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CHINESE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AND YUAN

Romantic Relationship and "yuan〞:

A Preliminary Study of Chinese in Hong Kong

Ling Chen

Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

224 Waterloo Rd.

Hong Kong SAR, China

852-3411-7807; chling@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract

This study investigates traditional Chinese concept of <u>yuan</u> and romantic relationship. A small-scale survey of young people in Hong Kong found the belief in yuan prevalent among respondents. Romantic love was found to be a better predictor of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. The belief in <u>yuan</u> appears to have tenuous direct effects on satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships, but serves as a mediating factor by enhancing the effects of romantic love.

Keywords: Chinese, Yuan, Romantic relationship, Relationship quality

On the one hand, the Chinese are known to be collectivistic and value relationships in general; on the other hand, however, they are also known to downplay romantic relationship in favor of family continuity (e.g., Chen, 1993; Gao, 1998; Hsu, 1986). This study is designed to further investigate how romantic relationships are perceived by young Chinese adults, living in Hong Kong.

Past studies have found that, compared to their counterparts in the United States, Chinese individuals perceive lower similarity (Gao & Gudykunst, 1993) and lower passion between themselves and romantic partners. However, perceived intimacy and commitment has not been found to vary across cultures (Gao, 2001) (c.f. Lin & Rusbult, 1995).

Examining a traditional Chinese concept, yuan, may help shed light on perceptions of romantic relationship in the Chinese culture and encourage systematic investigation of their nature and functions. Within the Chinese culture, yuan is the causative process through which an individual's conduct in past lives becomes part of his or her relationship (s) (Chang & Holt, 1991). In other words, relationships exist because of yuan. Based on the established association between the perceived quality of romantic relationships and communication patterns (e.g., Johnson & Roloff, 1998; McGonagold, Kessler, & Gotlib, 1993), the belief in yuan is hypothesized to relate positively to the relationship quality variables of satisfaction, commitment and love (Hypothesis 1a), and negatively to the communication variables of frequency of arguments and perceived consequence of frequent argument (Hypothesis 1b). A research question was posed to ascertain the factor best predicting satisfaction and commitment in a romantic relationship for Chinese young adults living in Hong Kong.

Method

Participants. The participants in this study were 197 Hong Kong residents, 86% college students; all respondents were between the ages of 18 and 33 (*mean* = 21.72). Sixty five percent of the participants (*n* = 127) were female and 34% (*n* = 66) were male; four

participants did not specify biological sex. Across the sample, 17% of the respondents reported that they had never been involved in a romantic relationship and were excluded in the relationship main analysis.

Instruments. The questionnaire was the Belief in Yuan Scale, developed from yuan aspects mentioned in Chang and Holt (1991), and asked participants to respond to six items tapping their beliefs: a) in <u>yuan</u> (i.e., "I believe that there is yuan in the world."); b) about <u>yuan</u> and a relationship (i.e., "It is because of <u>yuan</u> that two people meet and become involved," and "<u>Yuan</u> enables two people to be related and should be treasured"); and c) in individual efforts and <u>yuan</u> (i.e., "As long as there remains some yuan, my partner and I will be together,""Without yuan, all efforts will not help in a relationship," and "If they work on it, romantic partners can stay together even without yuan"). Response options ranged from *1* (completely disagree) to *7* (completely agree). The items were summed to produce the score of belief in yuan. This scale achieved acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .76$

Romantic relationship quality was measured with three sub-scales: satisfaction (three items; e.g., "I am satisfied with the relationship," and "I am happy with the relationship."); commitment (four items; e.g., I want the relationship to last," and "I feel committed to maintaining the relationship."); and romantic love (nine items; e.g., "I would forgive my partner practically anything,""If I could never be with my partner, I would feel miserable," and "If I were lonely, my first thought would be to seek my partner out.") Items assessing satisfaction and commitment were adapted from Rusbult (1983), whereas questions assessing romantic love were adapted from the work of Rubin (Rubin, 1970, 1973) and Rusbult (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow 1986). Response options for all items ranged from *1* (completely disagree) to *8* (completely agree). The following reliabilities, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha, were observed: .95 for satisfaction, .97 for commitment, and .98 for romantic love. Variables were computed by the sum of items in each subscale.

Frequency of arguments was measured with the question "How frequently you two argue about something?" for which the response options ranged from *1* (almost never) to *7* (all the time). The perceived consequences of frequent arguments were assessed via three items designed to tap the couple's intimacy, strength, and closeness. Response options for each item ranged from *1* (extremely positive) to *7* (extremely negative). When combined, the overall reliability for these items was high, $\alpha = .95$.

Results

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for the variables included in the study. ANOVA were conducted to check for sex effect. Sex differences were not significant

Correlations were used to test the hypotheses. A significant, positive correlation was observed between participants' belief in yuan and relationship satisfaction, $r = .20$, $p = .029$. Thus, Hypothesis 1a was partially confirmed; Hypothesis 1b was not confirmed. Not surprisingly, both satisfaction and romantic love were negatively related to frequency of arguments, $r = -.34$, $p < .001$. A substantial correlation was also found between frequency of arguments and perceptions of the consequence, $r = .82$, $p < .001$. The more frequently there were arguments, the more negative the perceived consequences. Controlling for yuan-belief to explore its effect, partial correlations were negative between relation satisfaction and perceived consequences of frequent arguments, and between commitment and frequency of arguments, $r = -.18$, $p < .05$. The magnitude of these partial correlations was larger than that of the zero-order correlations, suggesting mediating effects of the belief in yuan (Table 2).

Hierarchical regression was run to determine causal relations and answer the research question. The main variable of interest, belief in yuan, was entered first, romantic love entered second, as a predictor of satisfaction and of commitment. The model accounted for 30% and 34% of variance respectively. Romantic love turned out to be a better predictor, accounting for over 26% of variance in satisfaction ($\beta = .514$, $p < .001$) and almost 32% in

commitment ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$). Belief in yuan accounted for less than five percent of variance in each criterion ($R^2 = .039$ and .024), serving as a mediator (Table 3).

Discussion

Because this is the first empirical study of its kind, it would be premature to draw firm conclusions regarding how young adults' belief in yuan affects their romantic relationship. With this caveat in mind, the findings do suggest some interesting trends. The sample consisted exclusively of young people who may, in general, be less influenced than older generations by traditional culture. Having said that, however, for young Chinese adults, the belief in yuan does appear to have tenuous, direct effects on satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships; it serves as a mediating factor by enhancing the effects of love. Highly satisfied individuals seem to argue less with their partner, but perceive frequent arguments more positively, a tendency further enhanced when they believe in yuan. The findings suggest that frequent argument is also less likely where partners experience commitment and romantic love within the relationship. Higher relationship quality may somehow insulate them from or reduce the negativity of frequent arguments and result in a more positive perception.

This study introduces a Chinese notion to the vocabulary of relationship studies as it has verified the utility of the culture-specific concept of yuan. It also confirmed the internal consistency of the relationship quality scale in a Chinese context and pointed to the probability that variables of satisfaction, commitment and love may be culture-general. A limitation of this study is common rater biases, although respondent anonymity provided some control (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). Overall, we strongly believe that cross-cultural studies of romantic relationships would benefit from further investigation into people's beliefs in yuan.

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Author Note

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for Belief in Yuan and Romantic Relationship Variables by Sex

Variables	Female		Male		F
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Belief in Yuan (N=197)	29.6	5.6	28.9	6.2	.574 ns
Relationship Quality (N=122)					
Relationship Satisfaction	18.1	3.6	17.1	4.9	1.421 ns
Relationship Commitment	22.5	5.8	22.5	5.8	.001 ns
Romantic Love	56.6	10.2	57	14.7	.125 ns

Table 2.

Intercorrelations among Belief in Yuan and Relationship Variables

	Relationship Satisfaction	Relationship Commitment	Romantic Love	Argument Frequency	Perception of Consequences
Belief in Yuan	.197*	.154	.128	.081	.144~
Relationship Satisfaction		.706** (.697**)	.531** (.520**)	-.340** (-.368**)	-.175~ (-184*)
Relationship Commitment			.581** (.572**)	-.167 (-.184*)	-.060 (-.064)
Romantic Love				-.338** (-.355**)	-.134 (-.137)
Argument Frequency					.835** (.817**)

* p < 0.05 (2-tailed)   ** p < 0.001 (2-tailed)   ~ p = .055 (2-tailed)

Partial correlations in parentheses with belief in yuan controlled for.

Table 3.

<u>Hierarchical Regression for Variables Predicting Relationship Satisfaction and Commitment</u>

	Relationship Satisfaction					
	1			2		
Predictors	<u>B</u>	SE B	β	<u>B</u>	SE B	β
Belief in Yuan	.142	.064	.197	.09	.055	.131
Romantic Love				.178	.027	.514
R^2		.039			.299	
F for change in R^2		4.82*			25.57**	

	Relationship Commitment					
	1			2		
Predictors	<u>B</u>	SE B	β	<u>B</u>	SE B	β
Belief in Yuan	.143	.083	.154	.07	.069	.081
Romantic Love				.255	.033	.570
R^2		.024			.343	
F for change in R^2		2.93 ns			31.38**	

* $\underline{p} < 0.05$ ** $\underline{p} < 0.001$