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“Love is all you need” A content analysis of romantic love and sex in Chinese entertainment television

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Abstract

A large sample of entertainment television programs that aired on 28 channels in China in 2004 were analyzed for romantic and sexual content. Romantic scenes, typically portraying men and women already in committed relationships, appeared in 80 percent of the 196 programs analyzed. The analysis suggested that, according to Chinese television in the early part of the 21st Century, emotional love was more important than physical sexual interaction in romantic relationships. More than half of the 1,112 romantic scenes analyzed depicted love between the partners without any discussion or display of physical sexual behavior. Only eight percent of scenes included discussion or depiction of sexual behavior (e.g., touching, kissing, intercourse) without some sense that the partners were in a loving, committed relationship. Sexual intercourse was implied or depicted in fewer than two percent of the romantic scenes. Findings are discussed in light of the Chinese government’s periodic regulation of sexually suggestive media content and attempts to filter Internet content. The extent to which such content may affect young viewers’ perceptions of romantic relationships and sexual behavior is also discussed.

Keywords

content analysis; China; television; romantic and sexual behavior

Introduction

By some accounts, China was in the midst of a sexual revolution in the first decade of the 21st Century. The Associated Press (2008) reported that casual sexual relationships were on the rise as youth adopted more relaxed attitudes about sex that included public displays of affection and shops that sold marital aids and specialty condoms (CNN, 2003). Studies indicated that 70% of Chinese had had sex before marriage in the mid 2000s, up from about 16% in 1989 (Beech, 2006).

Governmental control over social matters has long been a reality for the Chinese people. Paradoxically, perhaps, some governmental restrictions have been credited with initiating China's sexual revolution. The Marriage Law of 1981 established equal rights for females and males and allowed women to wait until later in life for marriage. The One-Child Policy, implemented in 1979, reduced the expectation that women would have many children and increased the opportunity for women to pursue careers and other personal activities (Freed, 2007; Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002).

The Chinese government has also held close control over the media as a means of promoting certain values and restricting others. Although apparently most concerned about political news, the government has also imposed regulations on sexual content, especially in televised advertising and entertainment content. In 2007, radio and TV commercials and programs involving sex-related health supplements, drugs for sexually transmitted diseases, sex toys, and "vulgar" ads for breast enhancement and female underwear were banned; two TV stations in China's Zhejiang Province were ordered to stop airing "sex-themed" programs (Xinhua News Agency, 2007a). After the "no sex" ban was implemented, 2,000 advertisements determined to be sexually suggestive were dropped from television and radio broadcasts (Xinhua News Agency, 2007b). In Fall 2010, because of what it considered a proliferation of "low taste entertainment," especially on provincial and local TV, the Politburo passed a resolution to limit entertainment in media (Deng, 2011; Huang & Martina, 2010). In January 2012, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in China imposed limits on the number of "entertainment shows" allowed to air during prime time each week and forbid the airing of more than one-third of some of the most popular shows on television (Wong, 2011) to limit what regulators described as "vulgar tendencies."

Despite such regulations and trends in sexual behavior in China, only a few studies have investigated the media as potential sources of sexual norms and information among the Chinese people (e.g., Chang, 2008; Feng & Yang, 2007; Li, Rotheram-Borus, & Lu, 2009; Zhang, Li, & Shah, 2007; Zhu & Zhou, 2003). In these studies, the mass media are consistently cited as important sources of sexual information, especially since Chinese people tend to shy away from discussing sexual topics with others. But little is known about the content from which the audience may be learning about sexual relationships and behavior.

Television as a source of romantic/ sexual norms

This study was designed to systematically analyze the romantic and sexual content in a large sample of Chinese entertainment television to establish the parameters of what

viewers might have been learning and what might have stimulated the government to impose regulations. Given findings from research in other countries, we adopted a rather wide definition so that both patterns of courtship and more physical sexual behavior could be included. Studies primarily in the United States and Europe have found that media depictions can affect expectations about ideal romantic partners (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009), norms of fidelity, and perceptions of when intercourse should occur in a romantic relationship (Kim, et al., 2007). Even before young people engage in real-life romantic experiences, they have developed “cultural templates” -- perceptions, expectations, and scripts about sexuality and romantic love (Bachen & Illouz, 1996) – that they may later use as guides for future behavior. A few studies in this domain have found that frequent exposure to “romance media” is related to dysfunctional beliefs about relationships (e.g., “fate brings soul-mates together,” “disagreement is destructive to a relationship”) (Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Content analyses also have found that sexual behavior on U.S. television frequently occurs outside the context of committed relationships (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005), so we documented relationship status and looked for expressions of love in the romantic and sexual scenes on Chinese television.

As the Chinese government apparently suspects, television may play an important role in conveying current norms and models of romantic and sexual behavior in China. By the early 2000s, most Chinese households had a television in their homes, with an average of 36 channels received per rural household and 61 channels per urban household (China Media Monitor Intelligence, 2009). According to the cultivation model (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), watching television can alter a frequent TV viewer’s perceptions of social reality. Cultivation theory predicts that the more people watch television, the more they will believe the world is like what they see on television. Bandura’s (1993) social learning theory similarly suggests that television may contribute to sexual socialization by providing attractive and compelling models viewers may identify with and even imitate in their own lives.

Longitudinal surveys in the United States have begun to show that adolescents (12-17 year olds) are influenced by the sexual content they see on television and in other media, and that such sexual portrayals may hasten their transition to sexual intercourse (Brown et al., 2006; Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003; Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009). Television also provides scripts of how romantic relationships should occur and may teach viewers about appropriate behavior within the context of a romantic relationship (Kim et al., 2007). The most commonly used scripts may therefore have greater influence on viewers’ beliefs and behaviors over time than less frequently used scripts.

To date, a systematic analysis of the romantic and sexual content on Chinese entertainment television does not exist. Before any analysis or predictions can be made about the impact that such content on Chinese entertainment television may have on its viewers, it is important to first identify the frequency and types of romantic/sexual content that appeared on Chinese television before the recent regulations were enforced. This study provides a systematic analysis of romantic/sexual content on Chinese entertainment television in 2004 as a baseline against which future studies may be compared.

The structure of Chinese television

We focused on television in this study because by 2004, more than 90 percent of households in both urban and rural areas of China had at least one television set, and access to digital and satellite television was increasing quickly. In contrast, access to the Internet was limited primarily to urban areas. According to a Nielsen market analysis in 2010, even in urban households with televisions, PCs, and mobile devices, TV was “the dominant media platform, with nearly six times more time spent watching TV at home than accessing the Internet” (“Three screen study,” 2010, Para. 2).

The television stations in China can be sorted into three categories: (1) national channels, (2) provincial channels, and (3) city/county level channels. Chinese Central Television (CCTV) is the major state television broadcaster in mainland China, providing a network of 19 channels of varied content that includes news, documentaries, comedies, entertainment, and dramas. There are 34 provincial stations and approximately 400 city- and county-level stations. Most of the CCTV channels and provincial channels are distributed on satellite systems that are then redistributed to homes on local digital cables. Rural households can get at least three channels, CCTV 1, CCTV 7 and the satellite television channel in their province via satellite. Those living in counties or cities with cable television can watch all of the CCTV channels, the 34 provincial channels, and their county’s and city’s channels. Some provincial channels and all city- and county-level channels are not distributed by satellite so they can be seen only by local residents on cable (Lu, 2004).

The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) is the executive branch under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China that is responsible for the censoring of content in television, film, and newspapers that might be objectionable to the Chinese government or cultural standards (Hu & Hong, 2008). SARFT apparently has little tolerance for explicit references to sexuality on Chinese television. Weiqun Huang (2009), a SARFT officer, articulated his view of how sexual content is handled on Chinese television in this (translated) statement:

We normally define the scenes describing sex directly as obscenity; this content... includes unusual and abnormal psychology of sex. I think such content must be banned. If in the films or movies, though it is necessary for the plot, the scenes describing sex or showing sexual organs should not be broadcast.

When facing emergencies, crises, or other politically or internationally sensitive issues, the central government often prohibits all media from carrying their own news stories and allows them to broadcast only the news originated from the “big three” media -- CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, and *People’s Daily* (Zhang, 2006). Consequently, CCTV’s channels have much higher ratings than local channels, and their advertising spots are more desirable and more profitable (see Hornby, 2011). In short, CCTV does not have to “entertain,” or rely on romance or sex, to attract viewers or compete financially (Lee, 1990; Zhao, 1998). The provincial channels, in contrast, are not as closely monitored by the central government, but face more competition for financial stability. So the provincial channels compete by providing more entertainment that can attract larger audiences. Such programming may include romance and sex as a way to attract viewers (See Century, 2011; Yang, 2010).

Research questions

Little research has investigated the content or impact of sexual content on Chinese television on Chinese viewers. A few studies have examined perceptions and use of female sexuality in television advertising in China (Prendergast, Wah-Leung, & West, 2008; Sun & Zhan, 2008) and have raised concerns about ethics (Mo, 2004) and the potential harmful effects on children (Wang & Hu, 2005). Other studies have found that the media are cited as sources of sexual health information (Li, Rotheram-Borus, & Lu, 2009; Zhang, Li, & Shah, 2007; Zhu & Zhou, 2003) but none has systematically or quantitatively analyzed the romantic and/or sexual content of the programs.

The purpose of this study is to explore the frequency and type of romantic and sexual content in entertainment content programming on television in China in the early part of the 21st Century as China was experiencing a sexual revolution and as television's importance as a source of entertainment grew. We used a broad definition of sexual content to include discussions and depictions of romantic as well as more physical sexual behavior given the possibility that portrayals of sexual behavior were rare due to governmental restrictions. We also examined the possibility that standards are more strictly enforced on the national CCTV channels than on the provincial/ city channels. This study of a large sample of television programs and movies aired in China in 2004 thus addressed the following two research questions:

RQ1: What was the frequency and kind of romantic/sexual content in entertainment programs on Chinese television in 2004?

RQ2: Did the frequency and kind of romantic/sexual content in entertainment programs on Chinese television in 2004 differ by national versus local (i.e., provincial/city) channel?

Romantic and sexual content on U.S. television

Although relatively little is known about the romantic or sexual content of television in China, a number of studies have tracked the frequency and type of such content on television in the United States. Given that U.S. television programs frequently are exported around the world, are increasingly available on the Internet, and may serve as models for in-country television production, U.S. patterns may be relevant to what is happening in China.

In a comprehensive review of studies about the sexual content on television in the United States, Ward (2003) concluded that the frequency of sexual content had increased over time but was rarely graphic. Sexual talk and behavior occurred more frequently outside rather than as part of marital relationships. A content analysis of the top 20 television programs watched by teens in the United States in 2005 found that more than two of every three shows (70%) contained some sexual content in the form of talk about sex and/or sexual behavior. Sexual talk was more common than actual portrayals of sexual behavior (Kunkel, et al., 2005). Content analyses of television and other media also have consistently found that the discussion or depiction of contraception or sexual consequences, such as sexually transmitted diseases, are extremely rare (Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008; Kunkel et al., 2005).

Given trends identified in the sexual content on U.S. television, and the cultural and political context in China, we expected to find that overt sexual portrayals and sexual health information are infrequent on Chinese television. When sexual portrayals are present, they may occur in non-marital relationships, with little discussion or depiction of contraception or prevention against sexually transmitted infections. Given their different functions and regulatory structures, we also expected to find fewer romantic or sexual scenes on the national channels than on the provincial/ city channels.

Methods

Television sample

Television content was recorded from 28 channels from nine provinces in mainland China for one constructed week. The constructed week was based on the random selection of each day of the week, i.e., one Monday, one Tuesday, etc., in a three-month period (October - December 2004). The constructed week strategy was employed to guard against bias caused by unusual programming due to holidays or political events. The timing of the media collection and locations were selected to coincide with the 2004 wave of the Chinese Health and Nutrition Survey¹ that monitors some 19,000 Chinese respondents' knowledge, attitude, food intake, physical exercise, and health conditions. This analysis focuses only on the entertainment television series (e.g., current dramas, historical dramas, crime dramas, animation, comedies) and movies on Chinese television as such programming is most likely to include romantic/sexual depictions.

We selected 28 channels that included five national channels (CCTV 1 and CCTV 2, Phoenix Satellite TV, and CCTV's and Shanghai's children's channels), nine provincial channels, and 14 city channels. The channels were selected based on their ratings, the size of their audience, and their commonly acknowledged popularity. For example, Phoenix Satellite TV is based in Hong Kong. Partly owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, under the Satellite Television for the Asian Region (STAR) Broadcasting Corporation, it has been the only non-mainland-based television channel allowed to broadcast to ordinary Chinese in China. CCTV 1 is the oldest television channel in China and is widely known as *the* most official channel on behalf of the central government. CCTV 2 is a finance-focused channel. Two children's channels were included as we were also interested in the role television plays in child and adolescent development. The five national channels were recorded in Shanghai. The provincial channels were recorded in the provincial capitals, and the city channels were recorded in their respective cities. See Table 1 for a list of the cities and channels from which the sample was drawn.

Recording was done on VHS recorders from 4 p.m. through midnight on weekdays and 8 a.m. through midnight on weekends, when the largest number of people watch TV. For this

¹The China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS), an ongoing international collaborative project between the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the National Institute of Nutrition and Food Safety at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, was designed to examine the effects of the health, nutrition, and family planning policies and programs implemented by national and local governments and to see how the social and economic transformation of Chinese society is affecting the health and nutritional status of its population. The CHNS surveys were conducted in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004 and 2006 and in 2009.

analysis, we selected four days per channel, including one weekend and three weekdays. The total number of programs of all types in the sample was 585 (counting programs with multiple episodes only once); 196 of these fit our definition of entertainment programs. Among the 196 programs analyzed, 42% (n=82) included only one episode, while for the rest two to 14 episodes were analyzed (M=2.25 episodes, SD=1.92).

Because we recorded TV content during set time periods rather than by program, some duplication of content was possible. For example, the same episodes of a specific program could be airing on Channel A as well as on Channel B. Inspection of the sample, however, found that only 4 episodes were recorded more than once. In those four cases different segments of the episodes were recorded, so only two romantic scenes were coded twice. For example, episode # 37 of “Secret of Soldiers” (“Jun Ren Ji Mi”) was recorded from two channels. One recording included the complete episode but the other included only 20 minutes of the episode because the rest of the episode occurred outside the time range for recording. Seven romantic scenes were identified in the whole episode. The 20-minute fragment from the second channel included only one of the seven romantic scenes, and thus, was one of the two scenes coded twice in the analysis.

In sum, the proportion of entertainment TV programs and movies included in this analysis was about one-third (34%) of the total television content recorded and represents a broad spectrum of the kind of entertainment TV content available in China in 2004.

Unit of analysis

Each program and each romantic scene were the main units of analysis. The country of origin for each program (whether recorded in its entirety or not) was established from information provided in the program’s credits or by consulting program guides as the sample of content was selected. Within each romantic scene, type and characteristics of the content and the relationship status of each character were also assessed.

A “scene” was defined as a sequence in which the place and time generally held constant. Most scenes can be thought of in the same sense as a passage in a story. A scene ends when the primary setting shifts in time, place, or characters in a way that extensively interrupts the flow of the related action. In our analysis, a commercial interruption always signaled the end of a scene. When two scenes were intercut into many segments, each segment was considered a scene. Every inconsistent shot in a montage was counted as a scene. For example, the following series of shots would be counted as three scenes: two people kissing (scene 1), two birds flying (scene 2), and the same two people kissing (scene 3).

A “romantic scene” was defined as a scene that included implications of love and/or sex, such that the actors in the scene discussed the development or status of their romantic relationship, physically touched each other romantically, and/or gave indication (through action or language) of sexual interaction (i.e., explicit or implied reference to or presentation of intimate sexual behavior). Each romantic scene was coded for its length in minutes.

Coding definitions

Many of the definitions and examples in the original coding protocol were adapted from a comprehensive study of American TV series and movies (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Examples from Chinese entertainment programs were added to increase relevance for the Chinese coders. We found, however, that some basic cultural differences in expectations about the role of love in relationships were not reflected in the original coding protocol. In protocol testing, we saw that Chinese television programs often included discussion and depictions of erotic love, such as declarations of love and loving touches (distinct from filial or platonic love), but rarely included more physical sexual behavior (e.g., heavy kissing, exposure or touching of sexual parts of the body, or sexual intercourse). Although not explicitly stated, in some of the programs the assumption appeared to be that pure love is more important than physical desire. To account for the cultural difference, we expanded the original coding protocol to incorporate “pure” displays of love without the implication of physical desire or sexual relations. Thus, all scenes that were identified as having either implications of love or sex or both were considered a “romantic scene.”

For each scene coders recorded the types and characteristics of the implied, discussed or depicted romantic content and noted the relationship status of the characters in the scene. Coders were instructed to first code the *types* of romantic content along a continuum from non-physical to more physical in each scene: e.g., crushes and fantasies, sexual innuendo or flirtations, light touch, full embrace, kissing, sexual intercourse. Coders also noted whether the scene fell into one of three love/sex *implication* categories: (1) only love, (2) love and sex, (3) only sex. See Table 3 and 4 for all the *implications* and *types* of romantic content categories.

Then the *characteristics* of the romantic content in each scene were coded. More than one characteristic could be coded for each scene. The characteristics measure was designed to provide more detail about the context and outcomes of the love/sexual content in the scene. A scene coded as a crush/fantasy type, for example, could occur in the context of a new relationship and was coded as consensual pleasurable activity and perhaps refusal of advance/waiting for sex/abstinence. If the scene depicted a husband fantasizing about his mistress while arguing with his wife, however, the scene was coded as promiscuity occurring in the context of a divorce/deteriorating relationship. Physical and reproductive health outcomes such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases and other kinds of sexual behavior such as masturbation and rape were also possible characteristics of the scenes. (See Table 5 for all the *characteristic* categories).

Then the *relationship status* of the characters involved in the romantic content in the scene (i.e., husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, single, etc.) was coded. A character was considered to be “single” if he or she was not currently in a romantic relationship of some sort (i.e., did not have a husband/ wife or boyfriend/ girlfriend). If more than two persons in a romantic and/or sexual relationship were included in the scene, more than one status code was entered. Coders were instructed to look for clues in the scene or from previous scenes in that specific episode and to not use their prior knowledge of the program to determine current relationship status just as a viewer coming to the program for the first time would. (See Table 6 for the *relationship status* categories).

The entire coding guide with complete definitions is available from the first author.

Coding procedures

The coders were divided into two groups. The first group of coders (three males, two females) watched all entertainment programs (TV series and movies) in the sampled DVDs and identified the romantic scenes. The second group of coders (four males, four females) then watched the identified romantic scenes to code for types, characteristics, and relationship status. This two-step process was successfully used in the large content analysis of U.S. media on which this project was modeled (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005).

Ci3 software was used to code the content. Ci3 is widely used to facilitate computer-assisted interviewing and we adapted the program to facilitate this large coding project. The questionnaire that lead coders through the coding decisions was programmed in the Ci3 system so that coding could occur directly on the computer screen and data files could be generated automatically by the Ci3 system. The data were then transferred as SPSS files for data analysis.

Inter-coder reliability

Students from a mainland China university were recruited to conduct the content analysis. The coders were trained for one week until they could achieve percent agreement of .90 on an inter-coder reliability test of 10 percent of the total content. The coding protocol was revised and updated during the training to give clearer instructions and provide more examples. Once adequate coding reliability was reached, each coder independently coded a sample of the content.

Three inter-coder reliability checks with different sets of 10-20 romantic scenes were conducted at the beginning, middle and late stages of coding to ensure accuracy and consistency across coders. Reliability was adequate to good at all three check points. For example, the check in the middle of coding found that percent agreement for coder pairs across all 44 variables ranged from .86 to .98, with an average of .93. Inter-coder reliability corrected for chance agreement was calculated using Perreault and Leigh's Ir (1989) and Potter and Levine-Donnerstein's (1999) revised pi. The Ir ranged from .71 to .97, averaging .86, across all the variables and categories. The average Ir for type of romantic content was .71; for characteristics of romantic content, .92; and for relationship status, .75. As our frequency distribution is highly uneven across categories, Ir, revised pi and percent agreement have been recommended as more appropriate measures of reliability than some distribution-based indices (Zhao, Liu, & Deng, 2013).

Results

The large majority (85%) of the 196 entertainment television programs analyzed were produced in mainland China, while the rest were produced in such countries as the United States (N= 11; 6%), Korea (N=7; 4%), and Hong Kong (N= 6; 3%), and a few other primarily Asian countries (See Table 2). Of the 1,112 romantic scenes identified, 964 (86.7%) were produced in mainland China while 148 (13.3%) occurred in the imported content. Given the small number of internationally-produced programs and the significantly

smaller proportion of time devoted to romantic content in the internationally produced programming (9.4% vs. 5.6%), further comparisons of content type and characteristics between internally and externally-produced content are not included in this analysis.

Frequency of romantic and sexual content

In answer to the first research question about the frequency of romantic and sexual content, we found that a large majority (79.6%) of all the programs included at least one romantic scene. The average length of a romantic scene was less than two minutes, however, and multiple scenes accounted for only about five minutes of each hour of content. Most of the programs that included romantic scenes had more than one (1 scene: 28 [14.3%] programs; 2 scenes: 17 [8.7%] programs; 3-9 scenes: 75 [38.3%] programs; 10 or more scenes: 36 [18.4%] programs).

In answer to the second research question, given the more intense governmental oversight of the national channels, a much larger number of romantic scenes (N=1,065; 96%) were identified on the provincial and city channels than were found on the national channels (N=47; 4%). Although comparisons should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of scenes from the national channels, we conducted further analyses because the divergent functions and oversight of the channels suggested possible differences in the types and characteristics of the romantic content.

Kind of romantic and sexual content

Overall, in this sample of Chinese entertainment television, emotional love was a more important component of romantic relationships than physical sexual behavior. The title of this paper is derived from the observations presented in Table 3, demonstrating that sex was rarely discussed or depicted on Chinese television outside the context of love. In fact, in fewer than 8% of coded scenes was sex discussed or depicted without some implication of love also present. The frequency of scenes implying love and/or sex was not significantly different by whether the program aired on a national or local (provincial or city) channel.

As Table 4 shows, about two-thirds (65.9%) of the romantic scenes coded depicted only light physically-intimate behavior, such as holding hands, embracing, or kissing (sometimes only on the forehead rather than the lips). The second most frequent type of content in the romantic scenes (42.2 %) was reference to or talk about dating and relationships. Implied or explicit nudity (6.7%), reference to sexual intercourse (4.4%), and sexual innuendo or flirtation (3.6%) were rare. Passionate kissing and fondling (2.8%) or implied or depicted sexual intercourse (1.7%) were even less frequent.

National vs. local channels—Significant differences in types of content were found between programs aired on national and local channels. Romantic and light touch was significantly more likely to appear on programs aired nationally (85.1%) than locally (65.1%), $X^2(1, N = 733) = 8.04, p < .01$. Reference to or talk about dating and relationships, however, was significantly more likely to appear on programs aired locally (43.2%) than nationally (19.1%), $X^2(1, N = 469) = 10.70, p < .01$.

Characteristics and context—As can be seen in Table 5 that provides more detail about the characteristics and context of the content in the romantic scenes, most of the scenes included depictions or references to romantic relationships and behavior among people not married to each other.

For example, in the “Story of Zhuo Er” (“Zhuo Er De Gu Shi”) a young man suggests to a young woman that she move on from the bad things that happened before and become his girlfriend. The woman says she needs some time to think about the offer and he says he will wait for her. In “Watery Life “ (“Ping Dan Sheng Huo”) Youyou (the main female character) looks at a music box with two dancing figures and says to a sleeping man: “You are the man here and I am the woman here, we are in our wedding.” The man is suffering from amnesia and doesn’t know that Youyou loves him.

Even for partners in a committed relationship, talk about relationships and, less frequently, talk about sex, was more likely than depictions of sexual behavior. In another popular contemporary series, “Chinese Style Divorce” (“Zhong Guo Shi Li Hun”), for example, a couple engaged to be married are shown discussing that they should not have sex the night before their wedding day. They then promise each other that after they are married, “every day will be like our wedding night.” Their subsequent kissing and embracing suggests that they may break their promise, but a ringing phone interrupts them, so they are not shown having sexual intercourse.

A few scenes (8.4%) focused on the deterioration of a relationship or divorce; promiscuity was discussed or depicted in 3.5% (N=39) of the scenes. In only 3.1% (N=34) of the scenes were references made to sexual body parts in either a serious or humorous way. The depiction of sexual harassment or rape was equally rare (2.8%; N=31). Perhaps because of the rarity of the depiction or even discussion of physical sexual behavior, sexual and reproductive health issues such as pregnancy, STIs, the use of contraceptives or abortion, were discussed in fewer than 2% of the scenes.

Relationship status—As can be seen in Table 6, most of the romantic scenes (40.9%) on Chinese television overall depicted courtship between single males and females, but an almost equal proportion (38.3%) of scenes depicted married relationships (20.1%) or unmarried couples (“boyfriend and girlfriend”) in serious relationships (18.2%).

As might be expected by the increased governmental oversight of the national channels, the romantic scenes from the national channels were significantly more likely to depict married couples (57.4%) while the provincial/local channels were more likely to include scenes of unmarried couples (50.1%) ($X^2 [1, N = 171] = 66.74, p < .001$) (not shown in table). In one romantic/ non-sexual scene in the popular drama, the “Double-Sound Crackers” (“*Shuang Xiang Pao*”), for example, a married couple is in their car on the way to a concert. The car unexpectedly breaks down. The wife is too weak to walk on her own, so the husband picks her up in his arms and heroically carries her to the theatre.

In the programming on the local as well as national channels, infidelity and unrequited love (e.g., male is married but the female in the romantic scene is not his spouse) was a theme

in only a few programs (1% to 5% of scenes). Depictions of non-heterosexual romantic behavior were non-existent

Discussion

From this quantitative analysis of a comprehensive sample of entertainment television programs and movies aired on 28 channels in China, we find that according to Chinese television in the early 2000s, at least, love may be all that is needed in a romantic relationship as the Beatles suggested in their 1969 “Love is all you need” hit. More than half of the 1,112 romantic scenes analyzed in this study depicted only love without any discussion or display of physical sexual behavior. Only eight percent of the scenes included discussion about or depiction of physical sexual behavior (touching, kissing, intercourse) without some notion of a loving relationship. The other one third of romantic scenes that did include discussion or depictions of physical sexual behavior were in the context of emotional love. Sexual intercourse was implied or depicted in fewer than two percent of the romantic scenes analyzed. Perhaps because of the lack of depictions or discussion or depiction of sexual intercourse, protection against negative consequences was rarely portrayed. Not one instance of non-heterosexual romantic or sexual behavior was identified.

In some ways content of Chinese entertainment television and movies are similar to what has been found in the United States as most of the content is about romantic rather than overtly physical sexual relationships, and sexual health information is rarely portrayed. Chinese romantic behavior is more often portrayed in committed rather than in more casual relationships that are typical in U.S. television, however, and the depiction of love as central to the relationships is very different (Hust, Brown, & L’Engle, 2008; Kunkel, et al., 2005).

This emphasis on love rather than sex in Chinese entertainment content may be explained both by deep cultural traditions that glorify chaste love, potential male desires that women be virgins at marriage (e.g., French, 2006; Savadove, 2003), and the government-controlled media system that constrains sexual content on television. The finding that local television aired more romantic portrayals between non-married couples than national channels is also important for implications of government regulation. It appears that in 2004 the national channels were paying more attention to the ideology and polity of content, while local channels paid more attention to what is entertaining and attractive to their audiences rather than what the government may deem more appropriate or unacceptable.

Given the lack of sexual health information found in this analysis of Chinese entertainment television and movies, it is surprising that young people in China report using the media for sexual health information (Zhu & Zhou, 2003). Perhaps they are learning about courtship and the role of love in romantic relationships from the programs and interpreting that as “sexual health.” It may also be that they are learning about more physical sexual behavior from the advertisements that increasingly surround the programs. In 2004, when this sample of television was collected, the government had not yet forbidden “sexually suggestive” advertising and programs.

In the past few years, the proliferation of the Internet in China has increased access to all sorts of more sexually explicit material (China Internet Network Information Center, 2009). Although the Chinese government has expressed concern about Internet content and has blocked some politically sensitive information, recent attempts to place more restrictive filters on the Chinese Internet system (one called the “Green dam-youth escort”) have met with an uncharacteristically strident public outcry, and the government backed off (Wines, 2009).

Given the increasing incidence of premarital sexual behavior and increasing rates of sexually transmitted diseases in China, the lack of sexual health information in Chinese entertainment content on television may be a missed opportunity. If young people actually are turning to such content as a source of information, portrayals of couples negotiating safe sexual behavior might be valuable. In many countries around the world, such “entertainment-education” that has embedded messages promoting condom and contraceptive use have shown potential to change beliefs and attitudes about the value of such behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

The lack of any depiction of non-heterosexual romantic behavior is also worth noting, given the difficulties gay and Lesbian people face in China. The lack of portrayal or mention may have contributed to the high levels of stigma for homosexuals in China and may be seen as an example of “symbolic annihilation” that exacerbates a lack of understanding about homosexuality (e.g., Kan, Au, Chan, et al., 2009; Neilands, Steward, & Choi, 2007).

Given the findings of this content analysis, cultivation theory would suggest that frequent viewers of the entertainment programs on the provincial and local channels in China in the early part of the new century would be more likely than those who watch less to believe that love is an important component of heterosexual relationships and that singles are engaged in romantic courtships. Social learning theory would predict further that viewers who identified with particular characters would be most likely to want to model their own courtship practices on what they saw in the programs. Non-heterosexual youth might have felt further stigma due to the lack of similar and attractive homosexual models on television (Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000).

Given that content analyses can only set the parameters of what might be learned from television content, longitudinal surveys and experiments with young Chinese viewers would be valuable in establishing the extent to which the pattern of portrayals affects romantic and sexual beliefs and behaviors and whether such content contributes to shifting and/or perpetuating cultural norms. This study was limited in that only the most manifest characteristics of the content were coded, and even for some of those coding categories, strong inter-coder reliability was hard to establish. Deeper textual analysis that could uncover the underlying sexual scripts and cultural norms depicted in this content would be valuable. It would also be valuable to note whether the romantic and sexual content is being presented in a humorous or more dramatic way and to assess if genre differences affect viewers’ perceptions.

China is developing quickly as a modern culture and player on the world stage. Much may have changed in Chinese television and movies since 2004, although recent crackdowns on the “vulgarity” of entertainment television, sex in advertising and on the Internet suggest that significantly different kinds of sexual content than what was available in 2004 are unlikely. Nevertheless, it would be valuable to continue tracking the progression of romantic and sexual portrayals in Chinese television, movies, advertising, and on the Internet, as young people in China seek more information about romantic and sexual norms and sexual health information. What has happened in the past few years as the Chinese government has grown increasingly concerned about the content of entertainment media? Has the government been successful in keeping mainstream media content less steamy than it might be otherwise even in the more commercialized local channels that are competing to attract audiences?

Further study of the use and reception of such content is certainly warranted. Many interesting questions about the media’s role in sexual socialization in China remain. What are young people in China learning from the media about love, sex and relationships? Do they supplement what they are seeing in the loving but rather sexless world of mainstream Chinese television and movies with what they can download on the Internet that provides access to content from all over the world? How are programs such as “Sex and the City,” and “Desperate Housewives,” reputedly two of the most frequently watched foreign programs in China, interpreted and applied in contemporary Chinese life? To what extent do traditional values still trump the sexual worldviews offered by other media systems?

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Table 1

Chinese television channels (N=28) included in the sample by distribution level

National Level		Provincial Level		City Level	
<i>Channels</i>	<i>Province</i>	<i>Channel</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Channel</i>	
CCTV-1	Guangxi	Guangxi Arts & Sports Channel	Nanning (provincial capital)	Guangxi Nanning News Channel	
CCTV-2			Yulin	Guangxi Yulin Television	
Phoenix TV	Guizhou	Guizhou Public Service Channel	Guiyang (provincial capital)	Guizhou Guiyang News Channel	
CCTV-Children			Bijie	Guizhou Bijie Television	
Dongfang Children's Channel	Henan	Henan City Channel	Zhengzhou (provincial capital)	Henan Zhengzhou News Channel	
	Heilongjiang	Heilongjiang Films and TV Series Channel	Fujin	Heilongjiang Fujin News Channel	
	Hubei	Hubei Economics Channel	Shiyan	Hubei Shiyan News Channel	
			Xianning	Hubei Xianning Television	
	Hunan	HNETV Comprehensive Channel	Changsha (provincial capital)	Hunan Changsha News Channel	
	Jiangsu	Jiangsu Zongyi Channel	Suzhou (provincial capital)	Jiangsu Suzhou Socioeconomics Situation Channel	
			Shuyang	Jiangsu Shuyang News Channel	
	Liaoning	Liaoning Film & Entertainment Channel	Shenyang (provincial capital)	Liaoning Shenyang News Channel	
	Shandong	Shandong Film & TV Series Channel	Jinan (provincial capital)	Shandong Jinan News Channel	
			Zoucheng	Shandong Zoucheng Television	

Table 2

Romantic content in Chinese television by country of origin and channel

Country of Origin	N programs analyzed	N programs with romantic scenes	% programs with romantic scenes	% time devoted to romantic content	N (%) romantic scenes (N=1,112)
Mainland China	166	134	79.6	9.4*	964 (86.7)
National	7	4	57.1	9.4	44 (4.0)
Provincial /local	159	130	81.8	9.4	920 (82.7)
Internationally produced	30	22	73.3	5.6*	148 (13.3)
Korea	7	7	100.0	11.5	83 (7.5)
Hong Kong	6	4	66.7	4.2	22 (2.0)
United States	11	6	54.5	3.5	27 (2.4)
Japan	2	2	100.0	3.6	7 (0.6)
Taiwan	1	1	100.0	0.8	1 (0.0)
Other countries	3	2	66.7	5.5	8 (0.7)

Note: Bolded entries are totals for content originating in mainland China and internationally.

* An independent samples t-test showed significant difference ($p < .05$) between proportion of time devoted to romantic content by country of origin (proportion of time was evaluated as mean value).

Table 3

Implications of love and sex in romantic scenes (N= 1,112) in Chinese television

		Implications of love	
		Yes % (n of scenes)	No % (n of scenes)
Implications of sex	Yes	33.2% (369)	7.9% (88)
	No	58.9% (655)	*

* Scenes with neither love nor sex implications were not defined as romantic scenes.

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Table 4*Type of content in romantic scenes in Chinese television*

	Romantic Scenes (N=1,112)	
	<i>N</i>	%
Romantic or light touch/full embrace/light kiss	733	65.9
Dating/relationships/marriage/divorce	469	42.2
Nudity (implied or depicted)	75	6.7
Reference to sexual intercourse	49	4.4
Sexual innuendo or flirtations	40	3.6
Passionate kiss/fondling/caressing	31	2.8
Other	23	2.1
Sexual intercourse (implied or depicted)	19	1.7
Reference to romantic body touch (Not intercourse)	16	1.4
Crushes and fantasies	10	0.9

Note. Categories are not mutually exclusive – each category was coded as present or absent. Categories are arranged in descending order of frequency of appearance.

Table 5*Characteristics of content in romantic scenes in Chinese television*

	Romantic Scenes (N=1,112)	
	<i>N</i>	%
Consensual pleasurable activity among non-marrieds	547	49.2
Reference to romantic relationships or behaviors	467	42.0
Consensual pleasurable activity among marrieds	171	15.4
Divorce/deteriorating relationships	94	8.4
Promiscuity	39	3.5
Negative emotional consequences	36	3.2
Emphasis on sexual body parts or performance	34	3.1
Sexual harassment/rape/child sexual abuse	31	2.8
Wanted or planned pregnancy	17	1.5
Unwanted pregnancy	11	1.0
Refusal of advance/waiting for sex/abstinence	6	0.5
Deviant/unusual behaviors ¹	6	0.5
Sexual health behaviors ²	4	0.4
Physical/sexual development (puberty)	2	0.2

Note. Categories are not mutually exclusive. Each category was coded as present or absent. Categories are arranged in descending order of frequency of appearance.

¹ e.g., prostitution, sexual bribery, masturbation

² STDs or other physical consequences, using condoms/other contraception, abortion, unprotected sex

Table 6

Character relationship status in Chinese television romantic scenes

Relationship Status	Romantic Scenes (<i>N</i> =1,112)	
	<i>N</i>	%
Both are single (no marriage, no other boyfriends/girlfriends)	455	40.9
Husband and wife	224	20.1
Boyfriend and girlfriend	202	18.2
Hard to identify	164	14.7
Male is married, but the female (in scene) is not his spouse	58	5.2
Female is married, but the male (in scene) is not her spouse	33	3.0
Female has boyfriend, but the male (in scene) is not her boyfriend	14	1.3
Male has girlfriend, but the female (in scene) is not his girlfriend	12	1.1
Gay or Lesbian	0	0.0

Note. Categories are not mutually exclusive; each category was coded as present or absent. Categories are arranged in descending order of frequency of appearance.