

Book Review

Love and Marriage in Globalizing China

Wang Pan. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. 247 pages

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Wang Pan's book *Love and Marriage in Globalizing China* delves into the fascinating yet academically largely unexplored phenomenon of Chinese-foreign marriages in China since 1979. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the book, on the one hand, presents official statistics from China as well as other countries and delineates the evolution of Chinese-foreign marriages, especially the socio-demographic characteristics with great details. On the other hand, applying media framing theory and discourse analysis to an impressively extensive array of media artifacts consisting of around 500 reports, 57 television documentaries and 20 episodes of television talk shows, the book beautifully untangles how mass media in mainland China represent Chinese-foreign marriages and construct out of those marriages national allegories of "China's social-economic progress, national achievement and increasing multiculturalism" (p.184), its citizens' metamorphosis into modern and cosmopolitan subjects, and the Middle Kingdom's superiority in world civilizations.

As it overwhelmingly has been Chinese women that are marrying/divorcing a foreign partner – although Chinese men are catching up – the book foregrounds the gendered nature of media construction, incisively exposing the great symbolic "burden" imposed on Chinese women. When they marry up and out, they are interpreted as materialistic and morally corrupt; since they abandon China, they are unpatriotic and thus doomed to marriage failures. When they bring foreign husbands to China, they become exemplary modern career women and embodiments of China's economic and cultural strengths. While Chinese men are often absent in media, the book excellently excavates the figure of the good Chinese man – honest, upright, and patriotic by default – that lurks behind the problematic Chinese women and "barbaric" for-

eign men. Another complication the book highlights is how celebrity Chinese-foreign marriages/divorces discursively depart from that of ordinary people, reconfiguring conventional ideas of gender roles, marriage and family. Uncannily, female Chinese celebrities who divorce their foreign husbands are celebrated by the media because “they are able to walk away from the traditional gender roles attached to women, make new choices and pursue their own individual interests” (p. 126). Such a discovery exposes the necessity for more academic examinations of contemporary Chinese celebrities and what fantasies they generate and how they resonate with the fast changing Chinese society.

With the introduction and Chapter 2 “Obstacles, statistics and regulations” laying out the context of Chinese-foreign marriages as a reform-era phenomenon, Chapter 3 and 4 proceed to analyze print media’s coverage of Chinese-foreign marriages and divorces among ordinary people. In terms of marriages, both the initial rapid increase of Chinese-foreign marriages and the more recent decrease are framed as “a sign of China’s national progress, modernization and integration into the world” (p. 49). Correspondingly, the reasons behind Chinese female citizens’ marrying out, as framed by the media, also undergoes a linear change from hypergamy (“marrying up”) to pure romantic love, testifying to China’s rise. With regard to divorces, the media turn individual divorces into cautionary tales, portraying Chinese women as vulnerable, especially those choosing to live overseas rather than in their motherland, and foreign men as prone to deception, adultery, bigamy, domestic violence, and abuse, thereby implying that the invisible ethnic Chinese men are good husbands. Moreover, commercial marriage introduction services are also represented as villains to be tamed by the Chinese state.

Chapter 5 and 6 examine print and online media coverage of celebrity Chinese-foreign marriages and divorces. Like ordinary women, the first few Chinese female celebrities who married foreigners in the 1980s were also suspected of hypergamous desires. However, in the 1990s the discourse bifurcated: celebrations of female stars’ simultaneous pursuit of career and romantic love, i.e. a modern womanhood, started to co-exist with enduring suspicions. Entering the new millennium, celebrity Chinese-foreign marriages engender new framings thanks to: 1) more foreign spouses having relocated to China, demonstrating China’s grow-

ing attractiveness to nationals of more developed countries; 2) gender roles becoming inverted in those marriages as foreign husbands are seen as “feminized” to be househusbands while their Chinese wives are lauded as “modern, career-oriented individuals who are active in the public rather than private domain” (p. 106). When celebrities divorce, their extraordinariness is even more manifested. Compared to that of ordinary people, those divorces seem more likely to end in good terms. When Chinese male celebrities divorce, they remain responsible and caring fathers, a framing further enhancing Chinese men’s positive images and virtues. When female celebrities divorce, they are exemplary career-oriented, independent, autonomous, and daring modern women. Wang Pan, however, cautions us to read such a positive image as partially a construction of the sophisticatedly crafted star persona. Nonetheless, assuming that such an image would be received positively by the public already reveals the destabilizing of the conception of womanhood and femininity in the 2000s.

Chapter 7 and 8 turn to the small screen, i.e. television documentaries and talk shows. Chapter 7 zooms in on two particular kinds of Chinese-foreign marriages, namely marriages between mainland Chinese and citizens of Taiwan (cross-Strait marriages), and marriages between rural Chinese and foreigners, often foreigners of higher social status. Although those documentaries claim to give voices to ordinary people and their life situations, Wang Pan argues the representations are not devoid of political messages. In the 2000s, cross-Strait marriages are represented as loving despite of initial difficulties, “mirroring the gradual improvement of wider cross-Strait relations” (p. 146). And the emphasis on mainland brides’ role as crucial business partners to their Taiwanese husbands also implies the changing power relation between the mainland and Taiwan. As for rural Chinese, through encountering foreigners they are catching up with their urban peers and therefore embracing cosmopolitanism and turning themselves into modern subjects; meanwhile, they also embody traditional Chinese virtues that lure their economically more privileged foreign partners. And this Sinicization theme is further developed in Chapter 8’s investigation of entertainment television talk shows where foreign spouses are constantly performing their “Chineseness” marked by their Chinese language skills, cultural skills, and love of China. If they are not competent enough to be virtually

Chinese, they perform as foreign-country bumpkins to demonstrate China's cultural sophistication and superiority for the watching Chinese audience.

In sum, this book very compellingly carves the contemporary Chinese imagination of China's position in the new global order out of the phenomenon of Chinese-foreign marriages. It is clearly written and structured with relevant background information, making it not only useful for scholars and students of China studies, (im)migration studies and celebrity studies, but also interesting to the general public.

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