

*Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China.* By Weijing Lu. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 249. \$32.00 paperback.

Writing a history of emotion in premodern China is a complex task. Emotions, unlike social practices, cannot be quantified and broad shifts in structures of feeling do not fit neat models of periodization. The discursive record is a far-from-reliable record of actual practices. Given the public nature of personal writings in China, scholars must ask to what extent these expressive texts engage in image making as their authors sought to make their mark through the production of aesthetic texts or through identifying with unconventional cult of *qing* 情 values. Since genre regulates what can be said, reading different genres of texts written by the same person can present very different understandings of what mattered to them. Personal writings, a genre most likely to reflect affective states, necessarily privilege the experiences of a small percentage of elites. Studies of emotion in late imperial China further privilege the lower Yangtse (Yangzi), because of its importance as a source of print culture that preserved a rich archive of personal writings, including those of educated women. As became abundantly clear to me in researching the representation and meanings of filial piety during the Qing, the discursive record from Jiangnan is exceptional in its embrace of passionate emotions, whether depicting romantic or filial love. Even as Weijing Lu acknowledges that the historical record of perfect match marriages is concentrated among the elites of the lower Yangtse where daughters were much more likely to be educated in the lyric arts, *Arranged Companions* does not address the question of how representative its examples of “perfect match” (*jia’ou* 佳偶) marriages were of actual practices in other regions or social classes.

Affective terms are notoriously difficult to translate; this is especially true when one tries to identify examples of romantic love in imperial China, given the distinct cultural meanings freighted onto “romantic love” in the European West. As important as companionate marriage has become as a cultural ideal, the practice of marriage during the Qing was still embedded within intergenerational and patriarchal family structures that prized the dedication of daughters-in-law to fulfilling domestic obligations to their conjugal family. Throughout *Arranged Companions*, Weijing Lu tends to erase what was distinctive about traditional Chinese family structures in her eagerness to place love at the centre of the conjugal bond. As she writes: “Evidence suggests that romantic love did have a place in Qing arranged marriage and that the Qing conceptualization of *qing* in marriage bore a remarkable resemblance to romantic love in nineteenth-century North America” (p. 6). The premise of *Arranged Companions* is that romantic love took on a new importance within the institution of arranged marriage during the Qing. The monograph seeks “to deconstruct ahistorical assumptions about arranged marriage, as well as to delineate the cultural, social, and economic constructs of Qing marital life” (p. 4). However, not all traditional

expressions of conjugal affection are synonymous with love, an affective value that, in contrast to the European West, was markedly hypocognized in Chinese before the New Culture Movement's love affair with love. Her desire to write romantic love into the history of Qing marriage causes Lu to overtranslate. For example, she renders the phrase "*shi hao yong bainian*" (誓好永百年) as "pledging eternal love," when it more accurately should be understood as this young bride's hope that the couple will pledge lifelong affections and bond. Lu's eagerness to foreground the theme of romantic love in this poem written on the eve of a young woman's marriage becomes apparent when she translates "*jiahui*" 嘉惠 as "love" (p. 89) when *hui* is more closely associated with "kindness" or "favour" than love. To be fair, there is no way to translate these expressions into English without producing stilted circumlocutions that betray the Western idealization of romantic love as *the* basis for marriage. There is no doubt that the cult of *qing* and the validation of romantic emotions had a profound impact on the mores of the Jiangnan elite during the late Ming and Qing dynasties and that married (and unmarried) couples could and did fall in love with each other. However, among the questions that any scholar working on the history of emotion during the late Ming and Qing must ask ourselves is to what extent these values transformed conjugal life within large multigenerational households where young brides would spend much more time with the other women in the family, including their mother-in-law, than with their husband. When push came to shove in family disputes, how much suasive force did romantic love hold in determining family loyalties and expectations?

As Lu explains in the Introduction, she rejects the term "companionate marriage" in favour of "perfect match marriages" since companionate marriage is "a concept originating in Western historiography . . . characterized by: 'affection, equality, and mutuality'". However, the sentence that follows risks sacrificing some of that nuance when she writes that the concept of Western companionate marriage "indeed shared some key features with Qing perfect match marriages. This comparison appears even more fascinating because of the near perfect temporal parallel [between the two]" (p. 12). Passages like this encourage readers to look for the parallels between the Western concept of love-based marriages that privilege the romantic bond between the couple and the Qing phenomenon of celebrating the husband-wife bond. This comparison strips both the Qing and the Western concepts of marriage of their cultural specificity: the Western ideal of companionate marriage, of course, builds on a millennium of the glorification of romantic love, whereas the Qing celebration of conjugal bond was constrained by the hierarchal structure of the intergenerational family and the neo-Confucian strictures on women spelled out in the "three followings" (*sancong* 三從) that identified a wife's virtue with obedience to her husband and his parents and the cult of chastity that kept women bound to their one betrothed husband, regardless of whether they developed feelings of affection for each other. Since a bride married into a family, the affective aspect of marriage was much broader than the conjugal bond.

Those reading *Arranged Companions* quickly might miss some of this nuance since Lu frequently waits until the end of a section to add qualifying remarks to otherwise idealized depictions of conjugal life. For example, the section on the boudoir as an idealized space of conjugal bonding concludes by noting:

Indeed, the ‘boudoir-study’ space and the travels were partially fantasy. The writers were consciously silent on the things they had no desire to speak about: for example, the pressure to succeed in the examinations, the duties of serving in-laws, family tensions, forced separations, and financial troubles. (p. 96)

The temporal focus of *Arranged Companions* extends from 1644 to the mid-nineteenth century: this periodization captures the impact of the cult of *qing* on attitudes toward marriage before European value systems began to challenge traditional assumptions about marriage and family. The body chapters are organized according to the stages of marriage: “Fashioning Companionate Love,” “Building the Marital Bond,” “Managing Familial and Marital Relationships,” “Practicing Polygyny,” and “Growing Old Together.” As Lu writes, among the factors that distinguish Qing conceptions of marriage from the Ming was the value placed on educating daughters, especially in the Lower Yangtse. Rather than seek out famous courtesans as intellectual and aesthetic companions as was the practice in the Ming, Qing writers romanticized marriages in which husband and wife could share their aesthetic pursuits. Perhaps even more important to parents choosing brides for their sons than the conjugal happiness of the couple was the conventional desire to find a daughter-in-law who could be trusted to oversee the education of any future grandsons. Another factor that Lu points to in describing what made Qing marriage culture distinct is the rise of evidential studies with its “renewed attention to Confucian rituals that regarded the husband-and-wife relationship as the foundation of civilization” (p. 8). I would have liked evidence that showed the impact of this discursive gesture on actual marriages. After all, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) famously promoted the *fufu* 夫婦 conjugal relationship in his writings but went on to abandon his wife.

*Arranged Companions* draws on a wide range of personal writings: letters, poetry, eulogies, and other memorial texts, as well as chronological biographies (*nianpu* 年譜). *Six Records of a Floating Life* (*Fusheng liuji* 浮生六記) by Shen Fu 沈復 (b. 1763) is a particularly prominent source; each chapter begins with an epigraph taken from it and Lu frequently cites it as an historical source. As a literary scholar, I was surprised that there was no discussion of the fictional nature of Shen Fu’s autobiographical memoir given the degree to which it incorporates tropes found in cult of *qing* fiction. The characterizations of Shen Fu and his wife Chen Yun 陳芸 (1763–1803) strike all the right notes to be presented as elegant and free-spirited aesthetes, whether it be Yun’s embrace of both ritual propriety and romantic unconventionality, such as when she cross-dresses to accompany her husband on an outing, or her attempts to obtain one

of the most desirable courtesans of the day to satisfy both her own and her husband's romantic interests. That the arrangement between the two women is depicted as based on affective *qing*, a bond of sisterhood that Yun and the courtesan Hanyuan 憨園 pledge to each other, rather than as an exchange of silver, should strike readers as a fictional flourish given the economic value of top courtesans. This erasure of the commercial economy in Suzhou is of a piece with Shen's depiction of himself as the prototypical amateur aesthete: unstintingly generous with friends and acquaintances despite being chronically broke, and disdainful of any talk of money or career ambitions. Yet another aspect of *Six Records* that echoes cult of *qing* conventions is its narrative focus on the conjugal relationship to the exclusion of everything else. The only time the couple's two children are mentioned is the heartbreaking scene in which Shen Fu and Yun are forced to abandon them due to their poverty. Even though Yun dies at forty, no longer considered young by premodern standards, she is depicted as the classic cult of *qing* heroine, dying young from unresolved grief, variously ascribed to: i) her exceptional talent; ii) her emotional nature, described as "*qing* crazy" (*qingchi* 情癡); and iii) the loss of Hanyuan to someone who paid a thousand pieces of gold for her. One of the weaknesses of Lu's approach is her failure to consider any of her sources as discursive texts that may be more revealing of the aesthetic values of cultural tastemakers than of their lived experiences.

The first chapter of *Arranged Companions* explores the competing meanings of marriage as constructed in Confucian ritual texts and the poetic tradition. Given Lu's claims that she seeks to "deconstruct ahistorical assumptions about arranged marriage" (p. 4), I found it puzzling that the discussions of ritual in this chapter draw exclusively from canonical Confucian texts, with no discussion of the impact of neo-Confucianism on the status of women during the Qing. In the second half of the chapter, Lu turns to the kinds of nuanced close readings of primary sources that have established her reputation as a pioneering social historian of late imperial China. She presents a number of Qing debates about topics associated with marriage including divorce and the desire by some men to model the mourning period for wives on that for parents. Some argued that husbands should adopt a mourning cane, as was the practice for sons mourning their mothers, while others argued that the mourning period for wives should be extended to the same twenty-seven months mandated for fathers and increasingly observed for mothers.

The second chapter, "Fashioning Companionate Love," begins with a discussion of the early Qing vogue of public mourning for wives, the most spectacular example of which was that of You Tong 尤侗 (1618–1714), who had arrived in Beijing to take the *Boxue hongci* 博學宏詞 examination of 1678 and was unable to get permission to return home to mourn his wife who died that same year at fifty-eight. The mourning volume You Tong compiled contained condolences written by fellow examination candidates as well as high Qing officials, and the text of the "Public Sacrificial Prayers" (p. 50) for

a public service You held in the capital for his late wife. Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630–1696) wrote a remarkable poem in which he expressed his regrets that he had not followed his wife in death. After discussing these and several other exceptional examples of wife mourning that challenge Confucian norms of male propriety by putting “the husband-wife relationship at the center of emotional life” (p. 55), Lu offers a more nuanced historical context for these expressions of conjugal grief by noting that “the extraordinary energy put into grieving the passing of a loved wife subsided as the end of the seventeenth century drew near” (p. 57). Framing the early Qing vogue of wife mourning as both a continuation of the late Ming cult of *qing* and as an expression of trauma by the generation of literati who survived Ming–Qing transition is a useful reminder that writings by elite men about their wives could fulfil a variety of expressive and image-making functions that exceed the concept of companionate love. The rest of the second chapter focuses on the “craze” for perfect match marriages. Here again, it strikes me as methodologically problematic to ignore the ways that the perfect match craze was associated with specific kinds of image-making. To what extent was conjugal love the primary motivation for the circulation of texts celebrating conjugal bliss? As suggested, a great deal of cultural capital could be accrued from being part of a perfect-match couple: Wang Qisun 王芑孫 (1755–1817) was able to help promote the career of his bride Cao Zhenxiu 曹貞秀 (1762–?), who became one of the most renowned female calligraphers of the Qing, by “actively advertis[ing] their perfect-match reputation and turn[ing] it into a mechanism for building new relationships by using their collaborative works of calligraphy and poems as elegant gifts” (p. 62).

As Lu discusses in later chapters, the historical record frequently belies the notion that the perfect-match marriage was the dominant reality for talented and beautiful women. As Lu notes, marriages existed along a spectrum from intellectual companionship to orthodox conceptions of wifely duty. “In between lay a majority of more or less conventional marriages that thrived on bonds nurtured primarily through working together to fulfill family responsibilities” (p. 74). It is not clear whether Lu thinks that the affective core of this majority of conventional marriages was different from that of earlier dynasties. As is well known, the legal system gave women, even those from elite families, few protections from abusive husbands. Yuan Mei’s 袁枚 (1716–1798) sister, Yuan Ji 袁機 (1720–1759), was physically abused by her husband. Only the intervention of her father, who filed for divorce on her behalf, saved her from being sold to clear her husband’s gambling debts (p. 118). The practice of polygyny also complicates Lu’s likening of conjugal love during the Qing to that of nineteenth-century North America. Even though the aesthete Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1771–1843) “seemed to have enjoyed a brief perfect-match marriage” (p. 127) with his cousin Gong Yuchen 龔玉晨, their marriage soured about the time when Chen started expressing his infatuation with Guan Yun 管筠, the first of his talented concubines. Chapters four, “Managing Familial and Marital Relationships,” and five, “Practicing Polygyny,”

contain a multitude of counter-examples to perfect-match marriages, including men who rejected the perfect match ideal and criticized women's pursuit of talent since it might interfere with a wife's primary responsibilities to the household. There are also abundant examples of wives who expressed their bitterness at being abandoned by philandering husbands.

Despite its methodological shortcomings, there is a lot to admire in *Arranged Companions*. This elegantly written monograph contains a rich archive of Qing writings about marriage by both men and women. Although I might quibble with some of the interpretations of these primary sources, I am grateful to have these texts brought into conversation with each other. The neatly structured chapters of this monograph make *Arranged Companions* an ideal text to assign in undergraduate courses in order to humanize the practice of arranged marriage. Those using it as a textbook, however, should be aware that they will need to flesh out the context of domestic life for women to make it clear that the conjugal bond was just one aspect of a bride's affective life. As suggested by the female authors of literary *tanci* 彈詞 and other narratives, not all women bought into the romanticization of the scholar-beauty conjugal ideal. In many of these texts, the young female protagonists try to get out of marrying and turn to intergenerational filial bonds as well as friendships among women as their preferred sites of intimacy. However, its focus on the conjugal bond fills a lacuna in the scholarship on late imperial China and for this reason *Arranged Companions* is certain to be an influential text. After all, who would not like a good love story to balance out the realities of cloistering, polygyny, and the chastity cult, as well as the anxieties about marriage as a crapshoot for brides who had no power to choose their husband or parents-in-law, that serve as the focus of most current discussions of marriage during the Qing life?