



Weijing Lu

Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China

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reviewed by [Chenxi Luo](#)

Arranged marriage (or *baoban hunyin* in Chinese) has long been viewed as a repressive institution that prohibits human desire and free love, the values underlying an ideal marriage from a Eurocentric perspective. Chinese people, influenced by the New Cultural Movement of the early twentieth century, also hold the belief that arranged marriage signifies the backwardness of the conjugal relationship in traditional China. However, Weijing Lu's monograph, *Arranged Companions*, challenges such characterisations and stereotypes: rather than suppress spousal affection, arranged marriage nurtured emotional bonds between husbands and wives, especially for elite households. The book offers a refreshing perspective of how couples, despite their marriages being decided by parents, enjoyed lifelong marital lives. *Arranged Companions* deeply explores the emotive relationship between educated spouses and reveals what happy marriage meant to the couples living in late imperial China.

The book opens with a domestic moment between Shen Fu and Chen Yun—the couple playing drinking games with poems as a pastime, one snapshot of time that was captured in Shen Fu's *Six Records of a Life Adrift*. Although their marital life epitomises a perfect match in eighteenth-century China, the author juxtaposes the opposite image of Xie Bingying, a female writer in the early twentieth century. Xie Bingying resisted her arranged marriage to the point of attempting suicide—an extreme protest against such arrangements. The divergent opinions between Shen Fu and Xie Bingying demonstrate the shifting representation of arranged marriage: a representation that glowed in the premodern period as much as it is condemned in modern China. The drastic overturn invites a reexamination of how people experienced arranged marriage in reality. In the book, the author utilises six vignettes drawn from Shen Fu and Chen Yun's marital lives to introduce each theme of spousal relations. In some sense, the book follows the cycle of marriage. It starts from betrothal, through post-marital activities, household management, the practice of polygyny, and ends with the remembrance of a deceased spouse. A group of literati and their wives, exemplified in the book, prove that arranged marriage was viable, sustainable and even attractive. Through multiple literary venues, upper-class couples registered their deep feelings—they delighted in post-marital courtship, endured economic hardships, cemented intimate bonds and expected reunions in the next life.

The first chapter focuses on various conceptions of an ideal marriage. The meaning of marital success was not necessarily dominated by Confucian classics. Other intellectual arenas, including

rites, cultural motifs, moral texts and scholarly debate, diversify the notion of what companionate love looked like. A happy marriage was envisioned from ritual, moral, intellectual and sensual aspects. Beyond the discourses of an exemplary marriage, the second chapter deals with the practice of conveying marital affection: composing wife-mourning poems, publishing conjugal poems, celebrating the Double Seven Festival, etc. Of particular interest is that a bereaved literatus would invite male friends to commemorate his deceased wife in the form of compiling a wife-mourning collection (pp. 49–51). As shown in this chapter, domestic intimacy was not excluded from the public but became an important locus for the performance of male homosociality.

The third chapter concerns the early stage of marriage: engagement and post-marital courtship. One intriguing sub-argument emerging from here is that arranged marriage did not 'necessarily mean marrying a stranger' (p. 79) and in some cases, like Shen Fu and Chen Yun, a groom and bride had known each other since their childhood before the marital consummation. This premarital interaction eased the initial process when a young wife moved into her husband's family. In the meantime, in contrast to the modern courtship prior to marriage, romantic infatuation with each other in Qing China occurred after the marriage (p. 87). As demonstrated by Lu, a repertoire of post-marital activities, involving chess, musical instruments, books and calligraphy, created a vibrant space for newlyweds to entertain themselves. This chapter also touches upon an understudied topic of how people in late imperial China passed down sexual knowledge to young couples, especially girls. Readers from this chapter would know that sexual knowledge was not off-limits to a bride-to-be. She could be well equipped in the 'art of the bedroom' through her maids, female relatives, and pornographic paintings found at the bottom of her dowry chest (pp. 103–4).

Despite the joyfulness in an arranged marriage, marital love constantly had to come to terms with other types of personal affection. Chapter 4 puts marital relations in competition with filial piety, parental love and fraternal bonds, those devotions promoted by Confucian ideology and patriarchal principles. The chapter emphasises that marital love was indispensable to couples, even though they had other familial duties. Lu also reminds readers that we should not push the conjugal ties too far, so that marital relations did not override other commitments. Companionate love in Qing China resided in multi-generational households and couples faced various challenges in these settings. In-laws, husbands' brothers, and other co-residents could pose threats to marital relations within a patriarchal and generational household. Besides, upper-class households were not impervious to mismatched marriage and domestic abuse. Lu, however, ends this chapter in an optimistic note: wives, in response, had a range of coping strategies and sought a spiritual exit from troubled marriages in an era when divorce was hardly an option (p. 126).

Among many marital problems, one that plagued upper-class families was polygyny—the presence of concubines. The following chapter tackles concubinage in Qing China. The extant historical narrative has paid attention to the difficult relationship between primary wives and concubines within households. However, such depiction is only one side of a story. Lu's analysis offers us an alternative way to think about concubinage: primary wives and concubines could shoulder familial obligations together. The mention of Chen Yun, a wife who took the lead in bringing in a concubine, complicates our perception that wives were always reluctant to accept concubines within a household. The examples of Wang Huizu and Jiao Xun, whose biological mothers were concubines, demonstrate that the benefit of taking in a concubine could relieve a wife from reproductive responsibility (p. 147). The willingness from a wife's side balances out a preexisting account that concubinage worsened women's living conditions since they jockeyed for a husband's favour. Instead, Lu persuasively reveals that women's collaboration, regardless of social status within a household, sometimes turned out to be successful.

The final chapter focuses on aged couples and raises several issues, such as conjugal separation, parenthood and the remembrance of a passing spouse. One interesting observation made by the author is that conjugal separation was quite prevalent because husbands from elite households were preoccupied with travel in order to take examinations and serve in official posts. Against this background, effective communication between separated spouses became crucial. Couples often exchanged letters and poems, both of which were contained in the same envelope. Lu astutely captures the 'compartmentalization of the two functions': a letter informed the spouse about household matters, while a poem exchanged conjugal feelings (p. 171). This phenomenon suggests that familial responsibilities and intimate feelings assumed segmented but equal roles in marital relationships.

A wide range of Chinese vocabulary referencing marital ideals in this book deserves some attention. *Huamei* (painting wives' eyebrows), *Xieyou* (a couple travelling together), *Xieyin* (living the life of a recluse with one's wife), just to mention a few, suggest a rich linguistic repository that educated couples could utilise to exhibit their marital lives. An intriguing question once posed by another China historian, Norman Kutcher, is why Chinese people used stock phrases to express their emotions, which differ from the novelty valued by Westerners when they register their sentiments.^[1] Putting Lu's work in conversation with Kutcher's question, one might realise that these formulaic phrases were not clichéd but actually legitimated the expression of conjugal love within a cultural boundary in Qing China. Beyond that, readers of the day certainly appreciated those conceptions with which a couple chose to define their marriage in their writings. Those intelligible set phrases made conjugal love communicable and shareable among Qing literati.

Lu's monograph is an important addition to understanding arranged marriage from the angle of educated Han Chinese people. Two questions arose during my reading. First, the passive verb, 'arranged,' in the book title leaves readers to wonder: who can arrange a marriage in Qing China? A variety of people had a say in arranging marriage except for the groom and bride. They could be maternal/paternal parents, grandparents, matchmakers, and other powerholders in social relations. Readers might be curious about whether these actors exerted a uniform effect in the arrangement of marriage. Second, this book is contextualised in Qing China, a Manchu-established state. This leads to a question of how this alien dynasty influenced the marriage institution. For instance, Lu points out an important change in the Qing code regarding concubinage. The Qing code, in 1740, lifted the age requirement of over forty years and reproductive rationale for concubine acquisition. Under the new statute, any men could bring in a concubine (p. 138–39). Lu uses several reasons to explain this shift, such as the strong social acceptance of concubines and the growing commercial economy of female entertainers in the Qing. Ding Yizhuang, an historian of the Manchus, argues that this legislative change was made for the banner people, the ruling class of the Qing. Bannermen actively participated in concubinage, and they did not want their practice to be restrained by age or infertility. As such, the state accommodated their needs by changing the statute.^[2] Taking the Manchu state into consideration might enrich our understanding of arranged marriages in a multiethnic state. Regardless, this beautifully observed *Arranged Companions* will inspire future scholars to explore more about the intimate lives of people, the theme that matters to everyone despite time and space.

Notes

[1] Norman Kutcher, 'The Skein of Chinese Emotions History,' in *History of Emotions*, ed. Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, pp. 57–73, Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014, specifically pp. 67–68, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252038051.003.0004>.

[2] Ding Yizhuang, *Manzude funü shenghuo yu hunyin zhidu yanjiu*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999, pp. 82–83.

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