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To cite this article: Fan Yang (10 Nov 2023): Inability to love: change of intimate structure in the documentary *Hard love*, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2274812](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2274812)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2274812>



Published online: 10 Nov 2023.



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Inability to love: change of intimate structure in the documentary *Hard love*

Fan Yang 

School of Cultural Creativity and Media, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

ABSTRACT

The documentary *Hard Love* (炼爱) records the life of five middle- to upper-class women in Beijing, focusing on their love aspirations, romantic liaisons, and marital concerns. When acting on one's freedom of choices, why is it that these self-empowered women find love to be so unattainable? I will argue that *Hard Love* reveals the regime of intimacy in modern-day China that is infiltrated and governed by capitalism, resulting in the perfect love script shaped by commodities, the media, romance industry, and that obstructs the ability of middle-class women to love in an imperfect world.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 October 2022
Revised 25 September 2023
Accepted 19 October 2023

KEYWORDS

Intimate structure;
consumerist capitalism; Hard
Love; perfect love script;
blind-date industry

The documentary *Hard Love* (炼爱) debuted at the Shanghai Film Festival in 2021 and was released the following year to cinemas in mainland China. Although only taking in around 430,000RMB at the box office (partly due to the COVID pandemic), the documentary triggered public discussions on social media platforms. *Hard Love* covers the lives of five middle- to upper-class women living in Beijing. The documentary focuses on their love aspirations, romantic liaisons, and marital concerns. Through the mostly-women cast, the female director Dong Xueying intended to reveal the general emotional landscape of single urban women and their diverse expectations for intimacy and marriage (“Hard’ Love” 2022). When interviewed, Dong explained that she avoided feminist stances that incited conflicts and confrontations (e.g., men hating). Instead, Dong reached out to the empathetic side of her male audience and was relieved to receive more positive feedback than hostility. This apolitical and peace-making gesture can perhaps be expounded by two factors: the documentary sponsors (match-making companies) and the director’s post-feminist sensibility (favoring “soft” or “Hard” feminism). When acting on one’s freedom of choices, why is it that these self-empowered female leads find love so unattainable? I will argue that *Hard Love* reveals a regime of intimacy in today’s China that is infiltrated and governed by the consumerist capitalism. This formulates the perfect love script—through commodities, media and romance industries—which obstructs middle-class women’s ability to love in an imperfect reality.

Consumerist capitalism and intimacy

The commercialization of intimacy can be explicitly observed in mainland China's blind-date industry. From blind-date park corners, online dating services, and match-up television shows, this booming industry generally digitalizes people according to their capital in terms of appearance, social, economics, and culture (Yilin Luo, Hao Luo, Huangjing and Li Xiaoyu 2022). Based on the grading results of various capital, people are efficiently matched up with multiple candidates, with whom they communicate simultaneously until the right one emerges (Luo et al. 2022). Finding a partner is thus reduced to a market conduct, specifically "relationshopping," which refers to shopping for the perfect person rather than building a relationship through communication (Rebecca Heino, Nicole Ellison and Jennifer Gibbs 2010, 443). The pursuit of high efficiency and equal capital exchange led to the recent launch of the 985 blind-date business: this business restricts its matchmaking services to graduates from a limited number of top-level universities (under the name of "985 projects"). The goal of this company is to efficiently match people of equally high value, in terms of education and social class.

This market logic is pervasive in the documentary as it guides participants in their search for a partner. Specifically, they follow the logic of investment and consumption to minimize emotional risks and maximize pleasurable rewards. As for the investment formula, the calculation of the return on emotional investment cautions people against falling in love because it "runs the risk of seeing those sentiments unreciprocated" (Eva Illouz 2012, 30). In *Hard Love*, Maggie, the CEO of an AI company in Silicon Valley, agrees with her female friends that pursuing a career is the best investment as it generally rewards in proportion to one's effort. In contrast, emotional investment in a man is compared to purchasing a lottery ticket: most likely ending in an investment failure because the men's market is not "transparent." Consequently, self-investment is a more valued choice, as testified by the decision these women made to freeze their eggs in the U.S., "a purchase of insurance" should they choose to reproduce in the future. The demand for extra security, a guarantee that emotional investment should be rewarded with a perfect relationship, harms the contingency in the essence of love, which leads to the utilitarianism and quantization of love (measured by sexual pleasure) (Alain Badiou and Tran Nicolas Truong 2012). This return-on-investment logic is not circumscribed to businesswomen but revises the courtship ritual at large. As pointed out in the film by Kitty's mother: young people are no longer passionately chasing one another. This love madness cools and is replaced with shrewd restraint where individuals are prepared to promptly leave an intimate relationship to reduce further emotional and time costs. Furthermore, people could hardly afford the latter given the current situation of Neijuan (内卷), a buzzword in Chinese referring to the irrational and excessive competition in the capitalist economy (Shuangge Zhao and Rong Chen 2022).

The calculation of return on investment requires maintenance of value, or more preferably, the increase of value. One of the primary concerns for selecting partners is to retain class status, or to gain upward mobility. In *Hard Love*, Hong Mei, a rural girl, secures her middle-class identity through receiving higher-education and finding a white-collar job in Beijing. She insists that her Mr. Right should at least earn more than her. On the one hand, she denies her brother's accusation of her being a "gold digger" because, as an independent career-woman, she does not intend to financially rely on a man. On the

other hand, a man's wealth is the most crucial criterion for her decision of a future partner. As Hong stated, "he must have the ability to provide what his woman wants." The explicit ambivalence between these modern and conventional values reveals Hong's anxieties over her newly obtained middle-class identity. More than preventing the sinking of class status, she desires upward social mobility in a marriage. This desire is shared by Kitty, whose upper-middle-class family does not loosen her standards of the wealth of Mr. Right. Her father's persuasion that a man's morality is more important than his wealth, as exemplified by Karl Marx, fails to change Kitty's insistence on a class match-up.

As for consumer formula, love and intimacy are commodified for the immediate pleasurable function and become disposable when they malfunction. In this hedonistic consumption, "[p]assion and pain are giving way to pleasant feelings and inconsequential arousal" (Byung-Chul Han 2017, 18). In *Hard Love*, Yue Er's boyfriend clearly asserts that he is for a consumerist style of love as quicker dates (hence more dates) produce more pleasure. Although frowned upon by Yue, she resonates with this hedonistic view. Later though, Yue is unsettled by her strong longing for loyalty and a long-term relationship with a casual date who is flirtatious and can't be bothered to hug her anymore. The fling, that does not last the length of the documentary, is set in sharp contrast with the marriages of the older generations. Kitty's grandparents appear in the film, holding hands and taking care of one another, which stands as a symbol of last century's one-person-one-life love. In the new century, as Kitty comments, "no one fixes a broken-down goods. They just buy a new one."

Mediated love and love performance

Intimacy is generally commercialized by the market logic, but what are the specific mediums to facilitate such a commercial permeation? As Illouz observed, it is "through commodities, media images, stories, and technologies" that "[t]he modern subject increasingly apprehends his or her desires and emotions" (2012, 209). These various mediations "in turn have an impact on the structure of desire, how and what is desired, and the role of desire in the psyche" (Illouz 2012, 209). In *Hard Love*, the mediations represented include, apart from commodities and media images, intimacy guidebooks, blind date rituals and wedding ceremonies. These help to shape and compose a perfect love script for single women. The gap between perfect love script and not-perfect reality makes love hard in *Hard Love*. I will argue that the dilemma characters face in the documentary, largely representative of many Chinese middle-class women, is caused by their voluntary participation in the performance of the perfect love script designed by the market.

In *Hard Love*, Kitty constructs her identity (including her name) based on the cartoon image of Hello Kitty. She further fuels this self-construction through continuous consumption of Hello Kitty products. Similarly, she establishes her Mr. Right based on television romances and films. When asked about her expectation of Mr. Right, she began to recite lines from the film *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995), "my hero will come to marry me riding rainbow clouds." The "fictional emotion," not interactive with the real-world (Bijoy Boruah 1988), develops through Kitty's attachment to romantic films, albeit does not necessarily translate into real-life emotions. At the dining table of blind dates, apparently without rainbow clouds,

Kitty refused to talk anymore after a very reluctant self-introduction. The clear gap between fiction and reality is thus denied any chance to negotiate a potential convergence.

If romantic films and television create fantasies for women, the aim of self-help guidebooks on dating and marriage is to provide step-by-step instructions in a realistic fashion. However, following the post-feminist narratives of desirable femininities, strict body management and individual woman's self-fulfilment (Fan Yang 2020), these self-help guidebooks serve as another medium to shape the female desire for the perfect intimate relationship. Intently reading a dating guidebook on the train, Hong takes notes and recites lines that "love is eternal bliss; love requires no envy and no bragging . . ." She shows no envy towards the happily married and expectant couple next to her; instead, she feels slightly contemptuous for this not-perfect-yet-real couple because they fail to shine as brightly as couples in the guidebooks (they are not in perfect shape). Scripted anticipation based on the mainstream narratives promoted in the media and cultural products may induce constant disappointment caused by this defective reality. When the love script failed in daily life, these female characters did not question the fictional nature of their fantasies, but rather adhered to them. A blind date sequence captures Hong's agony after her romantic script is distorted by her date. She simply could not accept that her date proffered a cheating scenario in a discussion on marriage. This negative projection of love, even in terms of assumption, drives her to cry in the middle of the blind date. Obviously, her principle of loyalty in love is beyond being stained. Moreover, the fiction created in her imagination by the media narratives is irreconcilable with this reality.

If the consumption of commodities, media and guidebooks constructs women's desire to work out the perfect love script, the faith in its final success is tactfully maintained by rituals involving people collectively celebrating the fulfilment of perfect love, in reality. In 2022, the wedding industry in mainland China—selling complete romantic packages including bridal photography, diamond rings, professionally hosted banquets, and honeymoons—had an estimated worth of RMB24 trillion. The wedding industry also promotes the idea that the more luxurious a wedding ceremony is, the more successful a marriage will be. Over the last decade, the escalating competition for luxuriousness has resulted in wedding ceremonies becoming spectacularized, thereby serving as a showtime of loyalty and wealth for the newlyweds. The highlight of a wedding attended by Kitty, in the documentary, was the bride singing while suspended above the stage. Kitty places a ring substitute on her own finger to maximize her identification with the bride. These dream-weaving weddings seem to promise to reward participants with the same firework climax, if they follow the perfect love script. The wish to be the next diva is in part the reason for Hong's emotional tears at the wedding ceremony. To achieve the final spectacular performance, she also practises small rituals organized by match-up companies, e.g., playing little games to increase communication (verbal and physical) with potential dates who had also enlisted with the company. After the screening of *Hard Love*, the director played the role of a matchmaker, turning the documentary into a personal promotion for female leads wanting to try their luck among the audience. What the director failed to reflect is that middle-class single women do not lack luck; rather, they need to restore their ability to love by resisting the perfect love script designed by the market.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Misha Kavka for her invaluable suggestions, continued support, and encouragement. I also thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Fan Yang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5965-8913>

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