

Prior research suggests that for Chinese as compared with Americans, love is more embedded and is less associated with intense desire. Love is defined as embedded when it is incorporated within a larger context, namely, the natural world and broad aspects of the relationship that entail devotion over time. This study included 42 popular Chinese lovesongs (half from Hong Kong and half from Mainland China) and 38 popular U.S. lovesongs. Findings indicated that Chinese songs depicted love as more embedded, but there were no cultural differences in expressions of intense desire. The Chinese lovesongs had more negative expectations about the outcome of the relationship and they conveyed more suffering than did the U.S. lovesongs. These cultural differences and similarities may be particular to romantic love and may not be common in other contexts or relationships. The findings point to the importance, but also the limits, of cultural influence on romantic love.

## LOVESONGS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA On the Nature of Romantic Love

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To an American in love, his/her emotions tend to overshadow everything else. . . . To a Chinese in love, his/her love occupies a place among other considerations.

(Hsu, 1983, p. 50)

Two conceptual distinctions that have been helpful in elucidating U.S.-Chinese differences—individualism versus collectivism and independent versus interdependent concepts of self—shed light on the above quote. In a collectivistic society such as China, romantic partners focus on maintaining cohesion and harmony of the group within which the partners are “embedded”; by contrast, in an individualistic society such as the United States, the partners focus on their personal preferences (e.g., Kim, 1994; Triandis, 1990, 1995). Conceptions of the self are also tied to notions of romantic love: In China, the self is seen as interdependent and includes within it the partner’s needs and expectations. In the United States, where there is a more inde-

pendent sense of self, there is greater emphasis on the individual's separate-ness from others and the promotion of personal goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Our claim that interdependence and independence apply to the experience of love as well as to the sense of self was foreshadowed by Markus and Kitayama (1991): "If one perceives oneself as embedded within a larger context of which one is an interdependent part, it is likely that other objects or events are perceived in a similar way" (p. 246).

Both of the above distinctions suggest that romantic love is more "embedded" in China than the United States, and that love is more based on personal preferences in the United States than China. Yet, neither distinction has been focused on cultural differences in romantic love. Individualism-collectivism is primarily concerned with "*cultural-level differences*," involving institutions, symbol systems and behavioral systems (Kim, 1994; Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1994) and is less concerned with the study of romantic love. Independence versus interdependence is primarily concerned with *individual-level differences*, involving the self's emotions, motivations, and cognitions, and it too is not particularly concerned with romantic love (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We believe that the notions of embeddedness and personal preference help bridge the gap between the cultural distinctions mentioned above and cultural differences in romantic love.

Cross-cultural research clarifies ways in which the constructs of embeddedness and personal preference pertain to Chinese-U.S. differences in romantic love. Dion and Dion (1993) examined differences between U.S. college students of different cultural backgrounds in their endorsement of different styles of love. They found that students with Chinese backgrounds, as compared with those with European backgrounds, scored higher on a friendship style of love in which partners develop a close long-lasting relationship characterized by deep caring. Cho and Cross (1995) found that Chinese, as compared with U.S., persons were more likely to let their lover know of their commitment. Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) obtained similar findings and in addition found that the Euro-American students were more likely to endorse a style of love characterized by physical attraction and intense feelings ("eros"; see also Hsu, 1983). These findings point to a greater emphasis on broad aspects of the relationship entailing devotion (e.g., commitment, loyalty, and enduring friendship) among the Chinese, and to a greater emphasis on the lovers' intense desires in the United States.

Eastern philosophies clarify how embeddedness pertains to love. In the Buddhist tradition, romantic relationships are seen as developing in a context of multiple factors that determines the course of romantic love (Chang & Holt, 1991). Buddhist teaching stresses the importance of broad contextual conditions that underlie the progress and failure of romantic relationships

(Goodwin & Tang, 1996). The main context determining outcomes of love is the natural world. In explaining romance in China, Chang and Holt (1991) observe that "nature sets the model for human beings to follow" (pp. 47-48) and "[Nature] paves the way for all things to occur" (p. 51). According to all of the above authors, there is no U.S. counterpart to this emphasis on the role of context in determining the outcome of love relationships. Indeed, in the United States, the emphasis is much more on individuals' personal control over outcomes, and their ability to work on relationships so as to overcome obstacles. In the United States, there is more of a sense that love conquers all (Chang & Holt, 1991).

Prior research and indigenous philosophies suggest that romantic love in China is seen as embedded—within the broader relationship and within the natural world. Interestingly, this notion of embeddedness is different from the notion typically emphasized by cross-cultural investigators (e.g., Triandis, 1995), namely, the embeddedness of the individual within a cohesive group and within role-related obligations. Prior research also suggests that in the United States, more than China, love is linked to personal preference, and particularly to intense desire.

To assess the relevance of embeddedness and intense desire to Chinese-U.S. differences in romantic love, we examined lyrics from American and Chinese lovesongs. Prior studies have shown the value of song texts in elucidating the cultural differences in interpersonal relationships (Lomax & Halifax, 1968; Rothbaum & Xu, 1995). A pilot study of 15 American and 15 Chinese lovesongs was gathered informally from Euro-American and immigrant Chinese American students, respectively, who were asked to provide written transcriptions of recent popular lovesongs. The pilot findings suggested that the Chinese songs were more likely to emphasize the following aspects of embeddedness: (a) the type of relationship within which love occurs, namely, relationships entailing devotion; and (b) the natural world, as seen, for example, in connections between love and flowers, rivers, and stars. Other aspects of embeddedness, involving concern with the larger group (e.g., other family members) and with role-related obligations, were not more evident in the Chinese songs.

Whereas the Chinese songs were more focused on aspects of embeddedness, the American songs were more focused on individuals' intense desires. Because raters were told to rate each song either as depicting love as embedded or as focused on intense desire, it was not possible to determine whether the cultural differences were due to greater embeddedness in the Chinese songs or to more expressions of intense desire in the U.S. songs. In the full study, this confounding of embeddedness and intense desire was eliminated by requiring raters to make separate ratings of each variable.

The pilot findings also indicated that compared with U.S. songs, Chinese songs entailed more negative expectations about the future of the relationship and more suffering. Similarly, Wu and Shaver (1993) found that the Chinese tend to stress the negative and painful aspects of love. Negative expectations about romantic love in China may be associated with the embeddedness of love—the need for devotion and commitment and the power of contextual forces in influencing outcomes may make lovers less sanguine that the relationship will continue. For Americans, by contrast, “true love will find a way” (Hsu, 1983, p. 189). Further research is needed to explore cultural differences in the incidence of negative expectations and in the degree of suffering in romantic relationships.

In the present study, we examined Chinese-U.S. differences in the nature of romantic love by analyzing lyrics of lovesongs that were popular within the past 10 years. Our hypotheses were the following: (a) In Chinese as compared with U.S. songs, love is depicted as more embedded, as seen in greater mention of the natural world, and greater mention of broad aspects of the relationship entailing devotion. (b) In U.S. songs as compared with Chinese songs, love is more often depicted as focused on individuals’ intense desires. (c) More Chinese than U.S. songs convey negative expectations about the relationship. (d) More Chinese than U.S. songs convey suffering.

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

All songs were popular lovesongs from the years 1987 to 1993. A lovesong was one that addressed an adult’s romantic feelings toward a peer—past, present, or future. No more than three songs were selected from any one author.

A total of 21 Mainland China and 21 Hong Kong songs were selected. Three songs from each country were selected for each of the 7 years. In Mainland China, songs were collected in a popular monthly magazine called *Gequ* (Songs). When possible, the three songs were selected from the list of the Top 10. If three lovesongs could not be obtained from this list, lists of readers’ requests and TV theme songs were used. In Hong Kong, there are annual popular song competitions at which the 10 most popular songs are selected.<sup>1</sup> These songs are broadcasted on radio stations and also published in songbooks and other popular magazines. The three most popular lovesongs per year were selected.

A total of 38 U.S. lovesongs were selected from the monthly magazine *Billboard Hits*. This magazine contains a ranking of the most popular songs. For each year, all 12 monthly magazines were examined to determine which songs received the most No. 1 ratings. If more than six songs received a No. 1 rating, the number of times these songs received No. 2 ratings were examined, and if this still yielded more than six songs, the No. 3 ratings were examined. The ultimate goal was to find the top-rated five or six songs per year.

#### PROCEDURE

The Chinese songs were translated by a Chinese American graduate student who was fluent in both Chinese and English and blind to the hypotheses of the study. Another Chinese American graduate student, who was also fluent in both languages and blind to the hypotheses, back-translated a subsample of the Chinese songs that had been translated into English. The purpose of the back-translation was to determine how well the meaning of the Chinese songs was captured by the translation. As Sager (1989) has pointed out, "There are no absolute standards of translation quality but only more or less appropriate translations for the purpose for which they are intended" (p. 91). Thus, the back-translation should not be a polished idiomatic text in Chinese but a literal rendering of the translation for checking purposes (Larson, 1984; Sager, 1989; Wilss, 1982).

For the back-translation, 10 songs were randomly selected from the full sample of 42 Chinese songs. The back-translator, who was unfamiliar with the Chinese songs, translated the 10 songs back to Chinese. The back-translated text and the original (Chinese) text were then compared and evaluated by both the translator and the back-translator. The comparison and evaluation were done on a line-by-line basis as well as on each song as a whole, and they were focused on whether the meaning of the song was retained. In general, the back-translated and original text matched well.

When a difference in the back-translated and original texts was found, the translated text was studied to determine the cause for the difference. A common problem was that a few of the words were not translated literally—so as to allow the song to flow naturally and more closely resemble American songs—and there were occasional differences in interpretation of figurative text. There were also several specific words and short phrases that did not have matching meaning because of linguistic differences. For example, the word *ching* (whose generic meaning is affection) has many shades of meaning depending on the context and on how it is being used in combination with other words. The few differences in comparing the back-translated and

original texts were noted and used as guides to refine the translation for the other 32 Chinese songs.

All of the songs were rated by a Caucasian American female undergraduate student who was blind to the hypotheses as well as to the fact that about half of the songs were from China. A Caucasian American female graduate student, also blind to the hypotheses and the cultural differences in the songs, rated half of the songs for purposes of assessing reliability.

The raters were asked to make four judgments. For each song, raters were asked to decide whether or not (a) the love that was expressed in the song was embedded in a larger context of life, (b) the song mentioned intense desire, (c) the song mentioned negative outcomes of the love relationship, and (d) the concept of suffering was expressed. The four variables were described as follows:

*Embeddedness.* Love is defined as embedded when it is incorporated within a larger context, namely, (a) the natural world or (b) other aspects of the relationship that entail devotion over time (e.g., the notion of "forever"). Love is embedded in the natural world when it is compared to nature or when nature is used as a background for love; mention of nature apart from love was not coded as embedded. Devotion over time refers to commitment, loyalty, and enduring friendship. For songs rated embedded, students were asked to indicate which of the two aspects of embeddedness, nature or broad aspects of the relationship, were present. Students could indicate that both were present.

*Intense desire.* Intense desire refers to desperate wants or needs, such as those conveyed in the phrase "I can't live without you," or passionate (strong, impulsive desire), erotic, or blatantly sexual longing or love.

*Negative outcomes.* Negative outcomes are ones in which there is a general sentiment or expectation that the specific relationship will not work out or it has not worked out in the past (e.g., mourning, loss, regret). Expectations regarding the future were treated as more important than what had happened in the past, but if the relationship had not worked out in the past, this could be used in determining if it was likely to not work out in the future. If the loved one had left or was leaving, then the song was rated as negative unless there was an expectation (not just a desire or hope) that the relationship would work out in the future. Protestation of love did not overcome evidence of being apart. If the song contained a mix of positive and negative expectations without more of either, it was not rated as negative. In general, if things looked somewhat bleak for the relationship continuing, it was rated as negative; if

the relationship had at least an even chance of working out, it was not rated as negative.

*Suffering.* Suffering, which refers to negative emotions associated with relational problems, was coded when the song specifically mentioned any of the following: pain, hurt, sadness, crying, tears, loneliness, fear, despair, sorrow, gloom, brokenhearted, and suffer. Slight variations of these words (e.g., painful, sad, lonely, afraid) were also coded as suffering.

In addition to these four variables, raters were asked to record how much time they spent reading and rating each of the songs, rounded to the nearest minute. This was intended as a check of whether cultural differences in the ratings could be confounded with cultural differences in the difficulty of understanding the songs.

Raters were given 8 pilot songs and were asked to rate and discuss their ratings before being given the 80 songs to be coded as part of this study. The discussion of the pilot songs was intended to increase students' understanding of the ratings that they were being asked to make and to increase their reliability. The 80 songs were placed in random order, with the exception that there were no more than 3 songs in a row from either the United States or China, and the first four songs were evenly divided between Chinese and American songs.

After completing the ratings, students were asked to speculate about the source of the lovesongs. Both of the students recognized some of the songs as popular ones, and they presumed that the other songs were less popular, at least on the channels to which they listened. Neither guessed that some of the songs were from a different culture. When the students were told that half of the songs were from another country and when they were asked to guess which country that might be, neither student guessed that the songs were from Asia. In a pilot study involving several other students, no one guessed that some of the songs were from a different culture.

## RESULTS

Using Cohen's Kappa, the reliability of ratings for the four variables assessed in this study ranged from .74, for embeddedness, to .79, for suffering. The proportion of songs on which the students agreed in their ratings for the four variables ranged from 87% to 90%.

Chi-square analyses were used to examine cultural differences in each of the four ratings. A clear majority of the Chinese songs, 79% (33), depicted

love as embedded, whereas only 39% (15) of U.S. songs (out of 42 and 38 songs, respectively), were rated as embedded;  $\chi^2 = 12.70, p < .01$ . Follow-up analyses examining the two components of embeddedness separately indicated similar findings for both: 43% (18) of Chinese songs, as compared with only 16% (6) of U.S. songs, depicted love as embedded in the natural world,  $\chi^2 = 6.96, p < .01$ . Embeddedness within broad aspects of the relationship was evident in 55% (23) of Chinese songs but only 26% (10) of U.S. songs,  $\chi^2 = 6.66, p < .01$ .

In contrast to the impressive and highly significant cultural differences in embeddedness, there was no evidence of cultural differences in the intensity of desire expressed in the songs: 43% (18) of Chinese songs and 37% (14) of U.S. songs depicted love as involving intense desire,  $p > .50$ .

The chi-square analysis of cultural differences in negative versus non-negative (positive or neutral) expectations regarding the outcome of the relationship was significant,  $\chi^2 = 8.30, p < .01$ . Negative outcomes were expected in 69% (29) of the Chinese songs and only 37% (14) of the U.S. songs. The findings for suffering paralleled those for negative outcomes: 69% (29) of the Chinese songs but only 47% (18) of the U.S. songs explicitly mentioned some form of suffering,  $\chi^2 = 3.86, p < .05$ .

Differences between the Hong Kong and Mainland China songs were analyzed for the three main variables that yielded significant differences: embeddedness, negative expectations, and suffering. In no cases were the differences significant between these two Chinese communities, and for all three variables, the difference between the U.S. and Hong Kong songs was in the same direction as the difference between the U.S. and the Mainland China songs.

The differences in the amount of time that the raters spent reading and rating the Chinese songs versus the American songs was not significant. The average for the U.S. and Chinese songs was 5.17 minutes and 5.47 minutes, respectively,  $p > .20$ . Thus, the cultural differences reported above are probably not due to differences in the difficulty understanding or assigning ratings to the songs.

## DISCUSSION

The findings in this study supported three of our four hypotheses about cultural differences in the nature of romantic love. Love is depicted as more embedded in Chinese songs than in U.S. songs. The Chinese songs also convey more negative expectations about the relationship and more suffering than the U.S. songs. However, contrary to expectations based on prior theory



and research, love was not depicted as more focused on intense desires in the United States than in China.

#### EMBEDDEDNESS

The greater embeddedness of romantic love in China than the United States is consistent with major tenets of Chinese philosophy. For example, Taoism depicts the balanced life as "in harmony with both nature and society" (Ho, 1995). Devotion, commitment, and loyalty are Confucian values that are pervasive and ingrained in close relationships in China, particularly family relationships. The present findings indicate that these values may also pertain to romantic relationships. They are evident, for example, in the Chinese verses: "Since I have chosen you, we will be together from now on . . . I will never change from now to forever" and "Even though I may have to wait for a lifetime, I still will not question it." The embedding of romantic love in friendship and in nature is also common in the Chinese songs: "Whether we are in love or just friends, this love will last forever" and "Just because of the immortal look in each other's eyes—having you, me, feelings, heaven, sea and earth." This is in contrast with American songs that tend to ignore the context and to focus on the partner: "I don't know much, but I know I love you and that may be all I need to know" and "There is nobody here, it's just you and me, the way I want it to be. But I hardly know this beauty by my side. I never will forget the way you look tonight."

The Chinese songs indicated that romance is not embedded within the family or social group. The familial and larger group aspects of embeddedness (e.g., concern about parents' or group members' opinions or how they might be affected by the romantic relationship), which have been highlighted by prior investigators (e.g., Hsu, 1983), may be absent in part because of the decreasing influence of the institution of the family, and decreasing collectivism (Shaw, 1994), particularly in matters of romantic love. Yet, aspects of embeddedness that were emphasized in the Chinese songs—particularly devotion, commitment, and loyalty—are values closely tied to the family and to the broader social network. It is possible that societal values persist even in the face of profound changes in the institutions that support them.

With increasing westernization of China, there may be less difference between Chinese and U.S. beliefs about the embeddedness of romantic love in future generations. In support of this hypothesis, a study of generational changes in lovesongs in the United States, from the 1950s to the 1970s, found a decrease in the themes that love is eternal and that love results from outside forces, which relate to devotion/commitment and nature, respectively (Kessing, 1974). However, there is also reason to believe that Chinese views of

love will be considerably more embedded than U.S. views many generations from now. Values such as devotion and commitment and the belief in unity with nature are deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical and religious traditions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) dating thousands of years (cf. Hsu, 1983; Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, & Hiruma, 1996) and are likely to endure the erosion they are currently experiencing.

#### NEGATIVE EXPECTATIONS AND SUFFERING

The finding that more Chinese than U.S. songs express negative expectations about the relationship may be related to the embeddedness of the Chinese view of romantic love. This is illustrated by the following lines from two Chinese songs: (a) "Not knowing that tragedy has been predestined. . . . Can't forget the commitment we had made . . . I call to you with the endless pain in my heart." (b) "I fear love. I also fear I can't get love. I ask, now in this world, how many devoted women are there? Knowing, living together and owing each other . . . I don't want to love casually . . . walking together along this passage for the brokenhearted." We suspect that Chinese partners are more likely than are their U.S. counterparts to consider aspects of the relationship, such as the importance of sustaining devotion, that make them less sanguine that the relationship will continue. For Americans, who are more narrowly focused on their romantic feelings at the moment, negative expectations are less an issue. Even when the future is considered, obstacles related to embeddedness are relatively ignored, as expressed in this song: "I wonder how we can survive this romance, but in the end if I'm with you, I'll take the chance."

The concept of *yuan* (contextual forces) helps account for the negative expectation in the Chinese songs. Buddhism teaches that most human strivings, including romantic ones, are futile (Yang & Ho, 1988). According to Chang and Holt (1991), if *yuan* is not working in favor of a romantic relationship, it cannot be salvaged. All one can do is to accept the negative outcome, and the suffering that comes with it. In the Taoist view, harmony with nature and the context should not be disrupted and is best preserved by not resisting it. Americans, by contrast, would be more active in working on the relationship because individuals are seen as the main agents in determining outcomes (Chang & Holt, 1991; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). Obstacles presented by the context can even serve to energize the partners to try harder to make the relationship work out (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

The more negative expectations and greater suffering evident in Chinese lovesongs may reflect a deeply rooted Chinese tradition of viewing love, particularly intense love, with skepticism. In a lexicon study, Shaver, Wu, and

Schwartz (1992) found a category of sad love among the Chinese but not among the Americans. Whereas Americans associate love with positive emotions, "the Chinese apparently have many love-related concepts that seem sad to them" (Shaver et al., 1992, p. 195). The Chinese pessimism about romance, which may reflect the Buddhist view of not resisting the greater contextual forces and the Taoist view of aligning with nature, is captured by Chang and Holt (1991), "only when love dies beautifully can the story be kept forever, regardless of how much bitterness the lovers must suffer" (p. 48). This sentiment contrasts sharply with the American belief that personal agency can overcome all barriers.

Negative sentiments about romantic love should not be seen as universal of Chinese views about love. Rothbaum and Xu (1995) found that Chinese songs, as compared with U.S. songs, were more likely to convey positive sentiments about parents, particularly a desire to give back to parents the love that was given to the self. Thus, cultural differences in positive versus negative views about love seem to be highly dependent on the nature of the relationship.

#### INTENSE DESIRE

Our findings did not support the hypothesis that more intense desires would be expressed in the U.S. songs. We found that there is intense love in the Chinese songs, love that is as desperate and passionate and erotic as the love expressed in the U.S. songs. According to Hsu (1981), Chinese cultural tradition binds the individual into a web of dependency on others, thereby defusing the intensity of emotional experience, particularly romantic passion. Jankowiak (1995), however, takes issue with this claim, noting that romantic love has existed in China for thousands of years. In his ethnographic studies, Jankowiak found that romantic love among the Chinese involves intense feelings similar to those common in the United States and to those found in the Chinese songs in this study.

We believe that the Chinese lovesongs are as intense as the U.S. lovesongs because the lovesongs are focused on the early stage of romantic love, when attraction is most intense. In this early stage, biological dispositions may be dominant in both cultures. As the relationship progresses, cultural influences (social expectations and obligations) may overshadow attraction for the Chinese, whereas attraction continues to be a fundamental tether for Americans (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In the United States, there is an emphasis on keeping the flame alive, and renewing passion, even in mature relationships. A corollary of this explanation is that the U.S.-Chinese differences in intense desire would be greatest if the focus was on couples who were already married and had children.

Even if intensity is universal in the early stage of romantic relationships, the meaning of the intensity may differ across cultures. We suspect that intensity is more associated with devotion in China and with dependency in the United States. This is consistent with Hsu's (1983) claim that the Chinese defuse their dependency needs into a web of multiple close relationships, whereas Americans' dependency needs are focused on their sexual partners. Support for this claim comes from the finding that the word *baby* was mentioned in 12 of the U.S. songs but in none of the Chinese songs ( $p < .01$ , exact test).

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings supported the predictions that romantic love is described as more embedded and is accompanied by more negative expectations and suffering in Chinese than in U.S. songs. However, there was no evidence of cultural differences in the pervasiveness of intense desires. Considered together, the findings indicate the importance of culture in influencing the expression of love but also the limits of cultural influence. In particular, the intense desire accompanying the attraction phase of romantic love may be a universal feature of romance.

Western theorists, because of their emphasis on individuals and their dispositions (Morris & Peng, 1994), tend to ignore context. The constructs from which we borrowed in this article, individualism-collectivism and independence-interdependence, were developed in part to overcome this Western inclination, and to highlight the greater importance of context in non-U.S. societies such as China. The present findings regarding high levels of intense desire in Chinese lovesongs remind us that the Chinese may not be collectivistic and interdependent in all relational contexts. Future research should carefully attend to the ways in which these constructs vary as a function of the specific context to which they are applied (cf. Triandis, 1990). The cultural differences in embeddedness, negative expectations, and suffering that were found here, as well as the cultural similarities in intensity of desire, may be particular to the context of romantic love.

### NOTE

1. There are two stations in Hong Kong—Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) and Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)—that select the Top 10 hit songs each year. Because RTHK's selection criteria are much more stringent and fair than TVB's, the RTHK list was relied on for the 4 years when it was available.

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