

A Comparative Study on Chinese and Western Concepts of Love

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Keywords: Chinese concepts of love; western concepts of love; comparative study

Abstract: Love, an exotic flower among all the human emotions, is the eternal topic in many literary works. Not only in China but in the west, people have their own views on love. Due to the cultural background, the traditional moral and other factors, the views of love are very different. For westerners, love is supremacy as a man will sacrifice everything for love while a woman will abandon a lot. Regardless of origin, ancestry, age, social status and other considerations, westerners select their life partners based on love. But Chinese people do not take love but the material needs as the premise. In fact, many Chinese youths believe that "Love is sweet, the reality is cruel". In Chinese concept of love, couples should sustain the relationship between husband and wife for the family although they needn't love and respect each other.

1. Introduction

As for the concept of love, Engels made a scientific definition that 'love is the relationship based on mutual admiration'. It reveals the meaning of love, a strong and enduring feeling to find the lifelong companions under a certain material living condition between men and women, based on the common ideal of life and mutual admiration. Love contains not only its natural attributes, but also its social attributes. However, the essence of love is its sociality, because people's love is influenced by social factors. The sexual behavior in love is affected by emotion and intellect, based on social morality and constrained by social customs and laws. As a special kind of human emotion between a man and a woman, love is a changing social phenomenon which appeared until human society developed into a certain historical stage. Love is the emotional life between men and women with its social attribute to choose a partner, so the subjective feeling and objective duty in love are unified. When people exercise the right to love, they also have the obligation in love.

2. Similarities of Chinese and Western view of love

Love is one of the noblest emotions and an important part in human's life. Whether in China or in the west, people pursue love, praise love warmly and desire to enjoy the sweetness of love.

2.1. Praise and Pursuit of Love

In the view of Western literature, love is the eternal theme. As the beginning, some Greek mythologies, such as The Homer epic, declaring that the West have devoted a great effort to mankind's sex on every historical stage, including Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the period of Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism and Post-modernism. In many unforgettable myths from ancient Greece and ancient Rome, there was a goddess who has sex, love and beauty. She was called Aphrodite in the ancient Greek and Venus in ancient Rome. Both of them are the god of sex, love and beauty, in charge of human love, marriage and birth, and the growth and reproduction of all animals and plants. But the Middle Age was a special 'Dark Age' in western history. It would become a crime if you write the love song. Though in this case, Abelard, the French scholastic philosopher fell in love with Ismail, the Paris socialite. Despite being a monk, Abelard ignored the Asceticism from churches and wrote a large number of love songs which was praised by men and women. Westerners tend to regard love as the strong and irresistible power [1].

In ancient China, we can not find the god of love, but there were a lot of love myths. In Chinese first poetry collection, *Shijing*, there were a lot of love poems embodying the colorful love life vividly. These love poems chanted the blazing love between men and women, expressing the miss from 'one day apart seems like three years' [2]. Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism, the feudal ethics, strengthened increasingly and intercourse between the sexes became stricter. Some literary figures that were deeply influenced by Confucianism disrespected literary works about love. But, after all, human love is an objective existence for there are human beings, there is love. In the Tang Dynasty, feudal ethics were strongly popular, but some great poets, such as Du Fu and Li Bai, also wrote many love poems. We can see that love can not be suppressed. Even under heavy pressure of feudal etiquette, people still pursue and praise love.

2.2. Loyalty of Love

Both Chinese and Westerners think love should be pure and faithful for it's the most intense and exciting emotion, also the most profound and lasting. There are many vows of love, such as 'Even if the seas go dry and rocks crumble, my will remain firm.' and a mass of eternal love stories. The faithful love is common in the ancient Chinese and western mythologies as we can see many men and women sacrificed for love in ancient myths and legends.

For instance, the story of *Cowherd and Girl-Weaver* is one of the most touching legends in ancient China. Their passionate love and sad encounter caused people's sympathy and praise. Qixi Festival conveys messages of devoted loyal love between cowherd and girl-weaver who want to grow old together. The loyalty to love is praised highly in China [3]. There was a poem in Han

Dynasty, which said that ‘it could separate us until mountains have no edges, rivers have gone dry, winter thunder comes, summer rain falls or heaven and earth become together’. It was a confession written by a young woman to her beloved man, expressing that nothing would change her loyalty of love until death [4].

Similarly, in Greek mythologies, Penelope was the faithful wife of the Greek hero, Odysseus. She was a model of loyalty and chastity and virtuous to her family. Here’s the story about her. As Odysseus took part in Troy War, he had been away from home for twenty years. During that time, Penelope stayed at home, rejected many suitors and kept loyal to her husband, waiting for Odysseus’s return. In order to delay time, she made up an excuse to weave a shroud for father-in-law. She finished it in daytime and took apart it at night, and then she waited for the return of Odysseus. Her story became famous in every family. In addition, Sonnets from the Portuguese are love poems written by Elizabeth Barite, recording her strong love for Browning and her loyalty [1].

3. Differences

Love contains a large category of social and cultural connotations. The differences in politics, economy, culture and other aspects will inevitably lead to a situation that we have diverse concepts of love in China and the west, which is reflected in the following aspects.

3.1. The Different Status in Society and Life

As the western society is based on the humanity, love is supreme in people's life. They consider love as the highest realm of individual happiness to pursue. Wine, beauty and singing are all the emotional life of westerners. They think that life would be of no happiness without love. Love is the end, so it is impossible to sacrifice it for other valuable targets. We can see that westerners have the ultra-utility to love, even in the most conservative Bible, it’s also obvious. There are some words copied from the Old Testament (Song of Solomon, the 6th to 7th stanza from chapter eight) and it says that ‘please put me like a seal over your heart and like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death. The electro-optic is flashes of fire and the Lord's flame. The whole water cannot quench love, even the fire can not.’ Perhaps, because the western culture including religion provides moral asylum for sex, the whole westerners waged ten years’ war for the beautiful Helen and Edward VIII of England had the courage to fight for a better wife not a national revolution. It was a historical model for love’s fighting [1].

But in the Chinese opinion, it would be incredible. Because Chinese people focus on their fame and fortune, they would spend most of their lives in official affairs, so it’s common to leave their wife in a far-away county. Although people think love is an important part of life, enterprise is more important. So at any time, they would sacrifice their love for career. And these people would be praised highly. This value orientation has made people not easily be concerned with love and romance as they would be told that, ‘a good man is confident in any difficult circumstances, but is

immersed in love.’ And it is not like the Western knight who would be proud of winning the love of women.

As long as men and women can respect each other, the moral cultivation and political education can provide an intrinsic guarantee to consolidate the existing order of the whole society. Moreover, ancient China was an old man-oriented society, emphasizing on filial piety. Even in the family, men and women’s love or the couples’ love was not important. In traditional society of China, Love between men and women are ignoble and meaningless. Love depended on its social function mainly, so love itself was not important. If not subjected to social control, people didn’t respect the individual love and there was no freedom to love.

3.2. The Different Focuses of Love

When westerners think of love, they pay more attention to the nature of love. They believe that the most important thing of romantic love is the sex appeal, as the personal satisfaction is above everything else. Romantic love means personal satisfaction, and enjoying sex is the first step while getting marriage to form a family is another matter. When they fall into romantic love, they hardly care the responsibilities and consequences. In their opinions, love is human’s spiritual gift from the nature so everything should let nature take its course, not constrained by responsibility, so marriage is not the ultimate attribution of love. The western mass media also advertise sex widely. An article entitled *Sex content increase in the prime time of American TV programs* was published from *America news and world report* in April 15th, 1996. The article pointed out there were half lens of sexual behaviors with explicit or implicit purposes in 58 TV programs. In the prime time, there would be a sexual play in every 4 minutes. The lens of premarital sexual behaviors is 8 times of sexual behaviors within marriage. Casual behaviors about sex are always forgiven. The exaggerated advertising foe sex has affected real life. Under this environment which is full of sexual culture, people can not tolerate their life without sex and it is a foolish behavior to restrain the demand of sex, so they think sex will be free to love and outside marriage [1].

. However, Chinese people lay emphasis on a sense of responsibility, especially the moral value of love, the responsibility and obligation of love. They believe that when you have the right to enjoy love and happiness, you must undertake the obligation and responsibility from love, making their loved ones live more happily. Before accepting the love, they often consider whether they have the ability to be responsible for the love first. As for the Chinese people, selecting a mate is a very serious thing in their life, in case they fail; it will be an eternal upset. Especially sexual behaviors between lovers, they should think thrice before acting, as sexual behaviors once happen, they should take the responsibility. In Chinese concept, sex and marriage are unified. Sexual behaviors often mean a permanent contract with each other. Otherwise, it would be considered morally corrupt and condemned by public opinions. Because sex is as sacred as love and marriage in China, it’s necessary to comply with sexual morality, putting sexual behavior into the scope of love object. They believe that sex and love are inseparable, as without love sex is condemned by his conscience,

and sexual love means to be responsible. Love, sex and marriage are in unity. Marriage is the final purpose of love. But with the spread of western culture, some young people advocate to follow feelings, so the responsible consciousness in love desalinates gradually. They enjoy the temporary fulfillment and seize the opportunity to enjoy pleasure in time.

3.3. The Different Value Orientation of Love

Westerners are more apparent and emotional on the value orientation of love and they tend to have a more direct and straightforward expression in love. Meanwhile, Chinese people are more intrinsic and rational, so they are more subtle and deep to express their love. Westerners pursue the feeling of love in the first place, believing in love at the first sight. They think that the true romance is not rational, you can not choose love, but love chooses you. So it's very easy for them to fall in love and be bogged down in it inextricably [5]. Once they fall in love with a person, they seldom consider about their families, social status, economic status, educational level, age, occupation and so on. They only care about their enjoyment at that moment, not to think about the future. "Titanic" was described as such a story. The hero, Jack, is a young and happy wanderer, and the heroine, Rose, is the fiancée of a rich man and was going back to American to get married. They met on the deck and fell in love at first sight. One of them was a genteel rich girl, and the other was a penniless tramp. Their different status did not prevent the affection between them. Jack sought her ladyship's hand; therefore, he had the opportunity to enter her life when he saved Rose. And he confided his love to her. Rose was infected by Jack's chic, bold and uninhibited character, literary talent and his fiery love deeply, so she chose Jack eventually. In a luxury car of the cargo, two warm hearts melt together. At the later time when the disaster came to each other, they went through thick and thin together and Rose was saved finally. But Jack sank into the depth of the icy sea with their sweet love. This beautiful moving love story resonated with people and it seemed to play an important role here. Westerners respected individual freedom and personal development. They enjoyed the freedom to pursue their emotional expression, so we can see the bold and straightforward singing in the western poetry. Praising the appearance of female and the expression of love were constituted a core theme of Western love poetry. Its emotion was like an urgent storm.

But in the feudal society of China, it was difficult to see the bold descriptions about love and woman in Chinese verse. Due to the long history of feudal society in China, the status of women was in the bottom of the society and poets were constrained by the feudal manners deeply. People's sexual feelings were destroyed by Chinese value extremely, so it was difficult to express love in these serious works. Chinese were ashamed to talk too much about love in their works, and as for the traditional literati, sexual behaviors were like a trivial matter. They were different from British poets who were crazy to admire love and female's facial appearance. So their writing style about love tended to be implied. This so-called 'East' love was euphemistic to profess one thing but mean another [6]. I was not to say that Chinese poets were extraordinary to be petrified as Saint and indifferent to anything completely, but they had the normal emotions. In the description of love, the

counterparts from the west tend to be straight and passionate. But Chinese poet used their unique way with mildness and roundabout to express the pure love between men and women which was from a deep and sincere heart. Chinese were more rational to express their love. On the one hand, they were not encouraged to express personal feelings strongly; on the other hand, they were very careful to deal with love, considering love as the important affair of a final settlement in life and career, future and destiny were concerned in it. Because of this, it was not easy to make a decision about their marriage before a careful balance. Besides, marriage is not an individual event, it related to a family, opinions from friends and parents often have a great effect.

4. Discussions

4.1. Marriage Is Becoming More and More Entertaining and Uncertain.

Nowadays, lightning marriage and lightning divorce are becoming normal as it is a short time for people to fall in love and get married. Divorce becomes popular for the young couples, even the elderly couples. According to the statistics from the U.N., in recent years, the divorce rate has rising rapidly all around the world. America and many European countries always keep a high divorce rate. For USA, the current population is about 300 million, and 59% of Americans are married. Although more than 90% of the American adults choose married life, the divorce rate in USA is the highest. In the 1950s, 90% of married couples have maintained their marriage for more than 10 years. But in the 1990s, this proportion dropped to less than 50%. In recent two years, a large sum of elderly couples above 60, even 80 years old also joined the ranks of divorce [7]. Most of them just enjoy the momentary pleasure, they do not think of the future. If they find the shortcomings of each other, they tend to divorce with the thought that nobody is the only one.

This thought reflects such a kind of phenomenon in contemporary youth that not many young people are willing to assume more responsibility and pressure for marriage. So family is easy to be established by love while it is also easy to be collapsed without love. Few people have got ready to be the lifetime accompanists. Here is an example from a passage titled *A Study of the Present Situation and Countermeasures about Contemporary Youths' Opinions of Love*. We can see that Wang Bing (the hero in the story) is one of the victims in flash marriage. The first time he met his ex-wife at the classmates' party, he was fascinated by her fresh and charming temperament. He believed no language can express that kind of feeling as if he saw his dream lover again. And then they fell in love. His girlfriend's effeminacy and capricious behavior did not make him revolt, but care more about their love. Less than two months, they got married. But Wang could not resist his wife's bad temper. So he thought having children maybe could make her wife become mature. However, one year later, his wife was more childish than a baby and she had no self-care abilities. They wanted to divorce but what would happen to the children? In fact, the real life is far away from the original thought. At last, divorce becomes the only option for those fragile families.

4.2. Economic Basis Is Becoming More Important In Marriage.

In modern society of China, too many youths pay more attention to the economic bases in their marriages. They want to have stable incomes, big houses and cars when they get married and start to set up a new family. Apparently to meet all the requirements, it will be a great pressure for the marriageable young people who are between 25 and 28 years old. So there are some marriageable youths who are not willing to fall in love, but focus on work to accumulate the material foundation. At that time, they have to put off their wedding date which becomes a hot concern in families and society. Some couples would be supported by their parents, even taking their parents' pensions. There are many ladies above 28 years not being married, resulting in lack of responsibilities and the abilities to live as young husbands and wives.

In western countries, the material factors are also important in marriage. As commodity economy determines their keen view of money. They are not persistent about it but their consumptional style is unique and that is to enjoy. They won't leave property for their children, so the saving rate in the western countries is lower than in China. As for me, too high expectations of this material will weaken the basic demand of marriage, such as emotion, responsibility and mutual support. If they go on like this, remarriage tends to more and more common.

4.3. Marriage Is Becoming An Investment or Speculation in Life.

Many young people in China think that a good marriage is better than a good job and they hope to marry as early as possible. It seems to be an acceptable social fashion; especially employment situation is grim for the college graduates. Unemployment of female college students is more prominent, which makes some students try to shake off the dilemma with marriage. They believe in marrying a rich man can shorten 10 years of struggle. This utilitarian thought forces the female students to abandon their independence and to rely on the rich men to change their positions in the society. Here is another example from a passage titled *A Study of the Present Situation and Countermeasures about Contemporary Youths' Opinions of Love*. The story about Mary is a typical example of investable marriage. Mary is not the prettiest girl at school but many boys are fascinated by her. Finally the chairman of the students' union, Wang Qiang, fell in love with her by his outstanding writing and charming baritone. Their love story spread frequently in the beautiful campus. But Mary also felt unfair as her roommates have found rich boyfriends. And Wang Qiang can not satisfy her economic need. When she graduated from the college, she decided to work in the big city with Zhang Jun who has a well-known entrepreneur father. Though this investment about love gave her high material rewards, her spiritual demand became more serious. So even if you have rich material, but your spiritual world is exhausted, love and marriage also lost vitality. As for the western couples, they just enjoy the temporary indulgence, not to think of the future. They can separate sex and love. Sex is a kind of consumption and love is just a myth. In China, another grim fact also happens. It is the emergence of a large number of Layover Ladies who have been 'left behind'. Someone has been summed up four characters of the current Layover Ladies: small social

circle, less leisure time, more work pressure, high personal demand. And these four characters have caused the confusion and difficulties in the marriage of the modern office ladies.

5. Conclusion

Through the comparative study of the Chinese and western concept of love, we can see that there are a lot of differences between these two concepts. The west pays more attention to love while the Chinese focus on marriage. In the west, love is supreme among all the human emotions, so it must not be defiled. And that makes it as sacred and absolute as the religious icons. But in China, it lacks such a sacred feelings. For men, career is more important than love; for women, marriage is a guarantee of survival. They think love is just the need to survive. Sometimes they have no individual choice to decide their marriage. There are many reasons behind the differences, such as national culture, national character, and social opening degree and so on. Chinese traditional concept of love has been gradually falling behind after cultural development about two thousand years. And it is difficult to adapt to the modern freedom of marriage and develop true love on the basis of equality and mutual respect. A healthy and positive view of love is necessary in China. This modern view of love ensures a common feeling to gender. This is the impact and reflection which Western civilization has brought us. We can learn from the positive elements of Western concept of love, such as more verbal communication. Besides, men and women are active to pursue happiness in love and marriage, combining with the stability of marriage and family, paying attention to Chinese love view of harmony, considerate care of spouse and family, and finally forming a set of suitable view of love which is fit for contemporary China.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Sichuan provincial education department under Grant [18SA0253].

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