

Love, Family, and Gender in Twenty-first Century China

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Theorists of globalization have drawn attention to dramatic changes in intimate practices around the world, highlighting an overall trend towards the increasing salience of romantic love, free partner choice, and coupledness (Giddens 1992). The emergence of comparable policies and legal frameworks of marriage, family, and sexuality in different parts of the world certainly seems to support the idea of a global convergence. But, as many anthropologists and historians have shown (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006), the genealogies of phenomena such as love marriage, companionate marriage, lower birth rates, and politicized sexualities are very diverse and subject to significant variations. This heterogeneity is not just historical and cultural; it is also profoundly personal and political. Whatever changes are occurring globally across North–South and East–West divides, they are taking place in the context of increasingly entangled intersections between private negotiations and public dialogues at various levels in law, state policy, science, technology, and the media.

My project was concerned with such intersections, and in particular those between micro-historical experiences and macro-structural processes. In contrast to other social science approaches that only highlight the increasing salience of individualization in contemporary societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), I developed an approach to marriage, family, and intimate life that emphasizes also the continuing importance of collectivities, ties of sociality, and networks of social support. The starting point of the “intimate choices approach” (Santos 2016c) is the idea that people everywhere are confronted with pressing choices when it comes to intimate practices such as childbearing, sexuality, marriage, childcare, parenting, or eldercare. These choices are not just the outcomes of acts of individual agency (as when a wealthy consumer chooses the most adequate purchase from a long list of product brands and price ranges), but are shaped by complex processes of negotiation that take place in particular social, political, economic, and material environments. The intimate choices approach acknowledges the increasing centrality of individual agency, confessional and affective modes, and personal autonomy in the age of neoliberal globalization, but it also emphasizes the continuing significance of broader moral and normative structures, including not just state policies and national laws but also the institution of the family, larger kin groups, neighbourhoods, caste, and other associational identities (Santos 2013, Santos 2016c, Donner and Santos 2016b). Ethnographic research developed along these lines emphasizes the collective nature

of decision making and the limits of individualized notions of self-realization (Donner and Santos 2016a, Santos and Harrell 2017a).

This approach was developed in the context of a series of publications focusing on China alongside other Asian countries such as India. Anthropologists working in Asian contexts are uniquely positioned to open up crucial debates on how seemingly related ‘global forms’ of romantic courtship and companionate marriage are emerging and how such transformations are not homogeneous but are shaped by contextually specific historical processes of cultural creativity. In the introduction to our edited volume *Transforming Patriarchy*, Stevan Harrell and I show how marriages and families in China today are being pushed and pulled by conflicting signals that would seem to herald the decline of earlier traditions of patriarchal organization (Harrell and Santos 2017b). Whereas people’s identity used to be linked to membership in a collective, be it family or work unit, and intimate relations were largely mediated by parents and elders, today individualization has taken hold – young people, for example, have more freedom of movement and more say in their lives. Defining patriarchy as a historical system of family and social life built around a particular set of intersecting gender and generational hierarchies, we argue that patriarchy in twenty-first century China is not entirely dead, but it is no longer the default arrangement for Chinese families.



Young mother teaching author to tie a baby sling local style, northern Guangdong (2012).

There is some disagreement in the volume over whether the changes observed represent a form of progress, regress, or both, but there is broad agreement on the conclusion that we are dealing with an increasingly individualized system in which a single individual might be oppressed in some relationships and dominant in others. Stevan Harrell and I analyse this shift towards a more individualized system of inequality as a move away from ‘classic forms of patriarchy’ (what Max Weber called *Patriarchalism*), but we continue to use the term patriarchal for the new system in order to highlight the ongoing effects of deep-seated gender and generational hierarchies. This point is not a mere terminological detail; it highlights the paradox at the heart of the volume. On the one hand, present-day China resembles in many ways the industrial societies of North America and parts of Europe, in which patriarchy in Weber’s sense no longer exists, while male dominance remains. On the other hand, family relations in today’s China display many unique features, including the continuing importance of values associated with the patriline, filial duty, patrilocality, and the joint family ideal. The volume proposes a model of patriarchy and social change that is better suited to making sense of the social and cultural complexities of the Chinese family system. Patriarchy is not a historical constant and political action is crucial to maintaining or transforming specific patriarchal configurations. Our approach has much in common with earlier feminist historical approaches to patriarchy (as a system of domestic inequality) in that we envision global modernity not as the end of patriarchy but as its transformation.

This is not the view of global modernity put forward by theorists of individualization, such as Giddens, for whom global modernity entails a large-scale process of democratization and de-traditionalization of intimate life. Along the same lines, Yunxiang Yan (2009) highlights the growth of affective individualism in Chinese family relations, and Davis and Friedman (2014) focus on the privatization of marriage and sexuality, pointing to trends such as higher age at first marriage, fewer barriers to divorce, declining marital fertility, and greater social acceptance of premarital relationships. These authors are surely right to highlight the growing importance of affective ties and partner choice, but there is no sign that the institution of (heteronormative) marriage is weakening, or that it has been decoupled from broader patrilineal family ideals (cf. Davis and Friedman 2014: 26-27). While the increasing importance of individual choice and consent in spouse selection together with a rise in nuclear residential patterns may fit the ideal of intimate life put forward by globalization theorists, the same cannot be said of other processes such as the continuing emphasis on marriage and childbearing as a filial duty, or the continuing involvement of close and extended kin in the process of spouse selection.

My empirical research on rural families in Guangdong Province highlights some of these tensions (Santos 2016c, 2017c). I have shown, for example, how labour migration to the Pearl River Delta region from the 1980s onwards has generated new childcare arrangements that reveal an important intergenerational shift of power within families (Santos 2017c). As middle-generation mothers and fathers started

to redefine their parenting duties primarily in terms of the ‘masculine’ work of earning income outside the village, they turned senior generation grandparents into full-time baby-sitters of ‘left-behind children’. This transformation has contributed to the empowerment of the middle generation, but it did not result in the collapse of the intergenerational contract. Rather, it led to the emergence of a new patriarchal configuration in which middle-generation mothers and fathers have more bargaining power in the negotiation of gendered generational interdependencies. My analysis shows that patriarchal bargains are not timeless immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders well as between generations. These struggles do not always lead to dramatic changes, but they tend to reveal the existence of contradictory positions and tendencies in society. Similarly, my account of rural experiences of love, marriage, and family life in Guangdong Province shows how highly restrictive birth planning regulations and related biomedical reproductive technologies remain a central component of the Reform era shift towards a more sentimental, more individualized regime of intimate life (Santos 2016c). The Revised Marriage Law of 2001 continues to refer to birth planning as a national duty, making it quite clear that individualization does not necessarily mean less state monitoring.



Babysitting grandfather holding migrant son's daughter, northern Guangdong (2012).

Theorists of globalization would approach such tensions as symptomatic of an incomplete process of individualization. The intimate choices approach developed in this project offers a way out of this Western-centric vision of global transformation, showing how the Western project of individualization is ultimately based on late-twentieth century large-scale infrastructures of welfare provision aimed at securing individual autonomy. In most Asian societies, by contrast, welfare systems have been largely built around the assumption that in both income distribution and care provision the family will be responsible for the welfare of its members (Ikels 2004). There were, of course, several attempts in Asia to break away from welfare familialism, but these attempts had limited success and were always marked by tensions between individual and collective aspirations, familial and societal interests. Such tensions are becoming increasingly visible in Western societies today, at a time when welfare provision is facing significant retrenchment pressures due to population ageing and increasing public expenditures. As we move further into the twenty-first century, it will become increasingly clear that the growing importance of romantic love and individual partner choice in both Eastern and Western narratives of global modernity should not be read as evidence of the weakening of the institutions of marriage and family, but rather as a context-specific reworking of these institutions and the way they connect to larger infrastructures of social support and welfare provision.

References

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