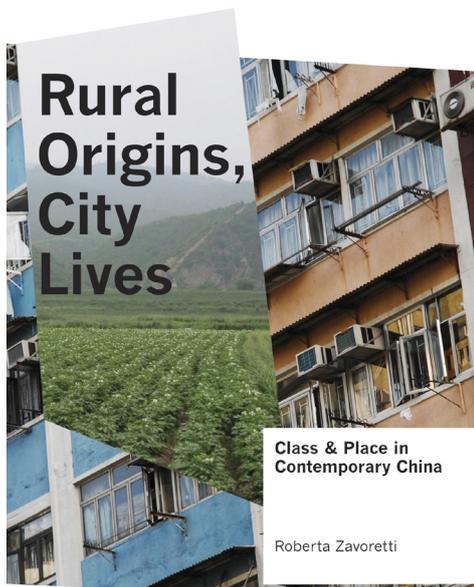


Love, marriage and intimacy in China

Roberta Zavoretti

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Roberta Zavoretti is a social anthropologist and the author of *Rural Origins, City Lives: Class and Place in Contemporary China* (University of Washington Press, 2017). Besides teaching at the University of Cologne and various other universities in Germany, she has extensively published on marriage, intergenerational relations, gender and affective politics in China. Educated in Venice (Ca' Foscari) and London (SOAS), she has been a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and is a member of Global South Studies Centre Cologne.



AN INTERVIEW

WITH ROBERTA ZAVORETTI

In the span of a few decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has seen enormous socio-economic shifts. What have they implied for gender inequality?

Pondering about care, reproductive labour, and holding gender positionality as a relation of production in itself—as Marxist leaning feminists do—makes sense when it comes to analyzing the situation in China. Indeed, women still bear most responsibility for reproductive labour in the home, while they are also largely present on the job market. This presence is largely due to the fact that during the heyday of socialism, the state held that the condition of female emancipation was women's participation to productive labour in a socialist society. What happened, however, is that women were strategically used as labour reserve, being preferentially employed in non-key sectors and non-managerial positions.

Today, young women's entry in the so-called productive sector is structurally predicated on what is perceived as their position as “younger sister,” a codified kinship role that indicates specific qualities like obedience, readiness to serve and propensity work hard. Most young women entering the factory in China (but not only in China) are automatically hired as unskilled workers, even when they bring competencies that, ironically, they have mostly earned in their homes and villages. One example is the textile industry, in China a very large one, which hires women who generally have already learned to sew in their girlhood years. In this respect the continuities with the socialist era are not difficult to see.

Nonetheless, changes did occur. The fast and extreme segmentation of PRC society enabled some to reach very prosperous standards of living, allowing some young people to access opportunities that their parents could have never dreamt of. In addition, since the '80s saw a rigorous implementation of the one-child policy in many large cities, many of the women born from then onwards have only one or no siblings at all. These generations of only daughters had un-

precedented access to family resources, and must cope with very high parental expectations in terms of competing on the job market. These women regard professional achievement as an imperative, however, they are still expected to marry and produce offspring, while the state- and market-sponsored model of family remains highly heteronormative. For the village young woman who earns economic autonomy thanks to her work in the city, as well as for the only daughter who makes her first career steps after getting a prestigious master's degree, success is a double-edged sword, since it is likely to lower their value on the marriage market.

How did radical economic and social transformations affect expectations of marriage?

Here again, we have both change and continuity. Marriage is perceived as a fundamental step towards adulthood, and is also widely held as a tremendous opportunity to improve one's prospects of economic stability and high social status. On the other hand, the expectations that people born and raised in the consumer economy hold vis-à-vis marriage tend to include also a high level of intimacy, both on an emotional and a sexual level. This was not unheard of during Maoist times, but generally people tended to articulate conjugal happiness in terms of shared values. Young people also draw on a different spectrum of values to evaluate their potential partners. While the qualities that would be praised in a man during the Maoist era were honesty and fervour for the socialist cause, nowadays young women claim to be looking for a man that has experience and, most of all, ambition. For a young man to be eligible, good job prospects and the capacity to buy housing have become imperative, while during Maoist years jobs and housing would be mainly assigned by the state. For these reasons families with a son will invest great resources in his marriage, expecting their daughters to find a fiancé who will take care of her material security. The implication for women who do not manage to find such a fiancé, or any fiancé at all, is often the exclusion from home ownership. The ideal wife, on the other hand, remains someone who has good character, is pretty, and is intelligent enough to become a good carer. What has noticeably changed, however, is the pressure that professional women nowadays encounter to leave their posts and become "high quality" full-time mothers. While intellectual women of the past tended to re-appropriate official state feminism to legitimate their position, today's highly educated mothers are targeted by state rhetoric and market sponsored images of high quality family life, which remind them that they are responsible for the 'high quality' and future competitiveness of their kids. The official imperative to 'improve population

quality' has been deployed as an ideological tool to curb the competitiveness of women who could aspire to high-level positions, which are the object of high competition.

How is divorce perceived in China? Does it differ for men and women?

Being divorced in the PRC is not good news, even though the divorce rates are higher than they used to be. Adulthood and married status are largely perceived as bound to each other, since marriage is also a precondition to child bearing. Alliance is therefore pivotal to intergenerational relations. Marriage is taken as a very serious business, which involves two families and should be pondered upon. When divorce occurs, it reflects badly on the people involved, which may be suspected of serious faults towards their spouse, or of having

light-heartedly entered a bad marriage. After a divorce, both men and women lose value on the marriage market, but for those women who exit a marriage with a child, getting a new match is even more difficult. Re-marriage is, however, common among divorced people, since the pressure to avoid singlehood is high.

What about singlehood? How is extra-marital intimacy seen?

In the PRC, marriage is quasi-universal, especially for women. This means that the great majority of women in China marry at least once in their lifetime, and that those men who manage to find a bride will marry, too. For adult people, marriage is considered to be a measure of normalcy. People who remain single well into their late twenties and early thirties do undergo strong pressure

from family and friends to find a match. Perhaps also because of all this pressure, many people have a hard time finding a desirable partner. For men, the challenges are generally related to their inability to offer economic security to prospective brides, who may expect to enter a marriage that will allow them some economic stability.

Women who are very successful in their profession, on the other hand, may find it difficult to find a good marriage partner. This is partly related to the fact that men tend to look for a bride whose income and educational level do not exceed theirs. On the other hand, these women do not have many reasons to marry just for the sake of marrying. They are economically solvent, have autonomous lives, and can support their elderly parents on their own. For those living in the anonymity of large metropolises, it is not difficult to have a sexual life without marrying. For them, marriage is only desirable as far as it grants high levels of intimacy and, of course, the chance to become mothers. This is also due to the fact that single motherhood is largely considered as out of the norm. China remains a patrilocal and patrilineal society,



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where children inherit their father's surname. Cases of single motherhood do, of course, occur, but they are rare and carry stigma. The issue of sexuality is, of course, more complex. Masculinity is largely considered as inherently active and assertive, and therefore men are largely expected to seek sexual pleasure and to experiment before marriage. Women, in continuity with the state-sponsored visions elaborated in the Modern and Maoist periods, are largely portrayed by the media as having an essentially different type of sexuality, which needs to be awakened by a male agent and is directed towards stable relationships. While people do have sexual relations outside and before marriage, these are not something to be advertised. For those who marry after their mid twenties, however, cohabiting is becoming more common and acceptable, especially in the context of formal engagement.

Does the mating behaviour pattern differ between city and countryside? Is the family-based care for China's aging population still the rule, even in big cities?

The PRC is a very diverse country in terms of religion and ethnicity, and its vast territory includes great disparities between north and south, east and west. Women who move from the village to the city to work often gain an unprecedented degree of autonomy from their family, and this, of course, has an impact on their dating behavior. But since these women are young and do not have university degrees, they are also highly marriageable and get pressured to marry soon after they reach legal marriage age (for women, 20 years old). Childbearing in China is largely considered as a direct consequence of marriage, therefore most married couples try to have a child shortly after tying the knot. Having children constitutes the utmost filial duty, because it is the guarantee of family continuity and allows a prospect of long-term security for the older generation. This is especially true for the elderly who are left behind in the countryside, often without pensions. Even for those who live in the cities, however, having children is an important form of insurance. With the gradual privatization of social security and the commodification of the labour and housing markets, many people need to buy care services at market price. In this prospect, intergenerational dependence remains a strong bond in Chinese society.

How do you explain the contrast between the high incidence of extra-marital intimacy and the general upholding of the politically correct view that cast marriage as the sole legitimate arena for intimacy?

Both have historical reasons. In some parts of today's PRC, marriage coexisted with other forms of alliance until the end of the Qing Dynasty and through the Modern period. These alternative forms (concubinage, acquisition of a 'little daughter-in-law,' etc.) did not grant to women and their children the same status held by a wife and her children, but were important avenues for building political and commercial relations. A rich-enough man would acquire concubines to improve his prestige and his lineage's chances of continuity. Besides offering her reproductive capacity to her husband,

the incoming concubine would contribute to her new household her own relations and labour power – we need to keep in mind that before industrialization, households were productive units, sometime large ones, where any kind of products was crafted, often by women's hands. Still nowadays, despite the presence of very large industries, family-based enterprises are of fundamental relevance for the country's economy. During the late Qing period, and often well into the modern period, a man with money and prestige could legitimately aspire to have more than one woman joining his own family. As a Confucian patriarch, he would then exercise authority, at least formally, on the women and the younger men in his family, deciding, for example, whom the children would marry. Of course this does not mean that there was no conflict or negotiation in these families. In fact, we know that, since women held an unstable position in a strongly patrilocal and patrilineal society, they did bargain and fight to improve their lot, and that some of them could gain status and become influential. What the Confucian order did sanction, however, was a strong hierarchy of authority along lines of age and gender, which gave codified prerogatives to people according to their position in a web of kinship. The modernist vision of family that emerged from the colonial encounter, and that was later re-appropriated by the communist state, revolved instead around the idea of a monogamous union between two choosing individuals. And because of the fundamental role that this idea of "modern family" had in the genesis of the PRC state, it would be extremely difficult for the current leadership to put it in question at a legal level. What the leadership can do is to put in place local state personnel to foster family cohesion (e.g., for example discouraging people from divorcing after adultery), and, of course, use the cultural industry to promote specific visions of family life.

In your research, you underline that the institution of marriage constitutes a signifier of national identity in China. Why?

The idea of "modern" family was central to the vision of national emancipation that Chinese intellectuals elaborated in the context of the colonial encounter. These young men, who had often been educated abroad, saw the modernization of the family as the only way to break with the Confucian order and "liberate" young people and women from the oppressive power of Confucian patriarchs. According to their view, if young people had been free to choose their match according to their wish, rather than their parents', they would have formed families of equal, healthy individuals, revitalizing the country, modernizing it and eventually emancipating it from the colonizers. We should not think about these intellectuals as feminists, though. Their main interest was the creation of a modern state, and for them, women were primarily the mothers of future Chinese citizens. These ideas, however, played an enormous role in the mobilization of young people and of women during the Modern period, including during the civil war between Nationalist and Communists. It is not by chance that the CCP passed the Marriage Law in 1950, just after unifying the country in October 1949. Still today, the Chinese

state can claim to be “modern” also because, among other things, it put forced marriage out of law and granted, at least formally, the right to divorce. It might be helpful to remember that in some European countries the right to divorce would not be granted until the 1970s or later.

How does the LGBTQ+ community live and fit in this traditional organization?

I would not assume that society in the PRC is necessarily “traditional,” unless we refer to what a specific group of people in China defines as such. Words like “modern” and “traditional” are not stable signifiers, and do not necessarily tell us a lot about what happens. In the PRC, the idea of modernity has been and is currently deployed by the state as a powerful political trope in order to mobilise the citizenry around any kind of issues. Also because of the centrality of the modernity narrative in the PRC state project, marriage and family are highly political topics there.

Leaving aside our own ideas of tradition and modernity, it may be helpful to keep in mind that in pre-Modern China, same-sex eroticism was not necessarily considered a danger to the heteronormative family. With the state’s gradual adoption of the paradigm of monogamous marriage, things changed. The gradual emergence of the so-called modern, monogamous couple as the one institution in which all the needs related to marriage and childbearing, but also sexual intimacy and emotional closeness, had to find their fulfillment, also corresponded to the elaboration of new articulations of femininity and masculinity. In this context, sexual preference became a relevant issue. As far as the contemporary era is concerned, large cities like Beijing and Shanghai have developed vibrant LGBTQ+ scenes, but so far the PRC state has not given legal recognition to gay couples, while

in Taiwan same sex marriage became possible in 2019. We have some interesting research about how same-sex couples negotiate their relationships in PRC cities, and about the so-called contract marriages between gay men and lesbian women. What I find compelling in these cases is that gender emerges as a clear line of inequality. When a gay man and a lesbian woman enter a contract marriage, they seem to have equal expectations: they both hope to “keep their parents happy” and maintain autonomous lives with other same-sex partners. What often happens, however, is that each of them gradually enters family dynamics that are specific to the role of husband and wife. While the husband is accorded a substantial degree of autonomy and free time, which is a clear precondition to becoming a successful middle-class man, the wives undergo much pressure to become domesticated and eventually give birth. Once the child is born, they are even busier and more tightly inserted in the web of family relations, which makes it very difficult for them to foster their bonds with the lesbian community and with their female partners.

We know less about what happens to those who have same-sex preference while living in villages. Another question is our own assumption that those who engage in same-sex eroticism should necessarily form LGBTQ+ communities. While many of them do, in fact, others may not really recognize themselves in the “out and proud” model. Some may prefer entering a regular heterosexual marriage, having children, while living their sexual preferences outside the home.

To go further

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