

5 Political Economy and Cultural Logics of Desire

An anthropology of the present should analyze people's everyday actions as a form of cultural politics embedded in specific power contexts.

—AIHWA ONG, *Flexible Citizenship*, 5

Desire, sexual or otherwise, is not a constant or a given, but is shaped in crucial ways by the very manner in which we think and speak about it.

—GREGORY PFLUGFELDER, *Cartographies of Desire*, 3

I had an acquaintance once whose brother told him, "Only hang around rich girls, then you can marry for love, but she'll be rich!" No kidding, this was a real person. Maybe not so different from the rationale for meeting people of a cultural "type" which fits your desires.

—SIMON, 2000

POLITICS AND CONJUGAL LOVE

Filipinas and Chinese women rarely objected to the idea that their relationships with U.S. men were related in part to political relations and the global flow of capital. U.S. men, by contrast, often objected strongly. Most men considered it distasteful to connect politics and market forces with personal lives and intimate relationships, or to propose that love might not be the single or most essential ingredient of a marriage. Women from China and the Philippines often articulated the importance of love, but were not so resistant to the idea that marriage involves personal and political considerations.

U.S. men's aversion to connecting political economy and marriage is linked to a common western notion of a domestic-public split, wherein the home and family provide refuge from the impersonal forces of capitalism and politics. Popular American views of the family cast it as "the antithesis of the market relations of capitalism; it is also sacralized . . . as the last stronghold against the state, as the symbolic refuge from the intrusion of the public domain that consistently threatens our sense of privacy and self-

determination.”¹ Of course, families and personal relationships are not immune from the state or the economy. Studies of international adoption and foreign spouses clearly illustrate that this is the case.² Yet certain ideologies serve to bolster the claim that family exists separately from—and in opposition to—impersonal political-economic forces.

U.S. men were often defensive when friends and relatives asked how they knew their partner was not looking for a “free lunch” or a “ticket to the U.S.,” or when critics suggested that the men really want “a maid and a sex slave.” Like adoptive parents who respond defensively to the question of how much an Asian adoptee “costs” or how much a surrogate mother “charges,” thus threatening to reduce what is conceived of as an intimate familial affair into a blatant market transaction,³ U.S. men are defensive about the pragmatic aspects of their relationships and about the market analogy that underlies the very notion of a mail-order bride. They defend their marriages as part of a “modern western ideal of the conjugal union, founded on intimacy and romantic love,”⁴ in contrast to critics who see correspondence marriages as precisely the opposite. The idea that marriage should be based on conjugal love is not universal. Anthony Giddens claims that “passionate love” is “more or less universal,” but that “romantic love” is “much more culturally specific.”⁵ Giddens suggests that romantic love as the foundation of marriage is a relatively recent idea that emerged in western Europe in the late eighteenth century with notions of individualism arising from capitalism, but others such as Jack Goody have argued that “conjugal love is more widely distributed ‘both in time and space.’”⁶ According to Kathryn Robinson, Giddens’s historical model runs counter to the way in which global technology has facilitated new types of marriage opportunities, such as brokered marriages, in which romantic love is presumed to be absent.⁷ As this chapter shows, however, many men and women in correspondence relationships valorize romantic love as the basis of the intimate bond of marriage, and defend themselves against contrary claims, while simultaneously expressing practical and pragmatic considerations that they associate with “older” or less “modern” forms of marriage.

This chapter builds on the previous one but grapples more closely with the cultural logics of love and desire. My aim is to point to the link between political economy and cultural logics of desire in Filipina- or Chinese-U.S. relationships; to illustrate the way in which men and women involved in correspondence relationships articulate a discourse on romantic love and its importance to their relationships; and to consider the limitations of perspectives that highlight the material and practical aspects of these relationships, view them foremost as a migration strategy for women, or express

skepticism about the possibility of love. Overall, I argue against privileging or prematurely dismissing a notion of romantic love, and against categorically opposing practical and material desires to emotional ones.

I argue that correspondence relationships are often based on ideals of romantic love or, at the very least, reflect attempts to define them in such terms. They are thus sorely misrepresented if boiled down to crude materialist motives. But it is also important to consider how and why love, romance, and marriage are linked—despite a strong American cultural reluctance to burst the fairy tale bubble and see it this way—to money, class, and power, as represented by and embodied in nationality, race, gender, and place at a particular time. In the previous chapter, I began to suggest some ways that political economy is linked to correspondence relationships. Here I ask how political economy can further our understanding of personal relationships without simply reducing men and women to opportunistic actors or eliding the issue of love and emotion.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND EVERYDAY LIVES

In her ground-breaking study of “flexible citizenship” and the transnational strategies of Chinese global capitalists, Aihwa Ong argues that it is insufficient to treat political economy as a backdrop for human relationships. She recommends that we consider the “*transnational practices and imaginings* of the nomadic subject and the social conditions that allow his flexibility.”⁸ The social and geographical flexibility of Chinese global capitalists is “an effect of novel articulations between regimes of the family, the state, and capital” (3). Ong avoids reducing her argument to economics or creating a model that views the local as cultural, the global as political-economic, with the former subsumed within or subordinate to the latter (4). She is concerned with “human agency and its production and negotiation of cultural meanings” (3) and with the “cultural logics” that make certain actions on the part of Chinese global capitalists “thinkable, practicable, and desirable” (5). In other words, she aims to bridge the common divide between practice and structure.

Since Ong’s study deals with Chinese global capitalists, it makes sense to merge cultural and political-economic analysis in discussions of their lives, residences, investments, families, and citizenships. But is the same move warranted when discussing individuals whose sense of personhood does not so explicitly revolve around markets and finances? What is the role of political economy in shaping values and desires when women and men’s motives are not primarily or explicitly economic?

In a section entitled “Working Women’s Dreams of Traveling Romance,” Ong describes working-class women in Shenzhen and other booming regions of South China and their attraction to overseas Chinese men “in charge of mobility” (153). She notes that the Chinese men from Hong Kong and elsewhere are perceived as “good catches” and as “a vision of capitalist autonomy and a source of new ‘network capital’” (154). Network capital, in contrast to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, alludes to the importance of *guanxi*, or potentially advantageous “connections,” which are especially important in the Chinese context in the reform period.⁹ Because of their potential to improve the circumstances of the woman and her family, “road-trip Romeos from Hong Kong can be an irresistible catch because he literally and figuratively embodies the *guanxi* (ideally through marriage) that will lead to the dazzling world of overseas-Chinese capitalism. Marriage to a traveling man enables one to expand one’s accumulation of network capital and can also benefit the members of one’s family, who eventually may migrate to the capitalist world, where their desires for wealth and personal freedom can be met” (Ong, 155–56). Ong writes that “mobility, wealth, and an imagined metropolitan future, *rather than love* or class solidarity, account for the lure of family romances” (156; emphasis added). The “romance of mobile capitalism,” Ong argues, “conjures up a felicitous brew of imagined personal freedom and wealth, a heady mix that young women imagine traveling men can provide the passports to” (156).

Although Ong’s main interest lies with overseas Chinese capitalists, her observations are more broadly applicable and her analysis raises a number of questions that are pertinent to correspondence relationships between U.S. men and Asian women. Are these relationships best understood as providing a “passport” to personal freedom and wealth, a bridge to the West for kin, or are there other salient issues that such an emphasis tends to eclipse? Ong’s description of women’s interests in “road-trip Romeos” highlights material or practical forms of desire and familial strategies of migration but downplays other more emotional dimensions of desire and dismisses out of hand the possibility of love.

My own analysis points to a more subtle rendering of—as Ong suggests in her own introduction—the cultural logics of desire in relation to wider political and economic factors. In contrast to Ong’s broad notion of “family romance,” which takes little notice of love and emotion, I ask how love and emotion are intertwined with political economy through cultural logics of desire. Political-economic approaches that neglect the possibility of emotion risk reducing an individual’s life-altering decisions to seemingly “ra-

tional" calculations that fail to recognize the humanity and sentiment of even the most ruthless and seemingly pragmatic acts.¹⁰ To separate politics from intimacy further reifies the western illusion of a divide between the personal and the political.¹¹ Given a western tendency to stereotype Asians as cold and calculating, it is important to consider emotions alongside pragmatics.

Network capital, a possible "bridge to America," and the potential for greater wealth and freedom are certainly attractive to many Chinese and Filipinas and to their kin in Asia. But do these attractions preclude romantic love—or other deep emotions—as Glodava and Onizuka and other critical representatives of international marriages as "trafficking in women" suggest?¹² Following Ong, we might posit that Filipina and Chinese women's understandings of U.S. men and of the imagined America they represent are *part of* the cultural notions of desire that are made thinkable, desirable, and practicable by a wider political economy. In contrast to Glodava and Onizuka's interpretation of men's pragmatic motives as excluding the possibility of loving and enduring relationships (see chapter 3), I argue that love can be no less of an integral concern in correspondence marriages than in any other marriages. What is distinctive is not that these relationships involve pragmatic and practical concerns (all marriages do), but that they allow the apparent contradictions and paradoxes to become apparent. Those involved in correspondence relationships are often defensive about romantic love because observers assume its absence, whereas in most other U.S. marriages, its presence may be taken for granted. Correspondence marriages thus threaten to reveal tensions that other marriages more easily ignore or mystify.

The following sections turn to U.S.-Philippine and U.S.-Chinese relations. I briefly highlight some socioeconomical, political, and historical aspects of China-U.S. and Philippine-U.S. relations that help to situate correspondence relationships. This discussion stresses how the local and the global are intertwined, and indicates ways that political economy and cultural logics of desire are jointly constituted.

PHILIPPINE-U.S. RELATIONS

As suggested in the previous chapter, Philippine-U.S. relations are informed by the colonial history of the Philippines, including the period of Spanish colonization, which lasted from the middle of the sixteenth cen-

tury until 1898. Spaniards introduced Catholicism to the Philippines, now considered the only “Christian country” in Asia. Catholicism still bears a strong influence today. It underlies the legal ban on divorce and the country’s pro-natal policies. Although divorce is not legally permitted, annulments on the grounds of “psychological incapacity” serve as a practical alternative for those—like Ben and Rosie—who have the financial resources and knowledge to avail themselves of it.¹³

In 1898, Filipinos fought for independence, the United States declared war on Spain, and following the Spanish-American War and intense debate in U.S. Congress, the United States assumed colonial rule of the Philippines. Several years of bloody resistance and brutal pacification ensued.¹⁴ U.S.-style education and English as the language of instruction were introduced. Citing Filipino historian Renato Constantino, Yen Le Espiritu writes, “With the use of U.S. textbooks, ‘young Filipinos began learning not only a new language but a new culture. Education became miseducation because it began to de-Filipinize the youth, taught them to regard American culture as superior to any other.’” (3).

U.S. sovereignty continued until 1946, when, following Japanese occupation, the war-torn territory was granted political independence, only to enter a new period of neocolonial dependency that continues today. After a brief period of economic development in the 1950s and 1960s, little growth took place in the 1970s. Rebellions and internal conflicts threatened stability, and the United States provided military and economic aid to fend off the perceived threat of communism. Ferdinand Marcos established martial law and received U.S. backing until he was toppled by the People Power movement in the 1980s.

The economic difficulties of the 1970s and 1980s set the scene for Marcos’s labor export policy, marking the third massive wave of migration from the Philippines. Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos sought temporary jobs abroad as seamen, construction workers, domestic workers, and other types of contract laborers. By the 1990s, one in five Filipinos was supported partly by economic remittances from abroad. Thus migrant labor grew from a “stop-gap measure” to a “vital lifeline for the nation,” and overseas contract workers were hailed as the nation’s “new economic heroes.”¹⁵

Marriage to a foreigner constitutes another important pattern of migration. By 1999, 2.5 million Filipinos made their permanent homes abroad.¹⁶ In the 1990s, an average of 17,000 Filipinos went abroad annually as spouses or fiancé(e)s of foreigners. About 92 percent of these fiancés/spouses were women, and the largest number, 70,828 (almost 40 percent),

were married or engaged to U.S. nationals.¹⁷ The Philippine government's Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) was established in the 1980s to protect and promote the welfare of Filipinos overseas and to "strengthen and sustain ties" among overseas Filipinos and between them and their country. A major CFO objective is to promote the economic role of Filipinos overseas in "national development," including investment in and remittances to the Philippines.¹⁸

Women's decisions to write to U.S. men reflect a certain cultural logic. The prestige, status, and assumed wealth associated with U.S. residence, light skin, western features, or a U.S. accent—reinforced by U.S. popular culture—help fuel such desires. In the summer of 2000, a Filipina friend gave me a copy of *Metro*, a popular glossy Filipino magazine that had run a main feature in 1998 on "the expat world in Manila." The magazine introduced readers to the "most eligible expat bachelors," described where they party, their relationships with Filipinas, and their impressions of the Philippines. Such articles blatantly promote white men as "prize catches" and leave little doubt about the existence of power relations that are inextricably linked to gender, race, class, and nationality.¹⁹ For Filipinas, who often consider people with fairer skin and western features "more attractive," or to women who associate white men with imperialistic or paternalistic power, political economy clearly promotes certain "cartographies of desire."²⁰

As mentioned in chapter 4, western notions of the Philippines as an ex-colony, as "Third World," or as "underdeveloped" contribute to the belief that Filipinas are more traditional, less modern, less influenced by feminism and other ills of western culture, and therefore more devoted to marriage and family than western women. For U.S. men, a rescue narrative juxtaposed with Asian images of sexuality and innocence, images from their own military experiences in the Philippines, or images of the nurturing Filipino doctor or nurse may feed into the attraction of Filipinas as prospective spouses. Men who write to Filipinas (often but not always Christian themselves) are often attracted to their Catholic and Christian values, a legacy of the Spanish era. They are also attracted to women's English language ability and their assumed "familiarity" or receptivity to western culture, legacies of the American colonial era. American popular cultural images of Asian women as beautiful, exotic, sexy, and submissive are also influential.²¹ Such an observation is not to reduce these relationships to artifacts of political economy, to rob them of their authenticity, or to question individuals' complex motives, but rather to consider how love and desire are constructed within a wider historical context of power relations.²²

CHINESE-U.S. RELATIONS

Relationships between U.S. men and Chinese women must also be viewed within a historical and political-economic framework. Unlike the Philippines, China was never officially colonized (with the exception of Hong Kong and Macao). Yet China experienced imperialism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as foreign powers established rights to Chinese treaty ports and markets through the “unequal treaties” following China’s defeat in the Opium Wars. The United States maintained good relations with the Republic of China (ROC) during the first half of the twentieth century, under the leadership of the Nationalist Party (KMT) led by Dr. Sun Yatsen and Chiang Kai-shek. This ended when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power and allied the People’s Republic (PRC) with the Soviet Union. The United States and the PRC were further alienated when the United States established official ties with Taiwan, where the KMT established itself as China’s rightful leadership. The establishment of the PRC in 1949 was followed by several decades of Cold War between China and the West and the maintenance of a rigid “closed door” policy.

Were it not for the death of Mao in 1976 and the subsequent era of economic reform, it is unlikely that U.S.-Chinese correspondence relationships would exist today. With the “post-socialist” open door policies came a thaw in U.S.-China relations. The establishment of Special Economic Zones in the 1980s created new possibilities for economic relations between China and the West. Foreign investments and joint ventures, and new cultural and academic exchanges, also facilitated closer ties. Although Chinese officials still resist labeling the economic changes as “capitalist,” they clearly veered away from communist ideals of state ownership and communalism. Many westerners found such changes positive and reassuring. Burgeoning private enterprises, incentive systems, and international investment led to a phenomenal increase in the standard of living of many urban Chinese. Rural-urban migration increased as a result of urban employment opportunities and decreased controls on internal migration. The loosening of state control over popular culture and the arts alongside growth of consumer opportunities led to phenomenal changes over the past two decades, including far greater exposure to the West.

The United States is considered a desirable destination for many Chinese. The most common routes through which Chinese citizens legally come to the United States are by way of student visas, relatives’ sponsorship (including spouses), and fiancé(e) visas. The opening up of China has meant greater visibility, communication, and interest between two coun-

tries whose citizens are no longer so apprehensive or suspicious of the labels “capitalist,” “communist,” or “socialist.” For many Chinese women, the United States is imagined—as Ong notes—as a place for freedom and opportunity. At the same time as U.S. men “discovered” China as a source of “more traditional wives,” so did overseas Chinese men from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.²³

Unlike many U.S. men involved with Filipinas, men’s interest in Chinese women was not so directly influenced by military experiences. None mentioned friends or acquaintances married to Chinese women before they had established their own relationships. One commented that all he knew about China was from eating at Chinese restaurants in the United States. A few men cited their experiences as tourists in China, acquaintance with someone who taught English there, participation in an academic exchange program, or business trips to China as factors that prompted their interest in China and made marriage across cultural borders more imaginable. Most men I knew had never been to China before they wrote to Chinese women. Many mentioned—as did those who wrote to Filipinas—that they had “always been attracted to Asian women.” Several men had written to women of different nationalities and eventually decided to write to a Chinese woman. A few men who were attracted to Chinese women did not distinguish between women from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, or women from rural or urban regions, but assumed that they were all “traditional.” The recent popularity of Chinese films in the United States did not motivate men to look for Chinese spouses, although many men became interested in Chinese films, praised and admired the actress Gong Li, for example, and paid close attention to U.S. films with Chinese themes after they had established a relationship with a Chinese woman.

The infrastructural framework for introducing mainland Chinese women to U.S. men has had less longevity and is less commercially developed than the networks for introducing Filipinas to American men. Almost all the men I met who corresponded with Chinese women had met them over the Internet (including informal chat groups), whereas most men involved with Filipinas had met through printed publications and initially communicated through the postal service.²⁴

A few men said they had not selected prospective pen pals by nationality, but were attracted to the fact that the Chinese had “no religion,” and a few mentioned Buddhism or “spirituality.” Several mentioned their attraction to Chinese women, whom they considered especially bright, educated, and devoted to the family, or because of their “feminine qualities.” Men’s descriptions of Chinese pen pals, wives, or fiancées often reflected

respect for women's willingness to work hard, their high educational attainment, their "go-getter" attitudes—features of the Asian "model minority" image in the United States. Several men expressed pride in their wife or girlfriend's Chinese patriotism, even when they had differing views regarding, for example, the Chinese Embassy bombing in Belgrade in 1999, or the detained U.S. spy plane in 2001. I was surprised when one very outspoken man equated his wife's family's strong military and Chinese Communist Party background with his own family's military and Republican Party involvement in the United States. Rather than view such backgrounds as a source of conflict, they considered their strong political convictions a common bond and a provocative source of lively discussion and debate. Many men reported "falling in love" with China when they visited. They raved about the food and the warm welcome from their fiancée's relatives, and they reportedly missed China when they left. Men who wrote to Filipinas, in contrast, often described Filipinas' Christianity or Catholicism, simple way of life, or conservative family values (including virginity and opposition to divorce) as attractive features. Many men complained about their difficulties with transportation (or their sense of danger from the speed and traffic) in both China and the Philippines. Men who had traveled in the Philippines complained about the food, weather, and bureaucratic red tape; when they left, they missed their wives or girlfriends, but few spoke of "falling in love" with the place.

SIMON AND XIAOLI

Simon is a fifty-year-old investment banker from Florida, who began a new career in education and moved to the Midwest because his Chinese wife had friends there. When I first met him over the Internet, he had been married to Xiaoli, a forty-three-year-old high-school teacher from northeastern China, for just under a year. Simon had previously been married for fifteen years, then divorced for ten, when he decided a few years ago that he would like to remarry if he met "the right person." Xiaoli had been married for fifteen years and had been divorced for three when they met. She had a nineteen-year-old daughter in China, and Simon had grown children in the United States. Simon's description of meeting Xiaoli illustrates the blending of emotional and practical considerations into a relationship that is thinkable and attainable. It is also noteworthy for Simon's ideas about Xiaoli's Chinese femininity, and for the way in which Simon envisions "love" fitting in.

When asked why he decided to look for a partner through correspondence, Simon explained,

I can only speak for our own case, of course. My own choice to find a foreign woman started with practical considerations of the cultural type. In other words, I knew if I fell in love with someone who tended to view a husband as "competition" or "an obstacle to success," we'd have big problems. I was once in love with someone [an American] . . . who had an ingrained belief (or feeling) that she was a victim and all men were basically perpetrators. I actually tried to marry her, but just couldn't take being the "bad guy" 24 hours a day. So, my decision was to find a woman who would be really good for me, and let me be good for her, even if it were someone I had to "learn" to love.

At first, Simon took a pragmatic approach to meeting women. "I originally wanted to collect 4 or 5 'prospects,' based on what I could tell of their personality and character, then choose the one with whom I had the best interpersonal 'chemistry.' That plan didn't come to pass because [Xiaoli] bowled me over completely after our first meeting." Commenting further on his early motivation to meet women abroad, Simon noted that "our culture has some barriers to successful relationships. I wasn't meeting anyone I was interested in here, so I decided to look abroad, via the Internet. After corresponding with several people from different countries, I decided that, in general, women from China had an outlook and upbringing that seemed more supportive of happy long term relationships, so I focused on China about 2 years ago." Simon looked at listings of women of various nationalities, but quickly developed a preference for Chinese women. "The first difference I noted about Chinese women showed up in the way they write their classified ads! When describing their characteristics, they overwhelmingly noted 'devoted to family,' 'soft,' 'kind,' 'virtuous,' and so on . . . old-fashioned 'feminine' virtues which don't get as much prominence in ads from other countries. Also, they were seeking men with the virtues of 'kindness' and 'good habits' more than anything else such as wealth, age, ambition and so on." He corresponded with "some really nice women, but most of them were almost twenty years younger than me." Then he got "sidetracked by a local girlfriend" and lost track of most of the women he had written to. He resumed his "search" and

wrote a letter to one woman who was older and not as gorgeous as the rest, but whose face seemed to have a lot of character. That did it! One of [Xiaoli's] . . . students had posted a 'net ad for her on a dinky local service with not-so-hot photos, but once we got into an e-mail correspondence, the relationship took off. We started calling, and I went to see her [five months later]. . . . We hit it off even better in person, and

started to plan for the K-1 visa process. There were a few snags, and I went to China again this [spring] to help her with paperwork and family matters, and finally got her through the interview at the Consulate, and flew back to America with her [early in the summer].

Early in the process, Simon thought he might meet someone whom he would “learn” to love. Recalling his earliest encounter with Xiaoli, however, he felt “very lucky that I didn’t have to learn to love anyone, we just jelled right away, and she happens to have the strongest character of any of the women I corresponded with.” It is worth noting that Simon’s description of how he and Xiaoli “jelled right away”—and his sense of the inevitability of their relationship (“that did it!” “the relationship took off”)—is in keeping with Giddens’s description of marriage and romantic love. As Giddens describes it, romantic love involves an “intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, as it is said, ‘complete.’”²⁵

According to Simon, Xiaoli was “seeking an American man not so much for the economic opportunity (she’s pretty well-off herself), but because they have a reputation for being romantic, democratic husbands, and because as a divorced [woman in her forties], her chances of a remarriage in China were pretty slim. So far, it looks like we both made the right decision, cultural bumps and all.” Simon stressed the importance of love (even as he approached it with a practical attitude), alongside other considerations that he associated with “Chinese culture.” As Simon explained, “I hope I made myself clear: I wouldn’t marry someone I couldn’t love, but this time around I wanted very much to do my first ‘screening’ based on the practical aspects of a long-term relationship . . . could I respect her in every way, is she tender and respectful to her mate, do we agree on the purpose of a marriage, is ‘a happy home’ the top priority, and so on. The Chinese idea of marriage is much like the America of 50 years ago, and I like it.” Returning to the tension between “pragmatic” arrangements and love marriages, Simon concluded, “I’ve also heard that arranged marriages work out better than we in America would expect . . . something about the older folks having more sense about who’s good for each other than the young ones in the throes of heat.” His reference to young people “in the throes of heat” is reminiscent of Giddens’s distinction between passionate love, “which may lead the individual, or both individuals, to ignore their obligations” and which is “religious in its fervor” and can be seen as a deterrent to marriage, and “romantic love,” which is more closely associated with virtue, less with sexual passion, and more compatible with marriage.²⁶

TRUE LOVE?

It would be impossible to “prove” whether love is present in these relationships. Even when the individuals claim “it is there,” the skeptic can assume someone is pretending. There is no question, however, that a discourse about romantic love is often present among couples involved in correspondence relationships. Simon’s account is one of many that seem to contradict the claim that men who meet women through correspondence do not want enduring and loving relationships. Like many women I met, Xiaoli had a successful career, a high income, and a good standard of living in China. Although we do not hear it in her own words, she does not appear to support the assumption that “mobility, wealth, and an imagined metropolitan future, *rather than love*” account for Chinese working women’s attraction to overseas Chinese or foreign men.²⁷

Both scholarly and popular representations of correspondence relationships often express doubt about the existence of love or seek to separate cases of “true love” from those that are motivated primarily by material, pragmatic, or practical considerations. This attempt to polarize love and pragmatics and to represent them as discontinuous represents a particularly western perspective and bias. Underlying such a dichotomy is the idea that “true love” is somehow selfless and “pure,” and not only incompatible with but also diametrically opposed to pragmatic or practical concerns.

Practical considerations and opportunism (the idea that a person can benefit from such a match materially, for example) can call true love into question and imply that it is false, impure, or legally constitutive of marriage fraud. Western critics of arranged marriage have implicitly or explicitly based their moral claim to superiority on the idea that a “love match” is superior, more “modern,” or more genuine. This dichotomy implies first and foremost that love is or should be a required ingredient of all marriages. It also implies that love is somehow antithetical to arranged marriages, that love is either present or not from the beginning, rather than viewing it as an emotion that may take different forms and that has the potential to grow and develop after marriage. It also assumes that love is measured and expressed by universal rather than different cultural standards.

As Ellen, the Chinese manager of ChinaMiss introduction service, explains to prospective clients, expressions of love may vary cross-culturally:²⁸

Chinese seldom use the word “love,” and we never use it as casually as people in the U.S. seem to. To us, love is not demonstrated by a word, but rather by how we treat our spouse, our family and each other. Usually, you will wait a long time before you hear a Chinese girl say, “I

love you!" This has nothing to do with how she feels, or whether she truly cares for you. It's a cultural difference.

In China, (*yuen*) the concept of "romantic love" is thought of more as "devoted commitment." . . . When "yuen" is present between you and a Chinese girl, you will know that she loves you by the way she treats you. And likewise, she will judge how much you care for her not by what you say, but by what you do. There is an old saying that goes: "It's easy for someone to move their lips, but keep your eyes on their feet." In other words, actions speak louder than words.

Men often cited the 50 percent divorce rate in the United States as a factor in the decision to look for a marriage partner from abroad. The desire for "enduring relationships" was thus one of the primary reasons U.S. men cited for their interest in women they believed placed a strong value on marital commitment. Ricky, a forty-year-old man, told me of his divorce four years earlier from his American wife of six years:

I thought we had a good marriage. We were happy and we had two great kids. But we ran into a rough spot—I won't get into that—but to make a long story short, she left. Just walked out. She didn't want to work things out. If it was up to me we'd still be married. I thought I'd never marry again. But later, I started thinking I want to get married, but to someone who is as committed to marriage, someone who believes in their vows, and thinks marriage is sacred. . . . I had a co-worker who had been happily married to a lady from the Philippines for ten years. So I got the idea of joining a pen pal club and started writing to some ladies there.

Many men felt they had "failed at love," and many blamed this on feminism and the "unrealistic demands" or "lack of commitment" of western women. Love American style did not bring the long-term and stable marital relationships these men desired, and underlying their desire to meet Asian women was often an expressed pragmatic and emotional concern for relationships "that will last." One forty-five-year-old, twice-divorced man, who described himself as a politically conservative born-again Christian, was attracted by an ad in a singles publication that described Filipinas as "Women who believe in the Ten Commandments every day of the week, not just on Sunday." Mick, twice-divorced and insecure about relationships with western women, engaged to a Filipina who had worked as a domestic worker in Singapore, explained, "My understanding was that Filipinas held to a higher standard, traditional family and marriage values. I was correct. Also, I have always been physically attracted to Asian women." Jimmy, after five years of marriage to his American wife, came to the sudden realization that she "didn't want kids and would have made a bad mother any-

way." Like Ben (chapter 4), he decided that his chances of finding someone who shared his family goal would be better among Asian women.

When I sent an e-mail message to members of UFG asking, "How [do] different people see 'love' fitting in? How important is it? Where and when do/did you start to see it? Is love a necessary ingredient in your relationship?" I received a variety of responses. Mick, a lively and good-spirited member of the group, replied, "I found that last question objectionable. I'm not offended really, but I am surprised that you asked if 'love was necessary.' To me, that implies that a Fil-Am relationship does not require 'love' to succeed. . . . Is that what you meant? I can't speak for anyone else but love is of primary importance to me. Without love, there is really is no relationship." JJ also commented at length about the importance of love in correspondence relationships and marriages. The absence of direct discussion of the issue, he said, may be misleading.

I hope that the attitude I display when I write to fellows regarding issues with courting a Filipina does not mislead you. I talk about a lot of issues, but I don't talk about love much. It is not that I consider it off topic, in fact the bottom line is that this is really the number one topic. I write with the attitude that of course they love the women so I don't need to question that. Love . . . is a topic all of it's own and could generate a whole lot more traffic than the INS does. :) Also, I consider that my understanding of love at the time that I asked my wife to marry me was only mediocre, so who am I to talk.

The only exception to his silence regarding love, JJ wrote, based on his experience on two lists with several hundred members, "is when someone has displayed some sort of 'ugly male syndrome' and it is obvious that they have bit into the 'Mail Order Maid You Can Have Sex With' scenario. Or something along those lines. Thankfully that does not come along often, only twice that I have come across." Yet hinting at the "pressure" that men may exert on one another to conform to the idea that "love" is the single key ingredient, JJ also points to the way in which the list discourages discussion of blatant pragmatic or practical concerns.

How often it [the "ugly male syndrome"] really happens I have no idea because if someone joins the list and reads for a while before posting it will quickly become apparent to them that their attitudes would not make them a favorite if they open up honestly. Of the two that spoke up, one was stupid enough to just assume we were all the same. . . . The other did not realize what he was like until we all took great care to point it out to him. But I don't think most people are that unconscious so I'm sure we have missed a few more, probably helped them on their

nasty way by giving them lots of good info and helping them to refine their masks.

Especially interesting in JJ's statement is the idea that men put pressure on one another to treat love (as opposed to sex) as the primary basis of their relationships: "I can't say that others dance around the love subject on the list for a similar reason that I do, but it seems most avoid direct discussion until their relationships have flowered to the point that they can confidently proclaim that they do love the woman, and that she loves him."

Kevin, whose Chinese wife spoke little English and who had initially communicated with her largely through translators, was the most openly pragmatic man I met. He explained his decision to correspond with Chinese women and the relevance of "love" as follows:

Each marriage is different so it will be hard to say what motivates a person to marry and to marry outside their normal social structure. As for myself I think I am a little more practical than a lot of people when it comes to love and marriage. Even tho my wife and I had very little time together when we started this process we both believed that a marriage can work without the pheromones running wild.

Our letters showed some desires in what we were looking for in a mate and there was no illusion created by raging hormones. We both talked about this and were honest that we both were looking for a strong friendship first and tolerance for each other. Since I have been married before under the guise of Love both fell apart because of our strong physical attraction instead of the deeper person. I hope you are able to understand what I am saying, sometimes it is hard to put our feelings into words. My grandfather put it best when he told about marriage and what we need to look at to make it work. He had said that marriage was like a bowl of oatmeal and that love was like sugar on the cereal which made it sweeter and more desirable but without the oatmeal it would have no nutritional value. I guess that is the way I look at my marriage now that when it started it was just the oatmeal but as we get to know each other it adds the sugar to it.

Kevin wrote to me again the next day, expressing concern that perhaps he had overemphasized "oatmeal" at the expense of "sugar." "After writing to you I wondered if my rational side was the only side that showed in my response or if I was able to express that like sugar emotional bonds make it do much better and there were some there even after knowing each other for such a short time . . . what I am saying is that I was looking for more oatmeal than sugar. I then flew to China where I met my wife to be and found the oatmeal with a little sugar." Reflecting on his and his wife's motivations, he wrote:

I think we were both looking for someone to share a more settled life with the occasional adventure. I think that we both wanted to find someone that understood the hardship of making a good marriage and would deal with the good times as well as the bad times. I personally was looking for someone that would accept me for who I am and not for what they can get out of me and that was another reason I looked for someone closer to my age. She understood that because of my heart that I was unable to work and for us to live together with her daughter that she would have to work some since my income was not that great and little chance of it becoming larger.

Charlie voiced another dissident view on the U.S.-Filipino list. He anticipated that his post would be unpopular, and indeed many wrote back to express their disagreement:

I might be in trouble with other members here but i've got to say it. i'm wondering how much is love and how much is infatuation among age difference men ladies. if a man is 40+ he probably is going through mid life crisis. we start thinking of death. most of our life is over. then some 20 year old filipino lady comes into our life well man oh man who wouldn't jump at the chance to marry and say your in love with someone that nothing sags on? couldn't that be infatuation? or a second childhood for an old fart? my wife and I know and have admitted we didn't really love each other when we married. I liked and was infatuated with her. I talk about old verses young here but I would probably marry a kid too. but what happens when the man gets hard of hearing or some cancer etc? probably all of us know some filipino lady who divorced or had extra marital affairs etc. they are people with the same desires etc as any other woman. if there's big age difference they will someday maybe hate the aged husband. love or infatuation? ticket to the usa? a better job for the family back home? who knows the answers?²⁹

Despite his seemingly cynical outlook, Charlie still expressed love for his wife. Responding to the questions about whether he and his wife were now in love, their age difference, and how they met, Charlie answered:

i'm sure we are in love more now than ever before. i'm 43 she's 42. we met through our churches singles. pen pal type. we've had enough problems though. she is a former maid and independent before we were married. she is stubborn and so am I. before we were married she wrote to me that filipinas never divorce but there's a reason for that they have a law against it. my wife last year filed for divorce. after I pleaded etc we called it off. I never felt worse in my life thinking i'd lost her. we still have our problems what with women in the philippines running the home and money I had problems with her trying to handle all the money. but hey she's pretty good at it. we've been married 13 years . . . I love her. I hope we can work out differences. i've got to learn to let her

take charge or at least let her think she's in charge. we have 2 kids and they need us both.

Many men mentioned their physical attraction to Asian women. As I argued in the previous chapter, sexuality is an important issue, but it should not be overemphasized at the expense of other issues. Men, and many introduction agencies, emphasized women's "family values," modesty, purity, and innocence rather than their sexuality or sexual availability. Women's "feminine qualities," as Simon put it, often refer more explicitly to their prospective roles as wives and mothers than as lovers. JJ wrote of one of his wife's Filipina friends who was getting divorced, "They were about the same age, the man was looking for some wild Asian sex and married a very proper girl who is not very adventurous in bed." Images of Asian women's sexual attractiveness no doubt play a role in the cultural logic of their desirability. Even more than love, however, there is often an absence of overt discussion of sexuality on the chat groups. Sex is often explicitly "off limits" as a topic mainly because its mere mention threatens to undermine a concerted effort to represent and construct such relationships as respectable and based on conjugal love and to raise the specter of what JJ called the "ugly male syndrome."

THE PRAGMATICS OF DESIRE

For the women, meeting a foreign man was desirable for a number of practical reasons, but this did not necessarily preclude feelings of love. Although Chinese women are often quite pragmatic about the appeal of foreign men and the desire to live abroad or to provide an opportunity for their children to go abroad, they seemed unwilling to sacrifice themselves for "just any" foreign men, nor were they willing to forego the possibility of love, caring, and affective ties to their prospective partners. Some Chinese women said they had first considered writing to overseas Chinese who would share more of their culture and background. A number of them came to the conclusion that overseas Chinese are often pickier ("they want women who are very young, very beautiful and have never been married before") and more controlling ("they want a very obedient and traditional wife"), so that non-Chinese men might be preferable.

While the promise of life abroad appealed to some women, some Chinese women and even more Filipinas expressed a preference to remain "at home" (in China or the Philippines) with a foreign husband. Some considered going abroad as a means to escape or loosen family controls and decrease their

obligations, rather than as a way to mobilize resources as “network capital” for the good of the family. Examples of women who wanted to marry foreigners and “stay at home” varied. Most Chinese women assumed that, if they married a foreigner, they would have little choice but to go and live abroad. One Chinese woman, a young Communist Party member in Shenzhen, said she hoped to meet a foreign man who would stay in China and love her country as much as she does. Several other Chinese women expressed a desire to meet an overseas Chinese or a foreign man who worked in China or was at least familiar with the language or culture so they could both feel at home in both locations. As noted, the vast majority of Chinese women believed foreign men would be more understanding and respectful of the fact that they were divorced. Divorced women, and also women in their thirties who had never been married, spoke of western men as more open-minded and less controlling than Chinese husbands. Most thought foreigners were more romantic, open, and expressive, and knew how to treat women “like ladies.” Some spoke of western men as better educated, more cultured, and more intellectual than Chinese men (see chapter 6).

Far more Filipinas than Chinese women I spoke with hoped to settle with their husbands in the Philippines, perhaps because they were familiar with such cases; many expressed ambivalence about the difficulties (e.g., loneliness, isolation, food, climate) of life in the United States. They were less attracted to the green card or to American citizenship than to a way of life that marriage to a foreigner in the Philippines could afford. I met several Filipinas who had experienced married life in the United States and had opted to return to the Philippines with their husband and children because there they could hire household help.

Filipinas most often referred to foreign men as handsome and kind men who know how to “take care of” their wives. Foreign men (often treated as a homogenous group) are thought to be romantic not only at the beginning of a relationship, but also after marriage. I was told that American men are less likely than Filipinos to have mistresses. Marriage to a foreigner can mean greater social freedom for his wife than many Filipino husbands allow. As Rosie explained, a foreign husband in the Philippines meant that many women envy you, but it also meant that other women would be interested in your husband because of his assumed wealth.

DISCERNING LOVE

The possible association of foreign partners with wealth and symbolic and “network capital” does not preclude the possibility of love. Indeed, the per-

ceived “attractiveness” and desirability of foreign partners may be, or may become, the basis of love. The association of foreign men, regardless of their actual socioeconomic standing, with wealth and personal freedom, or the simple fact of a man’s light skin (in the Philippines) or his passport (in China) may be the initial basis of interest and attraction, but this does not rule out, and indeed may provide the basis for, real or imagined feelings of love, affection, and devotion.

Men writing to Filipinas sometimes expressed concern about a specific woman’s sincerity and love. In an e-mail message to the group, Roland wrote of his concerns about his Filipina fiancée. “The big thing with me was I was not sure if she was sincere about being in love with me. As long as I know she does love me I am willing to be patient and understanding. I told her from the beginning that we would have problems, everyone does, but if we loved each other and were honest with each other we could work anything out.”

JJ replied, “And it is so difficult to find out if she does love you. I don’t know about your fiancée but asking did not fill me with warmth and security. :) Has she told you she does much? I have heard from many that it is part of the culture not to say ‘I love You.’ . . . But [my wife] has become accustomed to it in our house, in this culture and she kind of likes it. :) . . . But while we were courting all I could ever get out of her was a very low spoken, sheepish verbal admission.” Roland responded, “[my fiancée] is a lot better at telling me she loves me but she does the same as your wife. She just whispers it over the phone. That took a couple of months. But she does tell me a bunch of times in letters.”

Filipinas and Chinese women sometimes seemed to avoid the topic of love, but both (especially Filipinas) often spoke openly of their love for their partners. Both gave me piles of letters to read in which they and their fiancés wrote of love. Some women’s letters and messages to me were even signed “love.” Although verbal and other *expressions* of love may be learned in the process of correspondence and marriage, the concept of love and romance is not foreign to China or the Philippines. Inexpensive paperback romance novels are extremely popular among Filipinas in the Philippines and abroad, and like women’s own narratives, they often stress the importance of individual freedom and personal choice of a marriage partner.³⁰

Malou was one Filipina who responded passionately to Charlie’s assertion (above) that many pen pal relationships are based on infatuation but not love. She used her own story to oppose his more cynical view. Malou had met her husband four years earlier, had written to him for two years, had been married for two years, and had been living with him in the United

States for less than a year. Her excerpts of Charlie's comments are indicated by italics and her own responses follow.

> i'm wondering how much is love and how much is infatuation among age difference men ladies.

For D (I ask him) in a rate, [how much] he loves me 8 out of 10. (not enough for me). As for me . . . I don't know maybe more than your mind can reach. It's a little bit different between us. Because I just turn 18 when we started. Excuse myself for saying this. But at that time I was very competent in school . . . I was in the top 10 of teachers list of student who will make great career in the future . . . I was busy in high school but when D came into my life everything change. It changes to suit "his" taste. This is a fact!

> if a man is 40+ he probably is going through mid life crisis. . . . who wouldn't jump at the chance to marry and say your in love with someone that nothing sags on?

This I don't know. You know [better] yourself. Don't get me wrong you could be right. In all Fil-Am marriages but on a man's view of point only.

> couldn't that be infatuation?

This made me laugh!!! . . . the first picture D sent me was with his daughter, he got a mustache and he is not that kind of American you can see in Guess jeans commercial. It's just a total "eeeeeehhhhhh" (looks like a maniac). But when I read his letter it runs through my veins. I know there is something to this man right away.

> or a second childhood for an old fart?

Yap this is a fact. What else do you expect a man trying to put off his gray hair by coloring it (D does this) to make sure he still looks cute with a darker hair. Telling silly things. Chewing straws to get my attention. Maybe he was thinking I have to do this. Young people do this habits. Old people don't.

> but what happens when the man gets hard of hearing or some cancer etc?

Put him in a nursing home!!!LOL This is just something couples like we are . . . should be ready for by now. This is something you have to be prepared of before taking the plunge. Which I think D is lucky with me. I already thought about this before we got married. . . .

> probably all of us know some filipino lady who divorced or had extra marital affairs etc. they are people with the same desires etc as any other woman. if there's big age difference they will someday maybe hate the aged husband.

This is true. "WE" (Filipina) are just woman too. We think of men (just as you guys think of women), we like that "night in shining armor type" a suit and tie type, sporty, and "prince charming" type. But the thing about it is we are already MARRIED. The best we can do is "I am just appreciating the beauty I saw" that's bout it. For myself it's rooted in my mind "love" is something you feel only once and when you feel it you don't know that it is called love." . . . But the thing is if it take me almost 2 years to know A LITTLE BIT of my husband and still wonder if he really loves me. How long will it take to trust and know this new person??? I have locked my mind in beleiving that it take's lifetime to really know a person, and if that's the case one man is enough to spend my life with getting to know him. With this theory in mind you will never hate an "aged husband"

> *love or infatuation?*

Infatuation turn to a real love!

> *ticket to the usa?*

Most cases true! Goes both ways. A 40 year old man marry a 20 year old virgin Filipina bring her to the US let her work for the two of them. She has the right to help her family. She dammed work hard It's part of the culture. You know that beforehand. A sadist and abuser husband. He deserved to be cheated!!!

> *a better job for the family back home?*

True! that way when your husband treat you bad you have a family to come home to. . . .

As Malou concludes her response, she stresses a lack of disjuncture between love and material/practical considerations. Love in her view is linked to—but not subsumed by—issues of race, work opportunities, and possibilities of familial migration:

tell you what . . . I marry my husband because I love him, marrying him means beautiful kids, moving to the US is not that bad compared to having a career in the Philippines (But I didn't realized it is too until I started working at Mc Donalds part time), petitioning family to moved to the US (if this is what you want to hear), why not, life is a lot better in here than in there when it comes to material things. But when it comes to relationship, morals family relationship, parent children relationship. It [the United States] has nothing to be proud off. That's why most choose to marry a Filipina because, you guys know after examining [them] there is nothing wrong with "our" intentions of coming over here instead of convincing you to move to the Philippines.

Rosie provided another interesting discussion about love and opportunity. I had sent Rosie and Ben an early draft of chapter 4. In her e-mail response, Rosie wrote "Our Love Story" in the subject line. Her message conveyed her reaction to my retelling of her "love story." Her English is not perfect, but conveys her ability to communicate complex feelings despite her lack of fluency.

Hello ma'am Nicole,

. . . I love talking to you. . . . By the way, we received the stories that you wrote on the last few weeks. And I spent few hours to read all in all. Oh, boy super terrific that was nice your a good writer. That time when I was reading I can't understand what really I felt full of excitement, funny and very suspend.

My story that you wrote it sounds like a diary. I recalled the sadness and happiness that happened from the past. I cannot stopped laughing when I read this story about "Ben and Rosie" we are the foolish people. Until now it's hard me to believed and I began to asked myself, how is that happened? [Rosie] are you okey? Are you dreaming? I can't believe it was true.

How fool I am can you imagined after three days we met from his first visit I was engage right away. We both knows that we are not know each other well and beside I am not his girl friend. But we have unusual feelings we felt the same way. Our closeness sounds long years to me with no holding back. It's amazing and it turned to a serious relationship being a husband and wife.

Now, finally I was married and happy to found him in my life inspite of my homesickness. I think that's it what I can say for now.

Love, Rosie

Rosie's sense that "we have unusual feelings" and that she and Ben "feel the same way," as well as her sense that it was as though they had known each other "long years" and that theirs is a "love story" with the proverbial happy ending (despite her homesickness), fits with Giddens's notion of the connection between romantic love as linked to personal narrative and the telling of a story.

Romantic love introduced the idea of narrative into an individual's life—a formula which radically extended the reflexivity of sublime love. The telling of a story is one of the meanings of "romance," but this story now became individualised, inserting self and other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to wider social processes. . . . The complex of ideas associated with romantic love for the first time associated love with freedom, both being seen as normatively desirable states.³¹

Similarly, the wider social processes that made such a relationship possible are sublimated to the romantic nature—the feeling that the two individuals share about the inevitability of their relationships. Ben and Rosie, moreover, both viewed their relationship as one that had been entered into “freely,” in contrast to “arranged” marriages, in which one or both partners feel they have little choice. Although in fact social pressures can come into play (sometimes from the woman’s family to marry and from the man’s family not to), the overall sense that is that the relationship was entered into freely. Rosie’s impression that there was no choice but that they be together reflected a sense that this was “fate” or somehow meant to be. Insofar as it involves “instantaneous attraction,” Giddens suggests that romantic love has to be “separated quite sharply from the sexual/erotic compulsions of passionate love. The ‘first glance’ is a communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, it is said, ‘complete.’” Romantic love, moreover, is related to ideas of “cosmic fate.” Romance was no longer “an unreal conjuring of possibilities in a realm of fiction” but “a potential avenue for controlling the future.”³² Each of these elements—choice, love at first sight (but not uncontrolled passion), fate, and narrative completion—are expressed and negotiated in men’s and women’s discussions of their relationships.

ROGER AND CARLITA’S LOVE STORY

As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, for political economy to prove useful in cultural analyses of correspondence relationships, it must allow for the possibility of emotional motives in addition to practical and material ones. The following cases point to elements of this argument and simultaneously illustrate the difficulty of disentangling romantic love and personal narratives, political economy, and everyday lives. Each of the elements Giddens describes, choice, love at first sight (but not uncontrolled passion), fate, and narrative completion, are expressed and negotiated in Carlita and Roger’s story.

Carlita, a twenty-one-year-old Filipina from the Visayas, met Johnny, a fifty-year-old American from Houston, Texas, through an Internet introduction service in the late 1990s, when she was in her teens. After corresponding for three years, he suddenly wrote to break things off because he was marrying Fran, another Filipina pen pal who had been working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Carlita did not know that Johnny had an-

other pen pal, and she was devastated. As she explained in 2000, he had declared his love and devotion to her, and she had assumed they were exclusive. He had gone to visit Fran first and told Carlita he decided to marry her because she was in her mid-thirties and closer to him in age. In his final letter, Johnny mentioned Roger, his good friend and the best man at his wedding, who was planning to go to the Philippines, and he gave her Roger's address.³³

Tears resurfaced as Carlita recounted the ordeal. She was young and innocent, she explained, and had made the fatal error of trusting Johnny and "falling in love with him" by mail. They had never met in person, but she had felt as if she knew him from years of correspondence. She trusted him, cared for him, and had believed his expressions of love and devotion. As a staunch Catholic who regularly attended mass, Carlita prayed that God would help her.

In 2000, Carlita had recently graduated from a Catholic college and was the top student in her class. While recounting the story of how she and Roger met, she pulled out a photo album and punctuated her story with photographs. She pointed out her family (and her protective father), her graduation ceremony (in which she was valedictorian), and various college functions that illustrated her popularity and academic success. For three years while she had corresponded with Johnny, she had turned down advances from male classmates and had never had a boyfriend because she considered herself already attached. At the time she "still thought" foreigners made better husbands and that they were more "trustworthy" than Filipinos.

Three months after she received Johnny's final letter, she wrote to Roger. She was cautious and had no expectations, but she wrote and told him that Johnny had broken her heart. She politely offered to meet him when he came to the Philippines, and said she would be happy to help him make arrangements for his trip. Since he was about to leave the United States, Roger had time to write only one letter (which I read), in which he told her he looked forward to meeting her and he hoped they might become friends. He thanked her for her offer to help and said he would contact her upon his arrival. At the time, Carlita did not know that Roger had read all her letters to Johnny, and that he thought of her "as a kind and lovely person."

Roger was in his mid-forties when I met him. As he explained over coffee, he had been divorced for almost twenty years and had no children. He described his twenties and thirties as a period of "hard living and lapsed Christianity." In his early thirties, he had an accident that radically changed his life. As a result of the accident, which caused brain damage and affected

his short-term memory, he was unable to work, and lived on a disability pension of ten thousand dollars a year. Even before he met Carlita, he had planned to live abroad, where his limited income would go further. Since his accident, he had dated a number of women in the United States, but on the first date he “could always see the beginning, the middle and the end of the relationship.” By this he meant that the women he dated had little interest in a long-term relationship with someone whose economic resources would always be extremely limited. “But here it’s different, and my income can stretch a long way,” he said. After serious “research” and talking to acquaintances who had been there, he decided to move to the Philippines.

In keeping with the inevitability of romantic narratives, Carlita described meeting Roger as her fate. To their mutual surprise and pleasure, they felt an immediate attraction and “love at first sight.” Carlita told herself not to trust Roger, and her parents warned her too. But she thought that he was a kind and religious person and that they were meant to be together. Six months after they met and despite her father’s opposition, Carlita and Roger were married. When she met me, she was still sad and bitter about Johnny, but said she had married the “best man,” and seemed sure that this was God’s plan.

When I met them, Carlita and Roger lived in a small but new and comfortable one-bedroom apartment. For just over two hundred dollars a month, their rent included twice-weekly maid service, use of a car and driver (shared with five other apartments), laundry service, cable television, and local telephone calls. Shortly after they were married, Carlita finished her college degree and worked for a short time in a restaurant frequented by local Filipino-American couples and managed by an American man, but the hours were long and late and the pay was low (about three dollars a day), so she quit. She and Roger continued to go to the restaurant to socialize with other Filipino-American couples, and they took me there to meet their friends.

Like many other Filipinas, Carlita contributed to their income by serving as a small-scale money-lender to friends and acquaintances at a 10 percent interest rate monthly. Her goal was to save money to buy a house and property of their own. So far, she could not afford to go back to school, but she hoped to eventually do so. Roger, meanwhile, spent time visiting friends, writing home from the local Internet café, and watching television. They shared the cooking, some of the housework, and attended church together regularly. As he explained, he is happy and very satisfied with his new life. A decade ago he almost died. That prompted him to “clean up my act,” and he stopped drinking, taking drugs, smoking, and other vices. Al-

though he only mentioned religion when I asked, he said that religion had become important to him. His sense of good fortune at having found Carlita was evident. In a few years, he and Carlita planned to try to have a child. Meanwhile, they hoped to enjoy their time together. Carlita expressed satisfaction over the direction her life had taken.

CONCLUSION

When I described Frank, a heavy-set, retired state trooper in his mid-fifties, and Angel, his lovely twenty-two-year-old fiancée, to Filipino friends, one woman asked, "She never finished college? Girls like that are only interested in him because of his money." "Many Filipinas are pretty desperate," said another. "Have you seen the women in the mall hanging around waiting to meet any old foreign men? They think foreign men are rich or can help get them to the U.S." Yet two young women were more empathetic: "Filipinas can fall in love very easily, it's true." "If he pampers her and treats her well, she can convince herself she loves him. And maybe she really does." Questioning my characterization of the couple, one woman asked, "Why is it so hard for you to believe that she loves him, Nicole? So what if he's ugly, as long as he treats her well!"

U.S. men often assumed that the women they wrote to in China or the Philippines would be happy to hear from Americans because they assumed (often mistakenly) that the women are in difficult, dire, or desperate financial situations. Men claim that "foreign women care less about age," "don't care if you aren't handsome," "don't care if you aren't rich." They are often aware that their wife's family (especially rural families in the Philippines) appreciates their financial contributions. Yet when it comes to their own relationships, they are reluctant to believe that financial factors might be a factor. Men depict their relationships in terms of love and romance. Only a few men (like Charlie and Kevin) suggested a different balance wherein love was neither the premise nor necessarily the ultimate goal.

Many women were very skeptical about *other* women's motives, but they also believed that their own relationships were "solid and sincere," not based on "money." Although men often considered love in a vacuum, for most Filipinas and many Chinese women, love is inseparable from the view of a man who provides or treats her well. Frank's masculinity is embodied in his ability to provide for Angel, or at least to potentially improve her circumstances. Old age, poor health, or a large physique does not necessarily

make men unattractive, as long as they have the ability to care and provide. Whether it be through their own financial resources or their ability to offer potentially improved circumstances in the United States, men were flattered and attracted to the idea that women would truly value them “for themselves”—as American men and for the privileges their gender and nationality represent.

Men’s circumstances of course vary enormously (a large business owner’s circumstances differ from those of a factory worker). Chinese women and Filipinas demonstrated different degrees of understanding of men’s actual financial and social standings. Yet what these men share is their gender and (in most cases) their nationality. The two are in many ways intertwined. For many Filipinos, despite overt critiques of western imperialism and colonialism, an (ambivalent) admiration of western food, styles, light skin, and “modern way of life” persists. Filipinos with more western or “Spanish” features are often considered more attractive, and western features come to represent western culture, wealth, and modernity, regardless of the particular circumstances of the individual.

Men’s initial attraction to the idea of “Asian women’s family values” may later become a source of conflict. As Julag-Ay suggests, commitments to her natal kin can cause marital conflict if men feel the woman’s family draws resources away from his own nuclear household.³⁴ Another problem is that men may look to China and the Philippines for “traditional wives,” but women may look to the West for “modern” lives and husbands and for a way to escape the constraints of familial obligations. Just as there are differences between U.S. men, so are there differences between the aims and desires of Asian women.

To connect the minutiae of everyday life with wider patterns of power and culture without reducing them to some rigid mold or draining them of their life, flexibility, and uniqueness is one of the challenges posed to scholars of transnationalism. Men’s assumptions about Asian women’s commitment to marriage and their assumed appreciation and attraction to western men are linked to actual historical connections among the United States, China, and the Philippines.

In this chapter, I have argued that political economy should not be viewed as simply a “macro” backdrop for anthropological studies that deal with power on the “micro” or local level, but rather that political economy is implicated in the production and reproduction of desire and is implicated in even the most minute and intimate levels of interaction. The historical relations between China, the Philippines, and the United States are intertwined with cultural logics of love and desire, which are themselves rooted

in complex and subtle renderings of power. Modern and rapid forms of communication and transportation and relationships between nation-states make marriages between U.S. men and Asian women more practical and more imaginable than ever. Women may desire wealth, opportunity, freedom, citizenship, marriage, or a better way of life conceived of in an almost infinite variety of ways. Men's desires are also complex and varied, involving visions of domestic order, enduring relationships, modesty, femininity, sexuality, and an "old-fashioned division of labor." Such complementary desires may form the basis upon which meaningful relationships are imagined and realized across borders. At the same time they (re)produce and (re)inscribe certain structures of gendered power and inequality.