Compulsory Heterosexuality in Mao Era China:

A Study of Queerness with No Name

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Abstract

Current scholarly literature regarding compulsory heterosexuality, including the landmark paper, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," by Adrienne Rich, situates almost all discussion of the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality in a Western context. In order to bridge this gap, I analyze the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality in Mao-Era China. Current theory is often inexorable from the discussion of the objectification of women for the service of men, but in Mao-Era China, the government made a conscious effort to raise women up as equals to men. In this paper, I investigate how compulsory heterosexuality is perpetuated in a society that insists on equality of the sexes. I additionally connect this investigation of the differences between Western and Eastern compulsory heterosexuality to differences in Western and Eastern queer culture, concluding that compulsory heterosexuality and queerness in a capitalist society is distinct from compulsory heterosexuality and queerness in a socialist society.

Introduction

In the landmark paper, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich (1980) identifies heterosexuality as a political institution that is perpetuated by the patriarchy to draw women to men, acting against what she describes as a natural inclination of women to other women. She delineates eight ways compulsory heterosexuality is enforced by male power, borrowing from Kathleen Gough's essay, "The Origin of the Family". I draw attention to "(2) *to force [male sexuality] upon [women],"* which Rich elaborates on at length, identifying the socialization of women as sexual objects for men as a driving force for compulsory heterosexuality. Steven Seidman, in a paper published about thirty years later, outlines the development of the concept of compulsory heterosexuality in the context of Western queer history. Still, he echoes Rich's original claim. "Heterosexuality," he writes, "binds women to men and defines women as incomplete without men, prescribing their desires, wants, and roles in a way that makes women's self-fulfillment dependent on their relationship with men (Brown, 1975; Rich, 1978/1993; Small, 1975; Solomon, 1975)." In his conclusion, he mentions briefly that the concept of heteronormativity, "at least in the United States, is often wedded to an exclusively cultural critique," acknowledging that the concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity tend to be situated in Western contexts.

In other words, Seidman acknowledges that the study of the concept of compulsory heterosexuality centers around the Western world. Thus, many of the studied perpetuations of compulsory heterosexuality may be inherently Western. Alternatively, some Eastern perpetuations of compulsory heterosexuality may be understudied. Thus, I situate Rich's ideas, specifically that of her assertion that the socialization of women to be reliant on men perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality, in the circumstances of China in the 1950s, which shifted gender

norms under Mao's ideals of equality between the sexes. Under his rule, he shifted national images of women to be more gender neutral, creating a genderless national body and discarding traditional femininity. I question how compulsory heterosexuality is perpetuated by a society that actively asserts that women and men are the same, and, acknowledging the institution of marriage as a vehicle of heteronormativity (as Rich and Seidman do in their respective papers), I perform a content analysis on Mao-Era marriage propaganda posters, analyzing both the clothing choices of the models and the messages attached to the posters. I can then examine whether compulsory heterosexuality was or was not uniquely perpetuated during Mao-Era China in a way that previous scholars have analyzed.

Queerness and Socialism

Current scholarly conversations on lesbian culture in China tend to be situated in post-socialist China, as Hongwei Bao (2020)'s *Queer China* is, or pre-modern/pre-Mao China, as Tze-Lan D. Sang (2003)'s *The Emerging Lesbian* is. Both books acknowledge the gap of queer literature in Mao Era China in their analyses, explaining that queer histories and stories were essentially erased from the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s records. Sang, citing Harriet Evans' research in her book, writes that "in the early years of the PRC, homosexuality was declared not to exist in liberated China" (Sang, 2003, p. 163). Bao, in his introduction to a section titled "The Emergence of Homosexuality," writes that "[homosexuality] vanished for several decades in the Mao era" (Bao, 2020, p. 29).

However, we must not interpret the lack of records of "homosexuality" as a lack of *queerness* during the Mao era. (For clarification, I will use the word "queer" in this paper as a description of close relationships outside of traditional heteronormative relationships (spouses), even if the relationships are not inherently romantic.) Maoist "sexual puritanism" was based on

the ideal of having men and women be equal in every way. Traditional femininity, such as patterned and showy clothes, were frowned upon by the socialist regime, and the national body of China became a unisex body in a Mao suit, which was a shapeless, modest outfit (Chen, 2001). Furthermore, relations between a man and a woman outside of wedlock were seen as scandalous and indulgent, and so close relationships between those of the same sex (homosocialism) prevailed. The Chinese population were labeled not as men or women but as comrades, no matter the sex or gender. Socialist China's culture, which involved "[departure] from bourgeois individualism and private property, [redefinition] of traditional regimes of family and kinship, and [challenge] of conventional gender norms," was a complete deviation from past heteronormative ideals (Bao, 2020, p.34). In his book, *Queer China,* Hongwei Bao even goes as far to say that Mao China's culture was, in the Western definition, "queer in itself."

The homosexual identity did not exist and was not spoken of, yet homosexual acts and romantic relations between members of the same sex continued. Though this statement seems contradictory, it is important to situate discussions of queerness with Chinese queer identity as opposed to the (Western) "global gay." The concept of "the global gay" asserts that ideas of sexual identity (such as names and labels) originate from the West as a result of neoliberalism and spread around the world, allowing others to exercise freedom by being able to label themselves as their preferred sexual identity (Bao, 2020). In contrast, queerness in China, as presented in work such as Shi Tou's *Women Fifty Minutes* or the online queer novel *Beijing Story*, is often unlabeled; queer characters are not defined by their queerness, nor do they label themselves as any specific identity, simply existing and enjoying a relationship that is "other" to the heterosexual norm. Bao points out that these stories are often imbued with a nostalgia for socialism, as the utopian relationships they portray stand in direct opposition to the

commercialization of heterosexual relationships, love, sex, and marriage under capitalism. Queer relationships are portrayed as a pure type of love asking for nothing else but love in return, while heterosexual relationships are portrayed as imbued with ulterior motives and social burdens. In this way, Chinese queer identity is inseparable from critiques of neoliberalism and nostalgia for socialism, a time when queerness was not labeled nor discussed, yet deep connections outside of heteronormative relationships still prevailed (Bao, 2020).

Studying Marriage to Study Queerness

In the following sections, I will study heterosexual marriage as an institution during the Mao era in order to study queerness. More specifically, I investigate how compulsory heterosexuality was perpetuated via Mao's propaganda for marriage. Queerness, especially in China, is not so much of an extension of heterosexual relationships as it is a desire for a relationship free from the burdens of a heterosexual relationship. In other words, Chinese queerness represents the relationships outside of heterosexual, socially acceptable relationships, such as marriage (Bao, 2020). By studying compulsory heterosexuality in propaganda for marriage during the Mao era, I can find the constructs that queer culture during this period sought to separate themselves from and therefore form a theory on how queer relationships and culture functioned, even without much existing data.

In an attempt to determine whether or not compulsory heterosexuality in Mao Era China functioned uniquely to compulsory heterosexuality in the US in the same time period, I will also evaluate my findings alongside Vandermeade (2015)'s findings in her paper, "Gender Roles in American Propaganda and Advertising, 1941 - 1961." Specifically, I compare the image of the wife in Mao Era China marriage propaganda to the image of the wife in post-World War II America.

Analysis of Marriage Posters in Mao Era China

In 1950, Mao passed the Marriage Law in his quest to grant emancipation to women. The Marriage Law deemed it illegal to force someone into marriage (as many women had been by their spouses and families in the past) and made it easier for husbands and wives to divorce each other by reforming relevant judicial structures. Mao intended for this law to support women's self-determination and agency through the restructuring and resocialization of marriage (Cong, 2016). In the following sections, I analyze a total of 12 posters from 1950 to 1955, right after the passing of the Marriage Law and at the peak of government propaganda for a new image of marriage. These posters are sourced from Chineseposters.net in a collection titled "Marriage Law."

Fashion

In 1950s China, being a model socialist citizen also included participation and support of China's industrialization. More brightly colored and patterned textiles were being produced in Chinese factories, and supporting China's growing economy by purchasing and wearing the fabrics became part of being a model citizen. Women often wore cotton tops with floral prints, while men tended to wear less colorful clothing, which seems to emulate the encouragement of traditional femininity (Chen, 2001). Out of the 12 posters, 5 have the brides/wives wearing floral patterns, while the other 7 have them wearing solid colors. In a poster titled "Wedding Dress," or "嫁衣" (Zhang, 1954) (which directly translates to "Wedding Clothes," not "Dress") a young girl seems excited to choose the fabric her wedding outfit will be made out of, and her friend also seems to be having fun helping her. In this scene, we can see that the government's push towards gender equality did not mean that women's desires for patterned or colored fabric distinct from

men's fabric was frowned upon. In fact, being excited to wear patterned fabric was something to be supported, as the purchase of patterned fabric supported China's industrialization.

"Wedding Dress," Zhang Fanfu, 1954

However, Mao Era China's disdain for traditional femininity can be seen in other details. In all 12 of the posters, every woman shown is wearing a boxy, shapeless top with loose pants, a style almost identical to what all the men in the posters are wearing. The shapes of the outfits prevent the sexualization of every woman in the drawing, whether they be the bride, a guest, or a family member. Furthermore, the similarity between the outfits of the women and the outfits of the men paint them more firmly as equals, contrasting past imagery and traditions (both in Eastern and Western countries) of brides being given to grooms as gifts, usually as a product of agreements between the families of the bride and groom (Hamon and Ingoldsby, 2003). In 8 of the posters, the brides have their hair cut to a short bob above the shoulder; in the other 4, the brides have their hair tied up either in braids or buns. These hairstyles reflected both a dedication to the maintenance of a gender neutral appearance and to a lifestyle that involved labor for the country, for long, untied hair could interfere with farm and factory work. In an interview of a woman who lived in Mao-Era China, she reflects, "After I was mobilized

"Freedom of marriage, happiness, and good luck," Yu Yunjie, 1953

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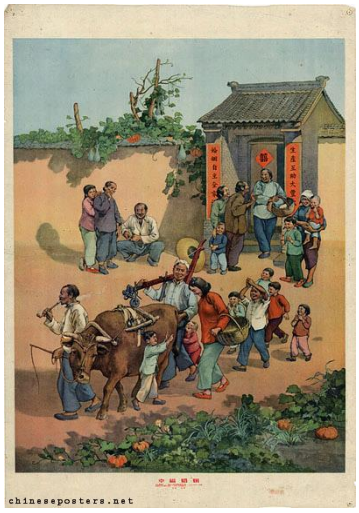
to go to the Production and Construction Corps, I could only wear men's used uniforms… Just as Chairman Mao put it, women are the same as men; when you walked around, you could hardly tell women from men if you did not look at their faces" (Yang and Yan, 2017, p. 68).

These accepted gender-neutral wedding outfits and hairstyles were a dramatic departure from the traditional wedding styles of the 1940s and earlier decades. Brides used to be dressed in long red dresses or robes, with elaborate gold or silver embroidery, floral adornments, and veils. Women looked every bit the part of the beautiful ornament that they were viewed as (Chen, 2013). Furthermore, weddings prior to the 1950s often involved much more fanfare, a contrast from the humbler weddings we can observe in the posters "A Happy Marriage" (Feng, 1953) and "Happy Marriage" (Lu, 1952), where weddings appear to resemble a lively tea party or parade with friends and family rather than a large event. In 3 of the other posters, the wedding ceremony may be implied to be skipped altogether, as the couple rides to the marriage registration office and happily celebrates their marriage alone, with their registrations in hand.



"Happy marriage," Shi Lu, 1952

In other words, marriage in Mao-Era China, as portrayed in these posters, was a humble union between two equals, where women tended to dress in gender-neutral clothing. Interestingly, women were not expected to dress in gender-neutral clothing at all times. Rather, the boxy shirt and trousers were seen as a "work outfit" — "androgynous clothing reserved for revolutionary work and national construction" (Chen, 2001, p. 153). Outside of working days, such as the weekend, women were encouraged by fashion magazines to indulge in new

women's fashions, which included more gendered items of clothing, such as colorful dresses and leather shoes (Chen, 2001, p. 153). Thus, observable femininity in clothing choices could determine whether one was doing work at any given moment.

The lack of new fashions and dresses in the marriage posters therefore yields an interesting conclusion: Marriage was *not* a private, personal affair, but *work for the country.*

Messages

In this section, I focus on some of the written advice and labels that accompany the visuals of the posters. About half of the posters give a simple description of what is happening in the picture, such as "A Happy Marriage" (1953), "Marriage Registration" (1950), or "Wedding Dress" (1954). I thus focus my attention on 4 posters which have text that directly address the viewer.

"Mutual assistance, more food; harmonious family, good production," Yan Jun, 1953

In 3 of these 4 posters, marriage, and by extension, the creation of a "harmonious family" are related to good "production." Good marriages are identified by two metrics: (1) the love the married families give to support each other in production, and (2) the collective contribution the family makes as a result. Both metrics can be seen in the poster "Mutual assistance, more food — Harmonious family, good production" (Jun, 1953), where two families (including not just the married couple, but children and other family members) each support their own family members in farming (on left) and raising animals (on

right), so that they can then share their goods with other families. Both of the families are painted as ideals to strive for, both in their cooperation with their own family members, and in their willingness to share with other families. This sentiment is also echoed in “Strive hard to produce with mutual help and mutual love” (Biwu, 1951) which shows a married couple working together to help each other produce and serve the country by growing, harvesting, and distributing wheat together.

The two spouses in Biwu’s 1951 poster are not inseparable in this narrative; in several panels, one is seen doing business without the other. The wife appears to speak to other women for companionship or work, and the husband does the same with other men. Another poster from 1953 reads, “A free and independent marriage is good; there is great happiness in unified production,” simultaneously encouraging spouses to be independent from each other while also working together in harmony to support the nation. Independence from your spouse is the focus of the advice in the 4th poster (Dezu, 1953), which reads, “In marriage, keep an eye on your own interests, and return radiant after registration.” Curiously, though the spouses are dressed more similarly and assigned similar responsibilities after marriage, Mao-Era China seems to endorse a sense of independence for

“Strive hard to produce with mutual help and mutual love,” Zhang Biwu, 1951

married women that has not been seen in prior decades (Cong, 2016).

Marriage in these propaganda posters was complimented not on the romantic love or passion between husband and wife, but on the collaboration between them and their families in producing goods for the nation. This message compliments the conclusion in the previous section; marriage was work for the country because it encouraged collaboration, enhanced efficiency, and provided love and support for workers to continue production.

"In marriage, keep an eye on your own interests, and return radiant after registration," Wu Dezu, 1953

In the 12 posters analyzed, the Mao-Era Chinese government used both implicit messaging (through the fashion choices made by the pictured women) and explicit messaging (through the poster text) in order to communicate a new image for marriage to women. Three messages stand out: (1) marriage must be resocialized as a union between equals, shown by the similar outfits and styles worn by both spouses regardless of gender, (2) marriage supports and is work for the country, and (3) both parties in a marriage should be collaborative, but independent.

Comparison to 1940-1980s America

In order to more clearly understand where this analysis fits in existing scholarly conversation about compulsory heterosexuality, which has generally been centered around Western (more specifically, American) ideals, I will compare the messages found in my analysis to messages found in posters and advertisements from 1940-1960s America. This time period

covers the same time period I studied in the previous section so we can analyze trends in the US and in China in parallel.

In the early 1940s, the US, focused on World War II, had a goal similar to China in the 1950s: getting women to serve the country, whether it be by joining the workforce or by serving in the military. However, while Mao-Era China encouraged the abandonment of traditional femininity in the prioritization of service to the state, the US did not. An ad from 1942 entitled "Keep Your Beauty on Duty" shows a woman with perfectly styled hair and makeup serving in the army, reinforcing the old idea that a woman's worth comes from her beauty (Vandermeade, 2015), even when she is working, an idea which is not seen in the Mao-Era marriage posters. In the 1950s, advertisements and propaganda vehemently pushed the idea of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers, urging women to return to the home after the war (Vandermeade, 2015). Moreover, advertisements targeted towards women in this decade centered on products such as makeup, diet supplements, and clothing, which taught women how to sexualize and objectify themselves to attract husbands with their beauty. This message stands in direct opposition to the messages of the Mao-Era marriage posters, which portrayed women as equal to men, with little emphasis on their attractiveness.

Adrienne Rich and other scholars came to the conclusion that compulsory heterosexuality was perpetuated by the socialization of women as subservient to men. While it would be bold to say such socialization did not exist in Mao-Era China, I posit that such socialization was not as strongly pushed on women through public magazines, posters, and images. Furthermore, the American image of a wife during this time greatly differed from the Chinese image of a wife. The Chinese wife is gender-neutral and independent from her husband, where the American wife is overtly sexualized and dependent on her husband, whether it be for

self-fulfillment (as seen in American makeup or weight loss advertisements) or monetary support (as seen in the lack of employed women in American advertisements). Therefore, I argue that compulsory heterosexuality in Mao-Era China was not as strongly perpetuated through the spread of the idea that women are "incomplete" without men nor the idea that women must find "self-fulfillment" in men, as Seidman (2009) had written.

Compulsory Heterosexuality in Mao Era China

What separates compulsory heterosexuality in Mao-Era China from compulsory heterosexuality in America is the presence of *male-identification.* Male-identification, as defined in Adrienne Rich's paper (where she quotes Ibid) is "the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation" (Rich, 1980, pg. 646). Ibid also describes it as the "colonization of one's self" (Rich, 1980, pg. 646). Combining this with Rich's earlier assertion that women are socialized as sex objects for men, Rich appears to be claiming that, under compulsory heterosexuality, women are taught to *want* to be objectified. This claim is further supported by the analysis of advertisements targeted to women in the 1940-1960s in the previous section, where women are told that they needed to be desirable and therefore needed certain products.

However, this narrative is missing in the Mao-Era marriage propaganda. In its place is encouragement to be independent from your husband, to support each other in work, and to maintain relationships with others outside of your marriage. Like in the US, heterosexuality was compulsory, but, unlike the US, it was not *everything.* Even prior to the passing of Mao's marriage law, when unhappy arranged marriages were commonplace, life was framed to be

worth living for wives because of the company of "sworn sisters" (Cong, 2016). While the presence of male-identification in Western compulsory heterosexuality diminishes the worth of relationships between women, the lack of it in Eastern compulsory heterosexuality causes there to be a focus on them, as a type of personal salvation from the hardships of marriage. In contrast, Western compulsory heterosexuality appears to paint marriage *as* a personal salvation.

As concluded in the previous sections, the Chinese government pushed marriage onto women for the sake of production for the state, whether it be the production of goods or the production of children, who may then be future workers. In other words, a citizen entered a marriage not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the country: a very socialist motive. On the other hand, American industries pushed marriage onto women for the production of the nuclear family, an essential social structure for the perpetuity of capitalism, as Marxists have theorized in the past (Healy, 2009). This innate difference in motive between Chinese propaganda and American propaganda stems from their differences in political systems. I posit that it is also this difference that separates Chinese compulsory heterosexuality and American compulsory heterosexuality. Through this lens, we can observe how Eastern compulsory heterosexuality and Western compulsory heterosexuality result in different queer cultures in America and China. As mentioned in the section "Queerness and Socialism," Chinese queerness reflects a criticism of capitalism, while Western queerness champions it, as seen in the spread of the idea of the "global gay."

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From my analysis of Mao-Era marriage posters, I conclude that Mao-Era compulsory heterosexuality was enforced by appealing to citizens' patriotism and desire to help their country, contrasting 1940-1960s American compulsory heterosexuality, which was enforced through male-identification in order to reproduce power structures within the nuclear family for the sake

of upholding capitalism (Healy, 2009). Both types of compulsory heterosexuality manifest in marriage, but, where Mao-Era marriage encouraged women to be independent in order to work more efficiently for the country, American marriage encouraged women to be dependent in order to maintain a power imbalance between husband and wife. Thus, I argue that compulsory heterosexuality under socialism and compulsory heterosexuality under capitalism are distinctly perpetuated, which may also be related to the differing queer cultures between the East and the West. I suggest that future studies further investigate this distinction through more studies on compulsory heterosexuality under socialist or communist countries, as the current scholarly literature focuses almost exclusively on compulsory heterosexuality under capitalism.

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