normative desires and longings.

A scholarly book centred on love and love stories may seem baffling, trivial or even downright pointless to many scholars, especially those in the social sciences, such as international relations and geography. But to arts and humanities scholars in such fields as literature, cultural studies and anthropology, to understand the project of modernity is to understand matters of the heart such as love and romance. By insisting on linking love and intimacy with questions of social equality, moral contestation and cultural politics, the authors in this volume embody a much needed 'intimate turn' in our study of social change in contemporary China. In doing so, their work demonstrates the value such approach offers to deepening our knowledge of 'deep China'.

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