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## **Researching Chinese Cultural Understandings of Marriage via Similes and Metaphors on the World Wide Web**

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*In an attempt to understand how changes in the societal context of Chinese marriage are reflected in Chinese cultural understandings of marriage, we explore Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage posted on the World Wide Web. Seven themes were found: You will have to decide whether a marriage will work for you, marriage is not about romantic love, marriage is bitter and sweet at the same time, marriage is strong and real, you must work at a marriage, marriage is risky, and marriage is not always taken seriously. The themes give a picture of cultural meanings for marriage in China that reflect more traditional ideas and such recent changes as the move to greater freedom of choice of spouse and greater ease of divorce. The themes provide cultural understandings both by characterizing contemporary marriage and by capturing advice about how to find a partner and make a marriage work.*

**KEYWORDS** *China, marriage, metaphor, simile, World Wide Web*

The People's Republic of China has been going through rapid change. Perhaps most visible to outsiders are the rapid industrialization and urbanization and the move from an economy largely dependent on small farms to a planned economy with very substantial industrialization. At the same time and linked to the economic changes and urbanization, couple life has moved, for many Chinese, from arranged marriage to a system in which many people exercise something close to freedom of choice of spouse

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(Friedman, 2000; Gaetano, 2008; Xu et al., 2007; Yan, 2003, 2009; Zang, 2008; Zhang, 2000). With greater freedom of choice has come marriage in which partners more often start out with feelings of affection, attraction, and openness to emotional and physical intimacy (Friedman, 2006; Gaetano, 2008). Given the changed environment for marriage, what does marriage mean now in Chinese society? What are Chinese cultural understandings of marriage?

One approach to exploring Chinese cultural understandings of marriage is to investigate the common metaphors and similes that are applied to marriage in Chinese entries on the World Wide Web. Metaphors and similes regarding marriage in a culture could provide rich and informative views of the meanings of marriage in that culture. Although many metaphors and similes are basically human and invariant (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), it is clear that substantial differences exist across cultures in the metaphors and similes that people use in thinking about their socioculturally defined realities and experiences (Kovecses, 2005). And we know from work by Quinn (1987, 2005), who examined metaphors in the narratives of married people in the United States about their own marriage, that the metaphors people use in talking about their marriage reflect common cultural understandings of marriage, understandings linked to culturally meaningful exemplars.

Inspired by Quinn's work, we set out to explore Chinese metaphors and similes for marriage. We assumed they would be at least somewhat different from what Quinn found partly because the shared, meaningful exemplars would be different. But even more, our expectation was that the figures of speech used in Chinese society would reflect the cultural context of marriage in the society, including pressures for or against marrying, the structural locations in which marriages are contracted and lived, the demands on marriage, marital expectations, and differences between older and younger people in what marriage is thought to be about. Thus, we expected the metaphors and similes used in China would illuminate and be illuminated by the context of marriage in that society.

Using the Web to study Chinese perspectives on marriage makes sense because people in China are said to be far more connected than people in the United States to the Web (Barboza, 2010). In fact, the Chinese rank second only to the Japanese in the amount of time each day they average on the Web (Barboza, 2010). It therefore seems appropriate to study Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage using the Web.

Some definitions are in order. A simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is said to be like another, for example, "marriage is like a bank account." This simile received 17,400 hits in an English language Google search (March 16, 2011). It could be interpreted to mean that in the United States some people see marriage as like a bank account in providing resources, with the possibility of accumulating more capital, but then there is also the risk of overdrawing one's account. A metaphor is a figure of

speech in which words or actions that are customarily used to denote one kind of object or idea are used in place of another, suggesting a resemblance or analogy, for example, “our marriage is strong” (which received 41,000 hits on English language Google, March 16, 2011). In English, the word “strong” has many definitions, but the primary one is about physical strength, as in the strength to carry a heavy load and not to be pushed around by external forces. By borrowing concepts from the idea of physical strength, one highlights that a married couple is together able to handle great burdens and to resist forces that might send others reeling, for example, they can handle economic difficulties, illnesses, and challenging partner disagreements.

The approach of this study, to explore cultural understandings of marriage in contemporary China by exploring Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage on the Web, is not offered as a substitute for conventional approaches, such as ethnography and survey methods, for studying marriage in Chinese society. But the approach seems to us to be worthwhile, exploring as a way to illuminate Chinese understandings of marriage and how they may be linked to the societal contexts for marriage.

## METHODS

In searching for common Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage, we used a previous method from a study of Chinese similes and metaphors for family (Rosenblatt & Li, 2011). We began by entering the Chinese characters for “marriage” [婚姻] and the Chinese characters for “is,” [是, shì] and “is like” [像, xiàng; 似, sì; 如, rú] in two major Chinese search engines, the dominant Chinese search engine, Baidu, and the Chinese version of Google. On March 12, 2010 we took the first page of hits from each search as our source of Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage, a total of eight pages (based on using the four different Chinese words for “is” and “is like” and the characters for “marriage” with each of the two search engines).

Because we were looking only at the first page of each search and we had eight different searches, there were a total of 80 hits. We looked at the similes and metaphors as they appeared on the results page and then went into the websites for each hit to explore more fully what the similes and metaphors meant. Some hit entries included several similes or metaphors, and we explored all of those. Some hit entries did not offer similes or metaphors but offered news reports, advertisements, definitions, or questions, and we chose not to use those entries in our data analysis.

What search engine optimization processes at Baidu and Google channel into the first page that comes up after a search is largely a matter of secrecy (see, for example, *Wikipedia* article on “Google search,” accessed January 21, 2011). Our assumptions are that the hits that come up on the first page of a search report are first largely because of their relevance to the

search term(s) and the number of searches directed specifically at them in recent days. But we do not know if our assumptions are correct.

As protection against the possibility that the hits on the first page of each search included items that were uncommon and little connected to Chinese culture, we did Baidu and Chinese Google searches for each simile and metaphor that had come up in our search, which enabled us to identify and eliminate any hit that was poorly linked to other Chinese websites. We took that approach because we thought any website that was linked to few other websites probably was not a good indicator of what was commonly thought about marriage in Chinese culture. Using this method of winnowing first-page hits, we found a range in the number of links of the first-page hits to other websites from more than a million to fewer than 10 other websites. We decided to drop from our analysis the first-page similes and metaphors that were linked to fewer than 5,000 other websites. While trying not to reject similes and metaphors with substantial currency in Chinese culture, we were also trying not to count as important those similes and metaphors that were not linked to many websites. The cutoff of 5,000 links is arbitrary, but we thought it a proper balancing between insufficient caution and too great caution. After eliminating similes and metaphors that were linked to fewer than 5,000 other websites, 19 similes and metaphors for marriage were left.

The similes and metaphors were translated into English by the second author, a doctoral student in family studies and a native speaker of Chinese who grew up in Beijing. Her translation was checked by Fang Wang, who is a native speaker of Chinese, who taught English as a second language to native speakers of Chinese for 10 years, and who is now a graduate student in the United States studying the teaching of English as a second language. A colleague who is fluent in Chinese, Ciloue Cheng Stewart, provided still another check on the translation.

The translations were winnowed further through extensive discussions between the two coauthors that focused on meanings of the Chinese characters that made up each simile and metaphor. The discussion included probing for alternative and ambiguous meanings and for meanings that are challenging or possibly even impossible to translate into English. It included an exploration of the range of situations in which each simile or metaphor might be used and asking about linguistic and cultural links to each simile and metaphor. The translations offered in this article have been checked in multiple ways, but still there are uncertainties. For some Chinese characters and phrases there are meanings that might at best only be approximated in English. Also, some Chinese characters have alternative meanings, and even though we chose what we thought was the most apt alternative, it is possible that a case could be made for an alternative that we rejected.

After the similes and metaphors were identified and translated, we carried out a conceptual analysis that grouped the 19 figures of speech into a

smaller number of categories. The groupings came out of conceptual similarities in underlying meanings within a group of figures of speech we could classify as belonging together. The preliminary analysis that led to the groupings was carried out by the second author, reviewed by the first author, and then thoroughly discussed. There was no disagreement on the groupings, although there was some discussion of the labels to give some of the groupings. However, as Quinn (2005) pointed out, the conceptual leaps in metaphoric analysis have elements of creativity that make it difficult to fully describe the method of analysis. Therefore, even though the analysis relied on what seemed like conceptual similarities to us, it is difficult to specify fully what we did in determining conceptual similarity.

Our methodological approach to analyzing metaphors and similes is similar to the Lakoff and Johnson approach to metaphoric analysis (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Their work was built on the analysis of what metaphors highlight and obscure. We looked at what the similes and metaphors highlight but not what they obscure, because we believe what they highlight is what best captures cultural meanings.

## RESULTS

We classified the 19 similes and metaphors for marriage gathered from the World Wide Web into seven broad themes.

### Theme 1: You Will Have to Decide Whether a Marriage Will Work for You

Six similes and metaphors seemed to conceptualize marriage as involving pairings that can work well or not well and seemed to say that each person will have to decide whether a potential partner will be compatible. These figures of speech offer a sense that one cannot know with certainty whether a relationship will be a good fit or not until it is tried out. A prospective marital partner may at first appear to be a good match, but he or she may not be. Or he or she may appear to be a poor match but may in fact be a good one.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE A PAIR OF SHOES

Four closely related similes or metaphors describe marriage as like a pair of shoes. Here are the four, with the Chinese characters provided so people who can read the characters can evaluate our translation.

婚姻是一双鞋 Marriage is a pair of shoes.

婚姻如鞋 and 婚姻似鞋 Marriage is like shoes (the same meaning expressed by two different sets of characters).

婚姻就像选鞋子

Marriage is like choosing shoes.

Likening marriage to a pair of shoes highlights that marriage can be a good fit and comfortable or a bad fit and uncomfortable. Also, some shoes can look good but not be comfortable, whereas other shoes can be unstylish but be very comfortable. Implied in the shoe similes is that one should try out a prospective marital relationship to see if it fits before committing for or against it.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE AN AUTOMOBILE (婚姻如汽车)

As with the shoe similes, one potential interpretation of the simile that marriage is like an automobile is that one must try marriage to know whether it works for that person. For example, a prospective partner may look very attractive, but appearance is not what matters. What may be best for one is not what looks most showy or elegant but what suits one best. This simile may also be partly about the proper care of a marriage in the sense that, as with an automobile, one must break in a marriage, being more cautious at first, and in general marriage requires a certain amount of maintenance.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE A BED COMFORTER (婚姻如被)

A bed comforter that looks very attractive may not be well made. One should purchase a comforter that will last and function well, and that means looking beyond appearance and getting a good sense of the texture, construction, and other qualities of the comforter. This simile also speaks to the utilitarian aspects of a shared comforter and a shared life. As with a comforter, it may be best to share life with another person, because with two people under a comforter each can feel warm on cold nights.

### Theme 2: Marriage Is Not About Romantic Love

Two figures of speech seem to address love. One talks about marriage not involving the romantic love that might be involved in a premarital relationship, and another addresses the more modulated love that might be present in marriage.

#### MARRIAGE IS THE TOMB OF LOVE (婚姻是爱情的坟墓)

This metaphor received almost 4 million hits. It expresses the idea that a couple cannot sustain romantic love if they marry. That does not mean that marriage is necessarily bad, undesirable, or devoid of love but that the Chinese view of marriage is often fundamentally utilitarian rather than romantic.

## MARRIAGE IS LIKE WATER (婚姻似水)

Marriage is like water in the sense that it involves a slow, steady, economical flow of love, and because it flows economically, the love of marriage will not run out. Alternatively, one can say that marriage is as necessary to life as water, that people cannot live without it, even though they do not feel passionate about the plainness of water or the plainness of the routines of marital life. Also, water can taste sweet and delicious, especially when one is thirsty, and marriage may be similar, tasting sweet and delicious to those whose needs are met by it.

## Theme 3: Marriage Is Bitter and Sweet at the Same Time

## MARRIAGE IS LIKE TEA (婚姻如茶)

In this figure of speech, marriage is like tea. It has a strong, even bitter taste, particularly at first, but it also has a pleasant long-lasting fragrance and an underlying sweetness. This suggests a paradox, that marriage can be difficult and bitter but at the same time pleasant and with an underlying sweetness. Perhaps also implied in this simile is that, like tea, marriage remains bitter for some people, is pleasant and sweet for others, and, as with tea leaves that have brewed too many cups of tea, becomes bland and flavorless for still others.

## Theme 4: Marriage Is Strong and Real

Two figures of speech liken marriage to entities that have substance and are real. Likening marriage to things that have a concrete reality enables people to think about marriage using the perspectives and cognitive tools they use to think of things that are physically real for them.

## MARRIAGE IS LIKE A TREE (婚姻如树)

A tree is solid and is likely to be long lasting. It continues to grow throughout its lifetime. It is robust in that it can hold up in strong winds, drought, and heavy rains. But it is still vulnerable in that it could be chopped down before it has lived out its normal life span.

## MARRIAGE IS LIKE PAPER (婚姻如纸)

Marriage is substantial, like paper, in that it typically has a physical existence (cohabitation, a place to live, a sexual relationship). Also, under Chinese law marriage rights and obligations are represented by the legal document that says one is married. That marriage paper makes marriage very serious. There is an obligation attached to it, a commitment that is enforced by law. Also,

marriage, like paper, is fragile. It might not take much to tear it up or destroy it.

### Theme 5: You Must Work at a Marriage

Five similes and metaphors indicate that one must work at a marriage.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE A PAIR OF CHOPSTICKS (婚姻像一双筷子)

As with a pair of chopsticks, spouses have to work together to be effective. If they work well together they will be nourished. Also, the deft coordination involved in nourishing oneself with chopsticks is like the deft coordination of a couple who has learned how to function well together in marriage. Another implication may be that, as with the skilled use of chopsticks, a good marriage may reach the point where it can operate without need for much awareness about what is being done.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE A CUP OF WATER (婚姻似杯水)

In being like a cup of water, marriage can hold only so much. If one tries to put more water in a cup than its carrying capacity, the excess spills over. Thus, saying that marriage is like a cup of water is a reminder not to expect or demand more of marriage than it can handle. The simile also implies that with marriage one has to keep replenishing marriage lest it run dry.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE COFFEE (婚姻就像咖啡)

Marriage is like coffee in that one must add sugar and milk or it will taste bitter. So rather than take marriage for granted, one must sweeten it and add the relationship equivalent of milk to make it palatable.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE PLAYING CHESS (婚姻如棋)

Two people playing chess must work at it and care about it to make it a good and interesting match, and just as with a chess match, marriage requires two players who work at it. This simile also implies that marriage is competitive.

#### MARRIAGE IS A LIFELONG BUSINESS (婚姻是需要经营一辈子的事业)

This metaphor implies that for a marriage to do well, a couple must continually manage it so that it does not do poorly or fail from neglect. Moreover, because many businesses in China are family ones, the metaphor may highlight that success in marriage involves efforts by multiple family

members, and the success or failure of a marriage will have an impact on the whole family.

### Theme 6: Marriage Is Risky

Two closely related similes highlight the riskiness of marriage and the possibility of failure.

#### MARRIAGE IS LIKE STOCK QUOTES OR BUYING STOCKS

婚姻像股票行情 Marriage is like stock quotes.

婚姻如炒股 Marriage is like buying stocks.

It is a sign of the times in China, with the rapid growth in a stock market and individual investing in the market, that the similes highlighting the riskiness of marriage refer to the stock market. Like stock quotes and like stocks one has purchased, marriage does not have the same value from day to day. And over time it may become a better or worse investment than one thought it would be. Ideally, one makes a good investment, and the value goes up. But there is considerable unpredictability, and so sometimes one's hopes for investment growth are dashed.

### Theme 7: Marriage Is Not Always Taken Seriously

The final simile for marriage seems to say that although marriage should be taken seriously, sometimes it is not.

婚姻似儿戏 Marriage is like child's play.

As a number of references cited elsewhere in this article indicate, marriage is seen in China as central, important, and necessary for a good and proper life. From that perspective the metaphor can be taken to mean that some Chinese believe other Chinese see marriage as something one can play at without deep obligation to the partner or commitment to a serious, long-term relationship.

## DISCUSSION

Seven themes emerged from the similes and metaphors for marriage that appeared in searches with the two main Chinese search engines: You will have to decide whether a marriage will work for you, marriage is not about romantic love, marriage is bitter and sweet at the same time, marriage is strong and real, you must work at a marriage, marriage is risky, and marriage

is not always taken seriously. Chinese characters can have multiple meanings, and translation from Chinese to English is not necessarily straightforward and without ambiguities. But the seven themes seemed to be about the different parts of the same elephant, that there is a unified Chinese cultural conception of marriage underlying the themes. And that is what we emphasize in the following discussion, which pulls together the data, shows the connection of some data with what is already in the literature, and also draws on the second author's cultural knowledge.

### Chinese Ideas about Marriage Implied by the Metaphors and Similes

A key Chinese cultural meaning for marriage that emerged from analysis of the World Wide Web data was that one has to decide for oneself about whether a marriage will work for that person. In modern China marriages are not so often arranged as in the past (Gaetano, 2008; Xu et al., 2007). At one level the idea that one will have to try a marriage out merely indicates that in the modern system the individual is more on his or her own than people were in the past. But the figures of speech that yield this theme also say that one cannot tell what a person will be like as a partner based on appearances; one must get to know the person.

Freedom of choice should ideally be informed choice. And that is not a simple matter to achieve, because even if in modern China young people have considerably more freedom than young people did in the past in finding a partner, there are still limited dating possibilities, especially for young people who have left school and entered the labor force. Structures for meeting and getting to know potential partners have not been developed to go with the greater freedom to choose a partner. If two people come together either in a meeting arranged for them (Gaetano, 2008) or on their own with the possibility that they will marry, the similes and metaphors about a person having to decide if a marriage is right for her or him imply that the two should not sit together in shy passivity. Hence, the imperative that comes from the idea of marriage being like shoes, an automobile, or a bed comforter. One must go beyond appearances, doing things with a potential partner, engaging in conversation, and so on, perhaps a contrast from what was common for Chinese couples in the past who had arranged marriages (Friedman, 2006; Gaetano, 2008). Therefore by saying one has to decide, there is a warning to evaluate a prospective partner.

Once a couple marries, it is important for them to realize marriage is strong and real, like a tree or paper. It can last through difficult circumstances. Part of the strength and reality to it is the practical value of marriage. Another part is that marriage is a relationship with legally enforced rights and obligations, as represented in the legal paper that comes with marriage (Palmer, 2007; Zhang, 2002). The paper gives one rights that the law will

protect, including rights to the wealth that came to one in marriage. Thus, for a woman whose husband is a philanderer, the paper protects her financially from his deciding to bestow all the couple's wealth on a new sexual consort (Palmer, 2007; Zhang, 2002).

It is also important to emphasize that marriage is strong and real because one of the themes in the analysis is that marriage is not always taken seriously. It is perhaps more often the view of some older Chinese that although marriage should be a serious business with practical and utilitarian qualities, it frequently seems as though marriage is like child's play. Older Chinese in particular are quick to say that too many people are irresponsible in marriage, not honoring their obligation to their partner. Given all that has been said so far, it should be no surprise that some Chinese figures of speech said marriage is risky. As with stock market investments, one hopes to gain a great deal, but one could experience great loss, either in terms of having a difficult and unhappy marriage or finding oneself going through divorce.

The idea that people must work at a marriage is also found in cultural models derived from metaphors from Japan (Dunn, 2004) and the United States (Quinn, 1987, 2005). If a person or a couple is to work at marriage, what, in Chinese metaphors and similes, underlies that? Part of it is that love does not last. The figure of speech with the most hits was "marriage is the tomb of love." One meaning of this metaphor is that for older generations there was not overt romantic love in marriage, perhaps not even a great deal of marital interaction (Yan, 2003). And if there was love in marriage, it was a calm love (Yan, 2003). But in recent years in China romantic love has become more important as a basis of courting and finding a partner (Xu et al., 2007; Yan, 2003; Yuen, Law, & Ho, 2004). However, a corresponding development of romantic love as part of everyday cultural practice in marital life may not have developed. Therefore, a key idea underlying the metaphor "marriage is the tomb of love" is that one cannot expect the romantic love of a premarital relationship to persist into marriage.

A related theme is that marriage is bitter and sweet at the same time, with the bitterness seeming to be another reason why Chinese figures of speech indicate that people must work at marriage. Like tea, marriage may, particularly at early stages, taste bitter and strong, though it can also have a pleasantness and underlying sweetness. The sweetness may not be that of romantic love but may include the warmth of sharing a comforter on a cold night. Also, like the taste of water when one is thirsty, marriage may satisfy because it meets essential needs and even feel vital for survival. Perhaps also implied in the tea simile is that in the long run some couples may continue to experience a bitter marriage, more reason to expect to have to work at marriage. Furthermore, one must work at marriage because under China's new marriage law, one spouse can divorce another (Palmer, 2007; Zhang, 2002); in fact, by Chinese standards the recent marriage laws have

made divorce extremely easy (Alford & Shen, 2004). Thus, now one cannot neglect one's marriage as some people might have in the past.

How does one work at remaining committed and satisfied in a marriage that lacks the romantic love that might have been present premaritally and that may have some of the bitterness of tea? The Chinese figures of speech suggest models for how to work at marriage. As with chopsticks, there needs to be coordination in the work of marriage, and if the couple learns to work well together, they will coordinate deftly and perhaps will not even need to be very aware of what they do to coordinate. Another implication in the figures of speech about the work of marriage is that, as with a cup of water, one must be careful not to pour too much into marriage (too many demands or expectations). As with a cup of coffee, one must add the right amount of the marital version of sweetener and milk. As with playing chess, partners must work at marriage, take it seriously, play within the rules, and not think it strange for the marriage to at times seem competitive. As with a lifelong business, marriage is a lifetime commitment and requires one to manage it and never neglect it. And as with an automobile, one must break in a marriage carefully and carry out proper maintenance.

This analysis of Chinese similes and metaphors provides a story that in important ways is congruent with the literature, for example, about the differences between the past and the present regarding romantic love in Chinese marriage, the central role of state legalization for many Chinese marriages, and the increased importance of freedom of choice in marriage. But then the metaphors and similes seem to us to go into areas the scholarly literature that we know of does not go, particularly in the advice implied in the metaphors and similes about how to function constructively in marriage, what to expect in marriage, and how to deal with the riskiness involved in marriage. The metaphors and similes seem to give something of a Chinese how-to-do-it view of marriage, which provides important perspectives on the sociological context of Chinese marriage. That is, the advice seems to be linked to the changing social context of marriage in China, including the transition to greater freedom of choice of spouse and to a society in which divorce has become much more possible for people who are in a marriage that is difficult for them.

### Limitations

One challenge in making sense of the data is that one can think of the Web material as coming from specific people who are located in specific places in the social system, but we lack information about the people on whose entries we relied. What if some of the entries are authored by Chinese people who live in or are from countries other than China? What if most of the entries are authored by men? We certainly have reason to believe men have different perspectives on marriage than women (see, for example, Xu et al., 2007,

on gender differences in China on attitudes toward such matters as premarital chastity and cohabitation). And it makes sense that there would be gender differences in China, where roles, stakes, extramarital sexuality, and much more are strongly differentiated by gender (Pimentel, 2006; Xu, 2001; Yuen, Law, & Ho, 2004, Zhang, 2010). Thus, even if both genders might endorse a metaphor like “marriage is the tomb of love,” they might be thinking different things, for example, a woman thinking about her disappointment with a philandering husband who does not do much around the house and a man thinking about his wife’s anger and disappointment at his limitations. Certainly in the area of division of household labor there are tensions in Chinese couples between women, who want relatively egalitarian gender roles, and men, who resent the pressure to enact egalitarian roles (Pimentel, 2006). So the similes and metaphors from the Web are not helpful in identifying and providing insight into gendered meanings and differences regarding marriage.

We also have no doubt the sampled materials reflect more the attitudes of those who are urban, well educated, and economically better off, because they are more likely to have access to computers and the Internet. Therefore the perspectives offered here are more likely to be urban and from higher social classes in terms of education and economic well-being. Also, the similes and metaphors are more likely to come from younger people, because it is they who are more likely to be computer literate and have access to computers. We know from the work of Pochagina (2004) and the literature review by Xu and colleagues (2007) that younger Chinese people are less likely to think of marriage in traditional terms or to endorse traditional sexual morals and are more likely to value a love-based and free-choice marriage. Therefore the Internet material is likely to be biased toward the opinions of younger people compared with the entire Chinese population.

Another limitation is how we chose to analyze the metaphors and similes. Among alternatives, one could stay closer to the literal meaning of the metaphors and similes or go extensively into the historical and contextual links of the metaphors and similes (exploring, for example, what “tomb” or “coffee” implies in Chinese culture). But we chose to go beyond literal meanings and not to explore historical and contextual links.

Then, too, our sampling method using Web material does not necessarily capture what could be heard if one were listening to Chinese conversations about marriage, yet conversations might be the more trustworthy and rich source of data. Perhaps we would hear all the metaphors and similes we gathered from the Web, but we might hear others as well. One hint to what we might miss comes from a paper published in an electronic journal based in Hong Kong. Leung (2008) surveyed 300 Chinese and English language newspapers from January to March 2008 and found four metaphors for marriage that were common to both English and Chinese periodicals.

One of the four was just like one of ours: marriage is a joint enterprise (and included in that is the idea that one works or must work at marriage). Two were related to what we found: marriage is binding (related to the idea in our research that marriage is strong and real) and marriage is a cuisine (including the idea that marriage can taste bitter and/or sweet, which was also a theme in our research). However, one did not appear among the metaphors and similes we found, marriage is a journey, and three other metaphors appeared in Chinese and not in English that did not seem to be like any we found: marriage is a fortress besieged and marriage is a sanctuary. By the same token, some of the figures of speech we found, for example, the importance of trying out marriage, did not seem to be captured in Leung's research. We cannot determine how common a metaphor was in Leung's data. Also, Leung's data came from newspapers, whereas our data came from the Web and therefore the differences in sources might account for differences in metaphors. Still, although the similarities are reassuring, the differences are reminders that our method may not uncover all the similes and metaphors that might be significant when other sources of data.

One must be cautious in saying anything about culture in the People's Republic of China because it is such a vast and diverse country. The central government's power, the power of the mass media, the spread of the Internet, and the power of cultural traditions push toward something like cultural uniformity, but still it is risky to try to characterize Chinese culture. There are different Chinese dialects, there are cultural minorities, there are substantial rural versus urban differences (Ma & Cheng, 2005), and there are enormous economic differences. Therefore, what we found in the Web data is unlikely to be representative of China.

A final limitation is that even though we could see a rather unified picture of marriage that pulled together the various figures of speech, the figures of speech came from a diversity of Web entries. We cannot assume various people who created the entries had anything like the unified picture that we paint for Chinese marriage.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article builds on previous work, particularly that of Quinn (1987, 2005), showing the value of figures of speech in illuminating cultural understandings of marriage. It goes beyond that work in identifying possible links for those figures of speech to the social structural context of marriage. And the links are partly revealed in the advice (explicit or implicit) in some of the figures of speech about how to find, build, and maintain a marriage in the new structural contexts for marriage; for example, one must try a marital partner out to know if she or he will fit for one and one must work at marriage.

The analyses in this article seem to indicate that marriage is important in China. For example, likening marriage to tea and water makes it clear how essential marriage is in Chinese thinking to everyday life and to human existence. And the fact that the World Wide Web offers such richness of perspective and advice about Chinese marriage can be taken as indicators that marriage is central to the lives of many Chinese.

One might say that to some extent Chinese marriage has been influenced by the West, for example, with the increased importance of freedom of choice of spouse and of romantic love. But it is also clear from the Chinese similes and metaphors for marriage that Chinese marriage is still framed in Chinese cultural terms. Every simile and metaphor presented here has a Chinese flavor, and some, for example, “marriage is like a pair of chopsticks,” suggest there are ways of thinking about marriage in China that are far removed from Western thought.

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