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The phenomenon of the mail-order bride has been studied for a long time, with these studies often linking this form of commercialized marriage to women trafficking and the global sex trade. However, in recent decades, scholars have shifted their focus from viewing women solely as victims to recognizing their agency and motivations for migration through marriage. Building upon this shift, Monica Liu’s work, *Seeking Western Men*, delicately investigates Chinese women’s desire to marry Western men amidst China’s economic rise and the relative decline of the West. The book highlights the relationship between the development of Chinese feminism and the impact of China’s economic transformation on women over the past few decades. Liu cautions readers against applying Western feminism to examine Chinese women’s agency, as it may lead to misinterpretations and labeling them as anti-feminists. From Liu’s perspective, these women are undeniably feminists but practice a distinct style of “entrepreneurial Chinese feminism” (referred to as entrepreneurial C-fem), a term coined by scholars Angela Wu and Yige Dong in the article “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” (2019). While agreeing on the need to relinquish traditional feminine virtues like self-sacrifice and submission to men, entrepreneurial C-fem does not view women’s participation in the labor market as a means of empowerment, as Western feminism does. Instead, it encourages women to attain power through “controlling” men, as reflected in popular adages such as “women conquer the world through conquering men” and “a man shows his love for a woman by handing her his wallet.” Smart women adeptly manipulate their sexual appeal and cultivate domestic skills to attract men for material gains.

Readers might wonder whether this practice of gender relations can still be seen as feminism and how it could be interpreted as such in the Chinese context. To address these questions, Liu suggests that we understand the contemporary embrace of traditional gender roles by modern women within the context of China’s modernization. Unlike many societies in the West, China’s
modernization has witnessed a revival of patriarchal ideology that emphasizes feminine youth and domesticity alongside its economic growth. Additionally, Liu emphasizes a generational difference among women practicing Chinese local feminism. Entrepreneurial C-fem was prevalent among the older generation born before the 1979 one-child policy. Women of this generation experienced a period of social transition when China adopted a market economy, which shifted the responsibility of family care to women, confined them to the private sphere, and led to their economic independence from men. In contrast, “non-cooperative C-fem,” (also from Wu and Dong’s article), which emerged after entrepreneurial C-fem, gained popularity among women born after the 1979 due to improved education and career opportunities resulting from the sex-ratio imbalance caused by the one-child policy. Liu’s research subjects belong to the older generation, and their stories illustrate how state policies and social changes have shaped women’s attitudes toward gender ideologies in contemporary China, as well as why these modern Chinese women place their hope on Western men rather than Chinese men. Furthermore, these stories shed light on a new trend in Chinese women’s perception of Western men, wherein class has become a more significant marker of privilege than race and nationality. As the wealth gap between Western and non-Western countries narrows, Chinese women have become more selective in choosing which Western men to date. For example, a middle-class Chinese woman would reject the courtship of a working-class American man despite his privilege of whiteness and American citizenship.

Liu meticulously examines the driving factors behind Chinese women and Western men seeking each other as life partners. Contrary to the commonly held belief that women seeking foreign husbands are typically young, single, and economically disadvantaged, the women in Liu’s study primarily consist of middle-aged, divorced women with children. According to her, one major factor that motivates these women to pursue relationships with foreign men is their age. Gendered ageism, which devalues middle-aged divorced women, continues to persist in contemporary Chinese society, further diminishing their marriage prospects, especially when they have children. These women therefore face significant disadvantages and have little competitiveness compared to young, unmarried women in the domestic marriage market, leading them to consider foreign men as an alternative.

While Western men are portrayed by dating agencies as ideal partners who are more gender-equal and economically capable than local Chinese men, Chinese women are also presented by dating agencies as ideal wives for Western men. Western men who seek foreign wives through these agencies tend to be socially marginalized and/or divorced working-class men who struggle to find partners in the domestic marriage market due to their perceived lack of masculinity in the eyes of Western women. Western women are viewed as too modern and progressive to fit the ideal wife archetype, promoting Western men to find appeal in Chinese women who embody femininity and domesticity, thereby satisfying their desire for a “traditional family.”

Liu recontextualizes the concepts of masculinity and gender equality within local Chinese and American cultures, uncovering an intriguing perceptual gap between Chinese women and Western men. While it may appear fair for Western men to provide financial security while Chinese women offer care labor for Western men, both men and women discovered that their expectations did not align with reality after getting married. Chinese wives realized that their American husbands were not as wealthy as they expected, and American husbands found that their Chinese wives did not conform to their assumption of traditional values. American husbands expected their Chinese wives to work outside the home and contribute to the economic burden, while their
Chinese wives preferred to stay home and fulfill the role of a traditional housewife. Liu describes numerous cases in which Chinese women sought to end their relationships due to the men’s failure to ensure their financial security. Interestingly, even economically independent women expect men to bear the financial responsibilities and be the sole breadwinner in the family, as they view providing financial support as an expression of men’s masculinity. They frequently lamented that Western men’s masculinity, often associated with the “transnational business masculinity” embodied by wealthy business executives navigating global markets, only manifested during their dating trips in China and vanished entirely in married life. Consequently, many Chinese women feel deceived by Western men and dating agencies after tying the knot.

In Liu’s portrayal of the couple’s dating experiences, women are neither weak nor innocent. Rather, they exhibit strong autonomy in determining their relationships with the Western suitors. These women possess a keen understanding of how to maximize their material gain and sexual satisfaction by manipulating their sexual attractiveness and demeanor. These women are confident and straightforward in expressing their desires and boundaries, particularly those who are financially independent. In certain instances, women are involved in the extramarital affairs of wealthy Chinese men and become their mistresses. Seeking foreign men to date provides an opportunity to escape unhealthy relationships and start anew overseas. Additionally, some Chinese women choose to marry American men to secure their children’s education, as they believe that American education offers better opportunities and prestige in the future labor market.

Readers may be surprised by the stories in which Chinese women “played” their American suitors and caused emotional harm when they ultimately decided to end the relationship and requested the dating agency to arrange their next match. Although the Chinese women may be portrayed as overly realistic and materialistic, Liu’s argument does not imply a lack of the women’s sincerity in building relationships with Western men. In many post-marital scenarios, despite the Chinese wives’ complaints about the hardships of living with their American husbands in the United States, they still make efforts to maintain the relationship and express their gratitude.

Regarding the issue of representation of Chinese women and Western men in her study, Liu responds to readers’ curiosity in the epilogue of the book. She emphasizes that the individuals depicted in this book should not be seen as representative of the “average” women in China or men in the West. They do not serve as a typical representation of marriage migration (p. 189). In reality, only a small portion of the population in these countries participates in this unique form of migration. This is primarily due to the fact that Chinese women are required to possess a certain level of English proficiency to engage in relationships with Western men, and Western men face the risk of being perceived by Chinese women as “losers” unwanted by Western women. However, despite the limited scope in its representation of Chinese women, this study remains significant as Liu vividly portrays how the dramatic structural changes in China have influenced Chinese women’s lives, altered their values, and shaped their gender ideologies through these remarkable stories.

Conducting research with individuals involved in the dating industry in China, which capitalizes on the gray areas of law for profit, presents numerous challenges for the researcher. It took Liu over ten years to complete this ethnography, and this book demonstrates her efforts and perseverance in undertaking morally challenging fieldwork. Unlike many researchers who often conceal their emotions or the conflicts that arise between themselves and the informants, Liu openly discusses these aspects, refusing to present
a falsely harmonious relationship between the researcher and the research subjects as a successful outcome of fieldwork. Liu's work exemplifies reflexive ethnography by revealing the researcher's identity from the beginning and maintaining transparent power relations throughout her research. Readers can clearly observe how the researcher positions herself in relation to the owner of the dating company, as well as the women and men involved in this industry.

This book is an interdisciplinary study that spans sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. I highly recommend it to students, researchers, and general readers interested in the areas of transnational migration, marriage and family, masculinity, and Chinese and Western cultures. Through a geopolitical and feminist lens, this book provides valuable insights into the power dynamics between Asian women and Western men. It enriches the existing body of research on marriage migration in Asia by offering a wealth of rich ethnographic data. In the future, researchers interested in this field can further explore issues related to marriage migration in the digital age, such as the accessibility of matchmaking services to clients from different social classes.

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