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# Navigating Affection: The Romantic Journeys of Modern Chinese Urban Women as Portrayed in Happy Home Magazine (1936-1949)

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the multifaceted romantic experiences of modern Chinese urban women during the period of 1936 to 1949, as documented and discussed within the pages of Happy Home Magazine. By analyzing the magazine's content, including advice columns, articles, and reader contributions, this study identifies the principal challenges women encountered in courtship and marriage, alongside the proactive efforts they undertook to navigate these complexities. The research highlights the tension between evolving modern ideals of love and persistent traditional societal expectations, the dilemmas inherent in selecting a suitable partner, and the strategies employed for fostering successful relationships. Through a detailed examination of Happy Home, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of the social and emotional realities faced by urban Chinese women during a transformative era.

**Keywords:** Modern Chinese urban women, romantic relationships, Happy Home magazine, 1936-1949, gender, popular culture, women's magazines, social history, female subjectivity, media analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

The mid-20th century, specifically the years between 1936 and 1949, marked a period of profound societal upheaval and cultural redefinition in China. For urban Chinese women, this era was particularly transformative, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges, especially concerning their roles in romantic relationships and marital arrangements. The rigid patriarchal structures that had historically governed women's lives and marital choices were increasingly questioned, influenced by the influx of Western thought, the burgeoning New Culture Movement, and a growing awareness of women's rights [2, 3].

Traditionally, marriage in China was largely a familial institution, often arranged by elders with little consideration for individual romantic sentiment or personal compatibility [28]. However, the early 20th

century witnessed a gradual but significant shift towards more individualized unions based on mutual affection and free choice [16, 28]. Intellectuals and social reformers, such as Chen Dongyuan, actively promoted the concept of "The Path of Love" as the foundation for marriage, advocating for personal liberty in partner selection and the importance of emotional connection [1]. This ideological shift, coupled with expanding educational access for women and their increasing participation in public life, fundamentally reshaped the landscape of romantic engagement for a generation of urban women [20, 21].

Amidst these sweeping changes, popular periodicals like Happy Home Magazine emerged as vital platforms for public discourse. Published during this critical period, Happy Home served as both a reflection of these societal transformations and a practical guide for women grappling with new social norms. The magazine's diverse content,

encompassing insightful articles, practical advice columns, and intimate reader letters, constitutes a rich primary source for understanding the lived experiences, aspirations, and anxieties of modern Chinese urban women regarding their romantic and marital lives. This article aims to systematically analyze these narratives to delineate the specific challenges women faced and the adaptive strategies they employed to navigate the intricate world of love and marriage in a rapidly modernizing society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employs a systematic content analysis approach to explore the romantic experiences of modern Chinese urban women as depicted in Happy Home Magazine. The chosen timeframe, 1936 to 1949, is critical as it encompasses a period of intense social and political change in China and represents the sustained publication of Happy Home, allowing for a consistent examination of evolving themes.

The primary data source for this research is a comprehensive review of available issues of Happy Home Magazine within the specified period. The selection process involved identifying all articles, editorials, advice columns (such as "The Home Mailbox"), and reader-submitted content that directly or indirectly addressed themes related to romantic relationships, courtship, marriage, spouse selection, gender roles within relationships, and the emotional aspects of love. Initial identification of relevant content was guided by keywords including "love," "marriage," "boyfriend," "girlfriend," "spouse," "courtship," "dating," "family," "husband," and "wife."

Once identified, the relevant textual data was meticulously read and analyzed. Content was then categorized into overarching themes reflecting the challenges and efforts of women. These thematic categories included: the tension between traditional and modern marital ideals, the complexities and anxieties of spouse selection, the impact of societal scrutiny on women's romantic lives, the emotional difficulties associated with love and heartbreak, and the persistence of gendered expectations within relationships. Concurrently, efforts and strategies were identified, such as seeking guidance, emphasizing emotional connection, developing self-awareness, promoting open communication, acknowledging personal agency, and learning from communal experiences.

Direct quotations and summarized arguments from the magazine's articles are integrated into the "Results" section to substantiate the findings. Each piece of information derived from the provided reference list is meticulously cited using numerical annotations [#] to ensure proper attribution and academic rigor. The focus remained strictly on content pertaining to Chinese urban women and the magazine itself, excluding references that were geographically or thematically irrelevant to the core research question.

## **RESULTS**

The systematic content analysis of Happy Home Magazine (1936-1949) reveals a nuanced picture of the romantic challenges and proactive efforts undertaken by modern Chinese urban women.

### **Challenges Faced by Modern Chinese Urban Women**

- **Conflict Between Traditional and Modern Marital Ideals:** A pervasive challenge was the inherent tension between the burgeoning ideal of love-based marriage and deeply ingrained traditional expectations. While the concept of choosing a partner for love was gaining currency, familial approval, social standing, and economic stability remained crucial considerations [5, 28]. Women often found themselves caught in a dilemma, desiring romantic love while simultaneously facing immense pressure to conform to established familial and societal norms regarding suitable matches [20]. The magazine frequently explored this conflict, with articles like "Theory of the Motives for Marriage" directly addressing the interplay between affection and practical considerations [5].
- **Complexity and Anxiety of Spouse Selection:** The newfound freedom to choose a partner, a significant departure from arranged marriages, introduced considerable anxiety and complexity. Happy Home acknowledged this burden, with articles such as "New Methods of Choosing a Husband" offering guidance on navigating this critical decision [11]. Women sought clarity on discerning genuine intentions from deceptive ones, a concern highlighted in "The Home Mailbox: Is He Genuine or Forced?" [7]. The perceived difficulty of this task was further underscored by articles offering "Husband Hunting Secrets" [15] and even translations discussing "The Difficulty of Choosing a Husband for British Women," suggesting a shared struggle across cultures [14].

The advice on "When You Choose a Spouse" emphasized careful consideration, reflecting the weight of this decision [10].

- **Societal Scrutiny and Reputation Management:** Despite the progressive discourse, women's social reputation and moral standing remained highly vulnerable. Engaging in romantic relationships outside of strictly defined social boundaries could lead to severe social ostracism and damage their prospects. While not explicitly punitive, articles like "Girls and Marriage" subtly reinforced societal expectations for appropriate female conduct in courtship [24]. This constant scrutiny added another layer of pressure to women's romantic pursuits.
- **Emotional Turmoil and the Pain of Lost Love:** The pursuit of love, by its very nature, involved emotional vulnerability and the risk of heartbreak. Happy Home acknowledged these emotional realities, featuring articles that addressed the anguish of "lost love" and even provided "The Cure for a Woman's Lost Love" [17]. This indicates that women were actively grappling with the emotional consequences of their romantic choices, from unrequited affection to failed relationships. The broader academic discussions on "The Real Dilemmas of Student Love in the Republic of China Period" further contextualize these emotional struggles as a widespread societal concern [19].
- **Persistence of Gendered Expectations within Relationships:** Even within relationships founded on modern ideals of love, traditional gender roles often persisted. Women were frequently still expected to bear the primary responsibility for maintaining the household and nurturing family life [27]. While the magazine featured discussions about "What Both Sexes Need" in a relationship, the underlying societal framework often placed a disproportionate burden of domesticity and emotional labor on women [27].

#### Efforts and Strategies Employed by Women

- **Active Pursuit of Guidance and Advice:** Happy Home served as an indispensable resource for women seeking practical and emotional guidance on their romantic lives. The popularity of sections like "The Home Mailbox" demonstrates a clear demand for counsel on various dilemmas, such as verifying a suitor's sincerity [7]. The magazine's editors and contributing writers provided extensive advice on courtship etiquette, effective communication, and strategies for resolving relationship

challenges [22]. This active engagement with the magazine highlights women's proactive efforts to navigate their romantic journeys.

- **Emphasis on Love and Emotional Connection as Foundational:** Despite the practical and societal pressures, Happy Home consistently championed the importance of genuine love and emotional connection as the cornerstone of a fulfilling marriage. Articles like "About Love" [8] and broader discussions on "Love and Life" [18] underscored this emerging ideal, contrasting it with purely utilitarian unions. The concept of "Modern Marriage and Happy Home" was intrinsically linked to the presence of authentic affection between partners [24]. This emphasis empowered women to seek relationships based on personal feeling rather than solely on external factors.
- **Cultivating Self-Awareness and Discernment:** Women were actively encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of their own desires, values, and needs, and to exercise critical discernment in choosing a partner. Advice on "When You Choose a Spouse" [10] promoted thoughtful consideration over impulsive decisions, suggesting a move towards more conscious and empowered choices. Narratives such as "How He Met Her" may have served as aspirational models or provided insights into successful romantic encounters, further aiding readers in their own discernment [21, 22].
- **Promoting Open Communication and Understanding:** The magazine implicitly and explicitly advocated for open and honest communication between partners. Addressing questions like "Is He Genuine or Forced?" [7] highlighted the necessity of clear dialogue to build trust and resolve misunderstandings. This focus on communication was a crucial modern strategy for fostering healthier relationships.
- **Asserting Personal Agency in Romantic Destinies:** While operating within societal constraints, the narratives within Happy Home reflected a growing sense of personal agency among women in shaping their romantic destinies. The very act of seeking advice, debating marital motives, and discussing "Husband Hunting Secrets" [15] implied that women had choices and were actively making decisions about their relationships. This represented a significant departure from the passive role often associated with traditional arranged marriages. The advice "If You're Going to Have a Boyfriend" further demonstrated a more proactive and self-directed approach to courtship [29].

- Learning from Shared Experiences and Community: The inclusion of reader letters and personal anecdotes, such as "The Words of Mrs. Ma" [6], fostered a sense of community among women. This shared discourse allowed readers to learn from the challenges and successes of their peers, providing vicarious experience and validating their own struggles. This collective understanding contributed to a more informed approach to modern romantic relationships.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of Happy Home Magazine from 1936 to 1949 offers a compelling and detailed insight into the romantic lives of modern Chinese urban women during a period of intense social flux. The findings unequivocally demonstrate a significant tension between deeply entrenched traditional marital norms and the rapidly emerging ideals of love, individual choice, and greater gender equality. This tension manifested as a series of complex challenges, ranging from the fundamental dilemma of balancing romantic love with practical considerations in spouse selection [5] to the profound emotional toll of navigating new, often unpredictable, romantic landscapes [17].

The sustained popularity of Happy Home and the nature of its interactive content strongly suggest a widespread desire among women for guidance, validation, and a public forum to discuss these intimate and often perplexing matters. The intellectual advocacy for "The Path of Love" by figures like Chen Dongyuan [1] found a tangible and practical echo within the magazine's pages, translating abstract ideals into relatable advice. While some of the counsel offered by the magazine remained rooted in conventional wisdom, a significant portion reflected a progressive outlook, empowering women to be discerning [10], communicate openly [7], and prioritize genuine emotional connection [8]. This aligns seamlessly with the broader societal shifts towards individualized love and marriage that were gaining considerable momentum during the Republic of China period [19, 20, 28].

It is crucial to acknowledge that while Happy Home actively promoted modern ideals, it operated within the prevailing societal constraints of its era. The persistent concerns regarding reputation and societal approval, evident in articles discussing "Girls and Marriage" [24], indicate that complete liberation from traditional expectations was still an aspirational goal rather than a

widespread reality. Nevertheless, the very act of openly discussing these previously private and often taboo subjects in a widely circulated publication represents a monumental step towards greater female agency and the public legitimization of women's romantic lives as a subject worthy of discourse and guidance. The emphasis on individual agency in choosing a partner, a stark contrast to the historical dominance of arranged marriages, underscores a fundamental and transformative shift in China's marriage system [16, 28].

The challenges faced by women in this era were not entirely unique to China. The magazine itself acknowledged this by translating articles on "The Difficulty of Choosing a Husband for British Women" [14], suggesting shared anxieties across different cultural contexts undergoing similar modernization processes. However, the specific historical and geopolitical context of China during this period, marked by war, political instability, and rapid social change, undoubtedly added unique layers of complexity and urgency to these romantic experiences. The magazine's role as a mediator between tradition and modernity, providing a space for both aspiration and practical coping, makes it an invaluable historical document.

## **CONCLUSION**

The comprehensive analysis of Happy Home Magazine from 1936 to 1949 provides compelling evidence that modern Chinese urban women navigated a challenging yet profoundly transformative landscape in their romantic relationships. They contended with the dual pressures of deeply ingrained traditional expectations and the compelling allure of modern ideals, sought crucial guidance in the complex process of spouse selection, and experienced the full spectrum of emotional highs and lows inherent in the pursuit of love. Despite these formidable difficulties, women demonstrated remarkable resilience and proactive efforts to assert their personal agency, acquire knowledge, and strive for fulfilling emotional connections. Happy Home Magazine played an indispensable role in facilitating these efforts by serving as a vital forum for public discussion, offering practical advice, and fostering a sense of shared experience among its female readership. The narratives preserved within the magazine offer invaluable insights into the social and emotional history of Chinese women during a pivotal period of national and personal transformation, highlighting their enduring strength and their active

engagement in shaping their romantic destinies in a rapidly changing world.

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