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The impact of squares on profiling perfect partners
A reflection:

"Recently I caught up with some uni girlfriends and we were giggling about old boyfriends when one said to me, 'Eh, Aggie, your boyfriends were not Chinese, leh? And then I find you on Facebook, and you are married to an ang mor ah! Why you never go out with Chinese guys, ah?'

My other friend chipped in, 'Yah, Chinese guys are so ...,' and added wistfully, 'That's why Michael was so different.'

Yes, Michael was different. I have never met Michael but I've seen him on Facebook cos he's married to another friend of mine, and I knew exactly what she meant. Though Chinese, he didn't fit the square. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

How might one define the square? I define 'squareness' as the fictions of Chineseness, or 'essentialising master narratives' (Meerwald, 2001, p. 388) that impact on one's perceptions of the other.

I draw on Schlunke's (2006) reference to a 'narrative that forms a “common sense”' (p. 43) and Weedon's (1997) notion of common sense to develop this idea. The power of common sense, comes from 'its claim to be natural, obvious and therefore true' (Weedon, 1997, p. 74). In short, common sense is similar to 'ways of constituting knowledge' (Weedon, 1997, p. 105) to impact on, for example, who we think we are as Chinese women and who we think the 'Other' is. A square, is thus the frame that governs the seer and the seen, the perceiver/perceived/perceiving.

For example, like common sense, a square conceptually and or metaphorically consists of various social meanings and ways of reading the world that reinforce fictions of Chineseness. Squares then, are the interests of particular groups. They are static in that they become fixed and are adopted as truths. As such, they ignore or mask contradictions and contextual changes. From the perspective of the hegemonic square, a Chinese person is thus expected to execute a particular fixed performance of Chineseness.
‘The square’, in the earlier conversation with my girlfriends, leads to a view that gendered ethnicities are set according to binaric binds. For example, Chinese guys are expected to behave in a particular manner and if they don't, they are considered to be different, and not Chinese, and they are placed outside the square.

I deploy the politics of liminality as a space to interrogate the idea of Chineseness, and more particularly, I use it to question how we profile our imagined potential perfect partners. I marry Turner’s (1969) idea of being neither here nor there, with Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the third space, to create a new location that can be understood as being ‘neither, yet both’, and ‘sometimes this, sometimes that’. To illustrate the liminal space, a coin represents a useful metaphor. For example, the question ‘Heads or tails?’ speaks to a dichotomising of the coin into binary opposites and suggests that the coin is either one or the other. Yet, in reality, the coin is both. It is neither heads nor tails; it is heads and tails. The coin is a composite whole. Consider further the notion of boundary. Where does the side with the head begin and where does it end? And where does the tail begin or end? Both are fused to become the one coin. Sometimes you see the head, and sometimes the tail, but both have become a seamless continuum.

To further illustrate the liminal space, I add that while Schlunke’s (2006) assertion that ‘the telescope imagination brings into being one view while excluding another [with the] technology of the telescope [meaning] that at no point can the observed ... look back’ (p. 44), I add that liminality inverts the role of the seer to that of the seen, and vice versa. The seer and the seen become collapsed to produce a double-consciousness (Yancy, 2010). That moment of double-consciousness exposes how thinking 'inside' the square produces essentialist notions of the Chinese woman and man, and the Australian male.

I argue that one is often oblivious to the power of thinking inside ‘a square’. One is ‘constrained ... in such an unconscious manner that [they] have difficulties acting outside its scope’ (Guimarães-Costa & Cunha, 2009, p. 159). Yancy (2010) states, for example, that what one knows at the conscious level is ambushed by the subconscious. In other words, in the context of profiling perfect partners, the conscious is ambushed by the subconscious fictions of Chineseness. These fabrications frame our perceptions of the other according to the limitations of the square.

To illustrate, in the following excerpt, a Sarong Party girl, or a Singaporean girl who only dates western men, exemplifies the influence of ‘squareness’:
Some more Asian men are not as socially sophisticated as ang mor men. For example, when I'm at a bar, I can approach an ang mor man, even a stranger, any time and they will chat with me, buy me drinks. So pleasant!

Whereas these Asian men are downright unpleasant – always coming up and trying to chat and buy me drinks. I mean, they're complete strangers! What do they think I am? The sleazeballs!

Here, it can be argued that this girl above is blinded by the contradictions in her perceptions of Asian and western men. Although the social context is the same for her interactions with both groups of men, the Asian men can do no right, as they are ‘complete strangers and sleazeballs’, in contrast to the western men who can do no wrong and are paradoxically albeit ‘sophisticated’ and ‘pleasant’ – ‘strangers’.

To further set the scene, the masculinity of the men are contrasted, with the Chinese man represented as weedy and emasculated versus the tall, dark and handsome western knight in shining armour who sweeps the diasporic Chinese woman off her feet. Such stereotypical constructions of the Chinese and white Australian men inform the Chinese women’s perceptions of the perfect partner.

Citing Chin (in Wong & Ana, 1999) I ask: But ‘what is wrong . . . with being considered passive, sexless, nerdy, evil, a Fu Manchu or a computer technician “if that is really what one is?”

What is wrong, I argue, is that such images fashion fictions that in turn shape the squares that regulate the construct ‘attractive partner’. This hegemonic fiction then inflicts violence on the diasporic and local Chinese community in Australia. This frames how one is perceived by the other, how one then perceives the self, then how one thinks one is perceived by the other, and how one perceives the other! This is now elaborated.

**How one is perceived by the other**

Here, I turn the camera lens on diasporic Chinese males to gaze and glean insights into their male perceptions of diasporic Chinese women, which I assert, in turn, influence how the women perceive themselves. To achieve this, I collected data from email correspondence sent to a group of diasporic Chinese men which invited them to: 'Tell me what you think of the different women with Chinese background whom you know in Australia. What are they like? How do you perceive them?’ From their responses, it was evident that the men categorised the women into two groups. The views represented images of the women either as typical traditionalists or as a less than virtuous and
somewhat subversive Modern Miss, as we can see in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Traditionalist</th>
<th>Modern Miss</th>
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<tr>
<td>• belongs to the older generation;</td>
<td>• is seen as a feminist or Australianised Chinese;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• has strong family values;</td>
<td>• has femme fatale powers and plays her man 'like a fiddle';</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• expresses filial piety towards her parents;</td>
<td>• is highly independent and seeks equal opportunities with men;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is insular;</td>
<td>• is 'not as obedient and submissive as Chinese women in other Asian countries possibly due to [her] level of education' which gives her an ability to reason (danger zone!));</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is 'too overly protected by her parents';</td>
<td>• has more easy-going life perspectives;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• does not 'go out too late at night';</td>
<td>• is the 'wilder types of girls; the real party animal, boozing types';</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is virtuous but not necessarily a better mother as she tends to offload her role as a mother to maids;</td>
<td>• is interesting yet risky: 'I get confused about how to treat her. If you're too nice, you end up getting squeezed';</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• is dependent on her partner;</td>
<td>• 'see[s] her parents as a burden due to the different cultural influences' (not good daughter-in-law material).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• is not independent in her thinking (interestingly, this is deemed unattractive by the men).</td>
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One way of understanding the meanings attributed to both groups is that they are naturalised according to geographical space (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Meerwald, 2001). This means, the qualities of the traditionalists are regarded as a consequence of living in the Asian region and the diasporic woman’s relocation to Australia magically transforms her due to the convergence of location and perceptions of white Australian morality that the men harbour.

In turn, the women respond to this perceived fictional Chineseness by either conforming to it or by rejecting it altogether. Both the women and the men succumb to the binaric bind without questioning why members of the Chinese community would want to police the traditional values associated with the constructed virtuous Chinese woman (see Meerwald, 2002, pp. 130-131). What is not considered in this construct is the possibility of liminality to challenge the perceiver-perceived hegemony. Liminality provides a space to recognise that it is possible to practise other forms of Chineseness and still be
Chinese, still be virtuous.

**How one perceives the self and how one thinks one is perceived by the other**

Shifting focus, the data I gathered also indicated that the women's self perception mirrored the men's binaric categories. For example, some of the women found the rules of traditionalism too stifling, and therefore rebelled and strived to rewrite the norms for themselves. In this light, they are perceived as unChinese by the Chinese community’s hegemonic cultural practices, and by the women themselves. This is encapsulated in the following extract:

> I am not a real China woman. I am already half-half. Just like Aussie half. I like freedom. I won't let people control me. I just do anything I want. ... When I was young, I was already like that because this is my character. ... They never see me as one hundred per cent Chinese woman because I'm open-minded.

What this reveals is that although this woman acknowledges her love of freedom which she views is part of her character, she is constrained by thinking ‘inside’ the hegemonic ‘square’ of what constitutes Chineseness. This constraint caused her to see herself as unChinese. This may be understood as resulting from her own practices of Chineseness that are perceived first, by herself as ‘outside the square’; and second, reinforced by the men as ‘outside the square’. Some women thus feel ostracised as they don't quite fit. Therefore, some diasporic Chinese women stand in limbo because they feel compelled to conform to belong, or to reject conformity and become an ‘other’.

I argue that, if she is able to slip into that liminal space, it would free her from that limbo of having to choose. Liberated from such constraints, she would then see that it is okay to be ‘sometimes this’, and ‘sometimes that’, a confluence of both depending on her context.

**How one perceives the other**

As stated earlier, some diasporic women interviewed prefer western men to Chinese men. How they come to perceive these so called ‘China men’, I maintain, is a crime of thinking ‘inside the square’. To elaborate, Ayres (2000) asserts that sexual preferences are shaped by two global factors: 'The idiosyncrasies of our personal histories – the first boy or girl we fiddled with in the back shed [and] the social signifiers of the “desirable body” - movie stars, supermodels.' My own experiences seem to support his idea, for example:

> Donny Osmond, Shaun Cassidy, John Travolta and Rick Springfield all used to gaze at me from their shiny posters. My early teenage wall in
Malaysia was covered with western pin-up boys. I wasn't very fussy about who went up as long as it was male and ‘ang mor’ or western. No Chinese guy ever made it to my wall, not even Bruce Lee, and definitely not one of those kungfu guys in dresses and pig tails. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

From my research, I came to understand that many of the women in my study shared this preference. For example, one woman remarked:

I was into Mills and Boons then so my ideal partner would have been several years older than me, really rough and domineering, authoritative, tall, dark and handsome. Sweep me off my feet. Of course, he'd be a Westerner because all the guys in Mills and Boons were Westerners.

What this suggests is a kind of imperial colonisation of the mind. This may be attributed to the possibility that growing up on a diet of Western literature, from Austen to cheap Mills and Boons, meant that it was subconsciously difficult to visualise short, hairless, and slanty-eyed Chinese males as attractive. The following woman’s views are particularly fascinating, for example, as she described the Chinese boys she knew from childhood in asexual terms, as such:

Of my childhood friends the boys were very feminine. I didn't view them as girls. I didn't view them as boys. Like I wouldn't lump them with the boys but you wouldn't call them girls. They just weren't boys. (Laughter) I cannot see them as my ideal partner because they weren't boys. Well, if they are not boys, how can they be men?

In addition, other perceptions of Chinese men emerging from the interviews included images of them as spoilt mummy’s boys, who were sexist, sexually unfaithful, silent and stoic. Men who did not fit these squares were seen as exceptions. They were not seen as Chinese men who happen to practise different forms of Chineseness due to their relocation to Australia, travel, exposure to other cultures, values, and so on.

In closing, I started off this morning by stating that ‘squares’ have the capacity to distort perceptions, and that liminality, as a conceptual device, enables us to interrogate such perceptions. Yet this is challenging, given the hegemony of the square is so domineering. Squares are prisons walls in the fabric of consciousness. In the social and cultural constructs of subjectivities, there is no easy release for captives once incarcerated. Thus this forces one to constantly think from only 'inside' the ‘square’, until emancipated.
I return to my earlier conversation with my uni girlfriends, to elaborate further. The girl who said that Michael was different explained:

*Michael was different from most of the [overseas] guys who were 'square'. He knew how to have fun (lived with excitement), think outside the box, had (has?) a great sexy voice, batted his eyelashes at me and knew how to treat a female as female. Most Asian guys didn't. He spoke well and didn't speak with 'lahs'. Sharp wit. Verbal sparring. Shared common interests - arts, concerts - which most Asian guys didn't.*

Perhaps thinking ‘inside’ the square simplifies life as one looks to existing fictions or squares as short cuts to inform how we profile the other. Her response did not surprise me. It is the absence of my own sense of surprise that surprised me. What this suggests is I too still think 'inside' the square. Yancy’s observation that there are moments where the conscious is ambushed by the subconscious (Yancy, 2010) has currency.

However, I contend that, in those interstitial moments of liminality, where the seen becomes the seer, and vice versa; in those tensions of double-consciousness, one gains political power to critique the squares that oppress or control us. Yancy (2010) persuades us not to rush through those moments to find a solution. Instead we should hover, be unsettled by them, become the seen. We can linger to map out the experiences for further self-reflexivity and to keep disrupting those squares that continue to inform our perceptions of the perfect partner and ask, ‘What if those rejected passive, sexless, nerdy, evil, Fu Manchus were to point the telescope at us women? Would we want them to fix us to images of Chineseness that do not exist? Would we want to be locked up in a box, a square that constrains who we are, to belong?’

While this present study is not conclusive, it opens up the box for further exploration on how ethnic subjectification is perceived. It is no longer just Chinese or not Chinese, heads or tails, but *both*, as whole and emancipated, and as Bretherton (1998) observes, 'we need to substitute an “and” for the “either/or” logic [which can only breed] polarised destructive conflict' (p. 9).

**References**


Longer Black and White, International Conflict Resolution Centre, School of Behavioural Science, University of Melbourne.


