
Since the establishment of the communist Chinese regime, arranged marriages have been forbidden under the law, which has provided all Chinese citizens with the right to marry whomever they wish (Pimentel, 2000, pp. 32–33). However, love and intimacy have been sensitive and private topics in the Chinese context until recently when the theme began to be discussed by the masses upon its appearance in public entertainment in the form of reality TV dating shows (Yang, 2017, p. 9). Among the TV programs in this genre, If You Are the Only One, the Chinese version of the popular British dating show Take Me Out, is the most recent and most influential in contemporary China. Dr. Chao Yang’s book could not be more timely. It is the first academic publication to provide an in-depth analysis of the interplay between young Chinese peoples’ consumption of this dating show and their understanding of love and intimacy.

Drawing on the findings of her interviews with Chinese youths and young adults who have watched If You Are the Only One, she attempts to answer a series of related questions: Why do young people watch the show? How do they perceive it? Does the show influence their views of romance and relationships? How does their views differ from those of their parents’ generation?

The six chapters of this book are organized according to theme. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the entire book. In this introduction, Yang situates the study of the romantic subjectivities of young people in the socio-cultural context of post-reform China. Both a researcher and a young Chinese citizen, Yang describes her personal journey to articulate the increasing significance of romantic topics in the everyday lives of young Chinese people. This description offers a vivid portrayal of the power dynamics among the state, the mass media, families, and young people’s romantic experiences.

Chapter 2 explores the views of young Chinese people regarding this popular Chinese reality TV dating show and discusses the approach used to research its audience. In particular, building on Stuart Hall’s (1980) “encoding/decoding” model, Yang shows how this TV show provides a mediated avenue that facilitates the (re)construction of young Chinese people’s understandings of love and intimacy. Chapter 3 then examines the ways in which the post-reform modernization of Chinese society has led to the rise of individualism among its people and how such emerging values have shaped young Chinese people’s perspectives on romance and relationships.

Chapter 4 is particularly interesting. In this chapter, Yang explores the changing dating ethics shared by contemporary young people in her analysis of the interplay between traditional Confucian-socialist values and the emerging marital morality. She addresses various current phenomena, such as premarital sex, cohabitation, and extramarital relationships, to determine how traditional understandings of responsibility and fidelity are challenged in post-reform Chinese society. In Chapter 5, Yang discusses the construction of the identity of Chinese youth by focusing on the interactions between this generation and their parents’ generation. This chapter highlights the marginalized influences of Confucian-socialist ideology on the values according to which Chinese youths choose mates as well as their attitudes toward premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and extramarital relationships. Chapter 6 summarizes the key findings of the previous chapters. It highlights the post-reform (re)definitions of love and intimacy by referring to a nexus of the market economy, global consumerism, the contemporary Chinese family, the Chinese national state, and the mass media.

Yang’s book provides original contributions to the knowledge about young people, their romantic relationships, and their TV consumption in the fast-changing, post-reform Chinese
socio-cultural context. Yang (2017, p. viii) notes that historically, dating, love, and intimacy have been viewed as sensitive topics in China. Prior to the launch of the reality TV dating show, If You Are the Only One, these topics were not discussed publicly by Chinese people. Yang’s case study of young Chinese people’s consumption of and dialog about the TV show displays the ways in which it both exploits and exacerbates the widespread liberation of thought in post-reform China. Her in-depth analysis demonstrates the ways in which the rise of individualism and consumerism in the contemporary Chinese context has changed young people’s perceptions and experiences of love and intimacy.

Yang’s book also raises an interesting issue: If You Are the Only One, which is an adapted version of Take Me Out, is representative of the “glocal” cultural flow because it exhibits the influences of Western consumerism in post-reform China. However, Yang’s study reveals that this adapted TV show has been “glocalized” dramatically through its consumption in China. Compared to the entertainment-focused original version viewed in Britain, much of the Chinese audience tends expect authenticity in If You Are the Only One. While watching the show, many young people ponder the self-presentation of the values and attitudes of the contestants and the guests, and they reflect on their own life experiences. These young people tend to regard dating activities seriously. This attitude reveals that the Confucian-socialist moral view of relationships has been marginalized in post-reform China although it is still manifest in the people’s understanding of dating ethics. These findings indicate the tangled web of Chinese tradition, Western consumerism, and the post-reform present, which has shaped young Chinese people’s perception of romantic experience.

This book provides a timely critical analysis of young Chinese people’s consumption of reality TV dating shows as well as their understanding of love and intimacy. It is both empirically rich and theoretically nuanced. I have no doubt about the thought-provoking nature of the book, and I anticipate that it will inspire further research in the field. This book should be of interest to readers who are interested in exploring the configuration of the everyday contemporary lives of Chinese people in the current post-reform socio-cultural context.

References

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