

The Romantic and the Practical: Using RDT 2.0 to Analyze Competing Cross-cultural Discourses

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This study uses Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) to analyze 10 interviews with Chinese females for competing discourses about romance. Using Baxter's contrapuntal analysis, the researcher identified a nuanced Chinese discourse of practicality that countered the American discourse of romanticism. These competing discourses demonstrate the influence of both Eastern and Western cultures on the participants as they sought creative ways to enact and explain their personal ideologies of romance as they sojourned in the US. The study highlights the usefulness of contrapuntal analysis in intercultural communication research.

Literature Review

International student sojourners bring with them their own culturally bound attitudes, beliefs, and values, which may make the transition to American culture challenging for them (Popadiuk, 2008; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Many female Chinese students are already married when they come to the US, or they postpone marriage until after graduation as a means to gain financial and social independence (Medora, Larson, Hortacsu, & Dave, 2002). With reduced fertility rates in China, modern families value their female children more than in the past and invest in their education and allow more personal choice for daughters (Fong, 2002; Fong, 2004). But these women who prioritize education over marriage often experience difficulty as they then find themselves caught between their cultures' expectations of marriage and the Western values of independence and individualism (Ferguson, 1995). In order to establish and maintain relationships within a new culture, these sojourners must be open to new perspectives and differing expectations for romance and marriage (Medora et al., 2002; Popadiuk, 2008). Thus cultural changes within China, globalization of media messages, and direct exposure to American culture may all directly influence traditional cultural values in an individual. Baxter (2011) suggests that these conflicting influences will appear in everyday utterances.

In the Western world the discourse of romanticism asserts that love will conquer all (Baxter & Akkoor, 2008), while traditional Asian culture promotes a discourse of arranged marriage in which love develops over time, and is viewed as respectful attention rather than passion (Baxter & Akkoor, 2008). However, in China a Buddhist belief also suggests that destiny plays a role in serious relationships (Goodwin & Findley, 1997), which is similar to the Western view of "one true love" or "soul mate" (Baxter, 2011; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). The difference between the two cultures is that the Chinese belief in *yuan* (destiny) stresses that if two people are destined to be together, they will establish a relationship with or without initial stages of love or romance (Dion & Dion, 1993; Goodwin & Findley, 1997; Sprecher, Aron, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova,

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& Levitskaya, 1994). In contrast, Americans generally expect that romantic love is essential in the relational stages prior to marriage as well as forming the basis of marriage (Levine, 2005). The most recent iteration of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter, 2011) is particularly well-suited for this analysis of acculturation to Western romantic values.

Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0

Baxter (2011) introduced a new iteration of RDT that analyzes actual communication among relational partners by identifying competing cultural, historical and personal discourses within utterances. These discourses can be divided into *proximal-already-spoken*s, which include something one's mother or friend said, and *distal-already-spoken*s, which include discourses received through education, the media, or immersion in a particular culture. Communicators also direct their utterances to address the responses they expect in the future, termed *distal and proximal yet-to-be-spoken*s. Anticipating how the conversational partner will respond, or how the greater group, society, or culture will respond, speakers may use three specific techniques: *Negating* acknowledges the existence of an alternative discourse only to dismiss it as having no value; *countering* acknowledges some legitimacy to an alternative discourse, but then aligns with the expected discourse; and *entertaining* suggests that an alternative discourse might be considered and that the speaker feels ambivalent toward it (Baxter, pp. 166-169). Careful analysis of spoken exchanges will provide evidence of how speakers are influenced by these competing discourses.

Method

The data set includes interviews with 10 Chinese female participants who were non-native speakers of English. The interviews with a white American woman of European descent created a dialogue to negotiate cross-cultural meanings regarding their experiences while sojourning in the United States.

The 10 participants in this study comprise a convenience sample from personal contacts with female Chinese students who had been living in the US for at least two years. The participants ranged in age from mid-20s to 40. Seven of the participants were married and five of the husbands were in the US: four participants had come to the US without their husbands, but two of the husbands had then later joined their wives in the US. One had met her husband and married in the US, and the other two married women had accompanied their husbands to the US. Of the unmarried participants, two had boyfriends in the United States, and one had recently broken off a semi-romantic relationship with a man in the United States. All the relationships included only heterosexual Chinese couples.

After obtaining IRB approval, I interviewed the 10 participants using the questions listed at the end of this article. The interviews ranged in length from 28 minutes to 72 minutes. I then transcribed all words spoken in the interview, as well as noted laughter and long pauses. To check the accuracy of the transcriptions, I listened to the interviews again as I re-read the transcriptions. Two participants also chose to follow up by taking the list of questions and submitting written answers later, just to be sure they had answered the questions accurately. I then analyzed the 84 pages of single-spaced transcriptions plus the 3 pages of typed responses, using Baxter's (2011) RDT

contrapuntal analysis, to identify the proximal and distal already-spoken and yet-to-be-spoken about romance that appeared within the conversations, and how the participants reframed the cultural discourses to account for their present relationships. I specifically looked for markers within the participants' discourse that indicated alignment or misalignment with cultural values—either American or Chinese. Because the questions also asked them to reflect on their parents' marriages and what their parents had modeled or told them to expect in marriage, the participants reported already-spoken and yet-to-be-spoken utterances from other people (both distal and proximal).

The interview transcriptions were analyzed in three iterations. First, I and a graduate research assistant read through them independently using a grounded theory approach, marking passages for thematic content, which did not reflect any pre-defined categories. We then met and discussed passages that seemed to illustrate competing discourses voiced by the participants. From this conversation we identified specific instances of distal and proximal discourses that appeared in the interviews. Identifying the discourses is not enough; contrapuntal analysis is about the interplay between them. Thus the researcher must examine how the discourses are in conversation with each other (Baxter, 2011). After working with my assistant, I allowed the data to rest for months, and explored more about the technique of contrapuntal analysis with another scholar. Then I returned to the data in two more iterations, several months apart, to examine and fine-tune my initial coding to demonstrate the distinctions between negating, countering, and entertaining.

This study attempts to analyze how the participants' utterances reflect competing discourses from both US and Chinese cultures, perhaps without specifically aligning themselves with either one. It verifies its claims through the weaving of rich detail of the narratives, quotations from the participants themselves, as well as the close combing through "the details of talk" (Baxter, 2011, p. 169). Thus, the voices of the 10 participants offer a sampling of how discourses compete and resonate in the dialogues about their relational life across or between cultures.

Findings

Participants described *romance* abstractly and reflected on its importance in marriage, but also included it in descriptions of their own relationships and that of their parents. Many of them wanted me to define *romance*, which I countered with the admonition that I sought their definitions. Since the interviews occurred around Valentine's Day, I often alluded to this holiday, which represents an American discourse about romance as being showy and important. Most of the Chinese women initially *negated* this discourse, with exclamations that they were "practical" (Ruth, Ava, Emma, Elizabeth¹), "factual" (Rachel), "just face the life" (Lisa) and "realistic" (Olivia). These utterances reflect the Chinese *discourse of practicality*, which the participants introduced to negate the American *discourse of romanticism* as having no value.

When pressed to define *romance*, participants spoke of the difficulty in identifying what was romantic because they knew their view was different from the mainstream American *discourse of showy romanticism*, such as flowers, gifts, and public

¹ All of the names used are pseudonyms, following the convention, practiced by most of the participants when they came to the US, of choosing an American name to facilitate pronunciation.

marriage proposals. After the participants had *negated* this view of romance directly, as noted above, they *countered* with the Chinese discourse of the *subtlety of romance*. *Countering* indicated that there was some value to romance—just not too much. Olivia intimated that in China *romance* was defined as “maybe just one glance, or a sentence, ‘Did you eat?’ or something like that.” To her, subtle romance countered the American view which she defined as a “sudden surprise [such as] a gift or some short trip.” Emma also countered by asserting that romance “is important like season[ing] for the food . . . if we don’t have it for the food, there is no [taste], but we cannot eat just the spice.” Thus one could have marriage without romance, which would fulfill some basic needs, but would not satisfy aesthetic needs.

Rachel clearly juxtaposed the romantic and the practical by invoking the romantic discourse present in both Chinese and American fairy tales: “[In stories the prince and princess] get together. . . and what happened? Did they have kids? Did they have problems?” Then she fondly recounted the romantic atmosphere of her hometown and her courtship with her husband, before returning to her initial stance: “Marriage is two parts: romance and facts.” Rachel’s utterances confirmed the allure of the romantic, but she then *countered* that view with the discourse of practicality, indicating that being practical was more important. Similarly, Elizabeth posed herself as not romantic at all: “I actually often tell my husband: don’t give me any flowers. I’d rather he just give me a cabbage; that is more useful than flowers.” However, in the next few minutes of her interview, she offered a more nuanced view of the tension between romanticism and practicality: “I would say I would dream a romantic relationship, but most of time I kind of want to be in the reality.” In this passage, Elizabeth *entertains* the idea that even though practicality is best, some romance was desirable.

Similarly, Ava’s utterances also mixed components from both discourses. She stated that romance took work and that only a little romance was needed occasionally. She *entertained* the idea that Valentine’s Day in the US was advantageous because it set aside one specific day to celebrate romance, thereby limiting the time needed to focus on romance. Thus Ava *entertained* the idea that even though romance required work, one day to celebrate romance with some subtle gestures might be desirable within marriage.

Beyond the discourse of romanticism as important but not essential in marriage, several other themes emerged regarding the essentials of marriage. The seven married participants had chosen their husbands, whom they had met in school. Although most parents had tried to influence the choices in some way, they eventually accepted the decisions their daughters had made, prioritizing their daughters’ happiness over the parents’ more rational choice. Although *love* was mentioned in every interview, only five participants directly claimed to love their husbands or boyfriends. Perhaps this fact reflected Chinese reticence about public romance. Or perhaps these five felt pressure to represent their marriages as “a real love match” to the Western interviewer (*distal yet-to-be spoken*).

In every interview, the descriptions associated with ideal and actual relationships reflected the themes of *respect*, *support*, and *independence*. The theme of *respect* embodied valuing each other as individuals who could make reasonable decisions that the spouse might not agree with, such as studying in the US; alternatively, the theme *support* characterized the spouse as honoring and upholding the decisions the individual made, such as choosing to go alone to the US to study, or the discipline chosen to study. These

utterances also seem to carry an unexpected theme of independence or individualism as a correlate of ideal marriage for the participants. This theme of *respect/support/independence* appeared in many places in the interviews.

Olivia had chosen to pursue her dream, and her husband supported her decision to go to the US unaccompanied even though their relatives predicted divorce. Ava chose specifically not to follow the Chinese custom of taking care of the money in the family. She wanted to just trust each other to spend their money appropriately. Emma appreciated how after marriage her husband was less romantic and just told her his real opinions, which were different from hers. She found this honesty more appealing than romance because it indicated respect and independence. Ruth recounted how she had married her husband between graduate degrees so that she would not be so lonely in the US. Nevertheless, she confessed that he was too dependent on her for the first two years as he struggled with mastering English. After four years of marriage they had achieved more independence, which she saw as a better way to conduct marriage. Isabella expressed that “an ideal husband he needs to, he knows you, he loves you, he want to take care of you. But he will also respect you, not just [expect you to] follow his order all the time.” Rachel complained that because she didn’t work in the US, she was too dependent on her husband now, in contrast to the independence she had experienced in China. Perhaps these utterances reflect exposure to global values, or perhaps an unrecognized discourse about female independence and respect within Chinese culture. Indeed, Fong (2002, 2004) has suggested that the one-child policy in China has resulted in greater valuing of girls, which has afforded them opportunities to make independent decisions. This discourse of respect and support also echoes Baxter and Akkoo (2008) regarding the discourse of romance in arranged marriages.

Discussion

These findings demonstrate the usefulness of Baxter’s RDT 2.0 in examining actual utterances between communicators to explore the discourses that influence how they negotiate meaning. This study also clearly demonstrates, as Baxter (2011) proposes, that often two antipodal discourses may exist within the same culture as rhetorical resources for communicating ideas, such as the discourses of individualism and of community. This study demonstrates that both American and Chinese cultures share some belief in destined romantic love, as well as similar ideas about how romance can be important in marriage. Where they differ, however, is that the Chinese participants clearly promoted the practical view of marriage over the romantic and dismissed the American view of romance as too public and costly. Nevertheless, all the participants noted that some subtle romance was welcome, and in fact, they had recognized the value of the romantic in their marriages and premarital relationships. The ascension of the romantic among these participants might reflect a long-term cultural discourse that had been submerged during difficult political times, or it might reflect the empowerment of women in China through reduced fertility rates (Fong, 2002).

This study also identifies the possibility of antipodal discourses of romance within the Western world. The participants in this study negated the Western romantic discourse as too showy and requiring big expenditures, which reflects the romance industry’s message. But to suggest that showy romanticism is the sole discourse of romance in the US is to ignore the everyday romantic rituals of American couples through small gestures

of kindness and connection. Thus the participants demonstrated how showy romance overshadows the subtle romance that might be more commonly treasured within Western marriages.

Also in contrast to the discourse of romanticism, the Chinese participants promoted the ideal marriage as founded on respect, support and independence, which suggests a discourse of individualism (Baxter, 2011). This was an unexpected finding, given that the discourse of collectivism is widely considered a basic Chinese value (Baxter, 2011; Dion & Dion, 1993). Two possible explanations exist for this phenomenon: (1) The participants were exposed to and accepted the Western discourse of individualism as evidenced by their choice to sojourn in the US, or (2) that individualism is an unrecognized discourse circulating within Chinese culture, perhaps as an adjunct to the hierarchy that governs respect in social interactions. Very likely both explanations may contribute to these competing discourses.

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Interview Questions

1. Tell me why you decided to come to the US to live and study.
2. Describe what your parents would consider an ideal marriage?
3. What do you consider “romantic”? How important is romance to your ideal of marriage?
4. Describe your parents’ marriage and how they communicate with one another on a daily basis.
5. How did you and your husband (boyfriend) meet? What were your first impressions of him?
6. Is your relationship with your husband or boyfriend different from or like your parents’ relationship? In what ways? Be specific.
7. [If not married] What will you look for in a husband? Or Why do you think your boyfriend would make a good husband?
8. [If married] In what ways has living in the US changed your relationship with your husband? [If unmarried] In what ways has living in the US changed what you look for in a husband?