Book Review


Since the establishment of the communist Chinese regime, arranged marriages have been legally forbidden, providing all Chinese citizens with the right to marry whoever they wish (Pimentel, 2000, pp. 32–33). However, love and intimacy have continued to be a sensitive and private topic in the Chinese context until fairly recently, when the theme began to provide public entertainment and be discussed by the masses, in the form of reality TV dating shows (Yang, 2017, p. 9). Amongst this genre of TV programmes, 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 that provides 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 of Chinese youths and young adults who have watched If You Are the Only One, she seeks to answer a series of related questions: why do young people watch the show? How do they see it? Does the show influence their views on romance and relationships? And in what ways is this view different from that of their parents’ generation?

The book is thematically organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 (pp.1-14) is the introduction, which provides an overview of the whole book. Here, Yang situates the study of the romantic
subjectivities of young people within the socio-cultural context of post-reform China. As both a researcher and, herself, a young Chinese citizen, Yang details her personal journey to articulate the increasing significance of romantic topics in the everyday lives of young Chinese people. This vividly portrays the power dynamics between the state, the mass media, family and young people’s actual romantic experience.

Chapter 2 (pp.15-45) explores how young Chinese people view the most popular Chinese reality TV dating show, *If You Are the Only One*, employing an active audience research approach. In particular, building on Stuart Hall’s (1980) ‘encoding/decoding’ model, Yang uncovers how the TV show provides a mediated avenue that facilitates the (re)construction of young Chinese people’s understandings of love and intimacy. Chapter 3 (pp.47-76) then goes on to examine how the post-reform modernization of Chinese society has led to the rise of individualism among its people, and how individualistic values shape young Chinese people’s perspectives on romance and relationships.

Chapter 4 (pp.77-114) is particularly interesting. In this chapter, Yang explores the changing dating ethics shared by contemporary young people by analysing the interplay between the traditional Confucian/socialist values and the emerging marital morality. She specifically addresses various current phenomena, such as premarital sex, cohabitation, and extramarital relationships, to unpack how traditional understandings of responsibility and fidelity are challenged in post-reform Chinese society. In Chapter 5 (pp.115-146), Yang discusses the construction of the Chinese youth identity by focusing on the interactions between the younger generation and their parents. This chapter showcases the marginalized influences of Confucian/socialist ideology on Chinese people’s mate-choosing values, as well as their attitudes towards premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce and extramarital relationships. Chapter
Yang’s book provides genuinely original contributions to knowledge of young people, their romantic relationships, and their TV consumption in a fast-changing, post-reform Chinese socio-cultural context. As Yang (2017, p. viii) herself notes, dating, love, and intimacy have historically been viewed as sensitive topics in China. Prior to the launch of reality TV dating show, *You Are the Only One*, they have never been themes to face wide public discussion by Chinese people. Yang’s case study of young Chinese people’s consumption of, and dialogue around, the TV show showcases the ways in which it exploits and feeds into the widespread liberation of thought in post-reform China. Her in-depth analysis effectively demonstrates how the rise of individualism and consumerism in the contemporary Chinese context changes young people’s perception and experience of love and intimacy.

Yang’s book also raises an interesting issue: *You Are the Only One*, as an adapted version of *Take Me Out*, is representative of the glocal cultural flow, in that it exhibits the influences of Western consumerism in post-reform China. However, Yang’s study reveals that this adapted TV show has been dramatically glocalized through Chinese people’s everyday consumption. Compared to the entertainment-focused original version viewed in Britain, much of the Chinese audience tends to look for more ‘authenticity’ in *You Are the Only One*. While watching the show, many young people ponder the contestants’ invited guests’ self-presentation of their values and life attitudes, and reflect on their own life experiences. These young people tend to take dating activities seriously. This practice reveals that the
Confucian/socialist relationship morality has probably been marginalized in post-reform China, although it still manifests itself in influences on people’s understanding of dating ethics. This highlights a tangled web of Chinese tradition, Western consumerism and the post-reform present in the shaping of 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 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 contemporary Chinese people’s everyday lives within the current, post-reform socio-cultural context.

References

