

A Response to German Fairy Tale: Young Chinese Attitude to Romantic Relationship

Lee, Soo Li

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Malaysia

sooli178@hotmail.my

Ang, Lay Hoon*

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Malaysia

hlang@upm.edu.my

006-012-2028915

Wan Roselezam Binti Wan Yahya

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Malaysia

rose@upm.edu.my

***Corresponding author**

Abstract

This paper deals with the love attitude between men and women among young generation of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia. Sixty-eight students from a public university were presented with a German literary text, Maid Maleen, and were asked to fill out a questionnaire with 32 items. The results show the similarities and differences between the characters' (Maid Maleen, the prince and the kings) and Chinese Malaysians' attitudes towards love. In Chinese Malaysian culture, family plays an important role in romantic relationships; however, Maid Maleen thinks otherwise. Prearranged marriage is unacceptable although it takes place in a very short time. Both Chinese Malaysians and Maid Maleen expect to find their ideal partner regardless of time. In sum, the German story is generally perceived positively by Chinese Malaysians, except they disagree with prearranged marriage (by the kings) and disrespect for parents (by Maid Maleen).

Keywords: Brothers Grimm, German fairy tale, romantic relationship, love perception, Chinese, Malaysians, university students, young adults

1.0 Introduction

According to Monin and Monin (2005, p.512), “Fairy tale is a genre that is familiar, timeless and a universal conduit of folk-knowledge”. In past centuries, many significant short stories, including German fairy tales, have been produced and handed down from the older generation to the younger generation in Europe, western countries and Asia. They are indeed popular, and the fact that the world has become gradually more technical has added to their distribution in digital form. Recent works suggest that German fairy tales have a lot to offer not just to children, but also to adults (Jellouschek, Kast, & Wöller, 2009; Kast, 2002). It is believed that one of the central themes (i.e., the power of love)(Moss, 1982, p. 657) is the reason for dedicating German fairy tales to adults as well. Since the early 19th century, love has been widely spread in literature (e.g., novels, folk plays, fairy tales, etc) (Borscheid, 1986, p. 159). The German stories collected by the Brothers Grimm embody romantic love during that period of time.

Because of the age of Enlightenment and Romanticism, the attitude of passionate love (or romantic love) was adopted by German people and became the foundation of marriage, resulting in “Liebesheirat” (“love match” in English) as “an ideology and norm” (Borscheid, 1986, p. 157–158). As the romantics define it, the concept of “love match” underscores the spirit of love that is a disparate form from traditional marital love (p. 158). Nonetheless, “[l]ove did not fill an empty stomach; in a world where the nightmare of starvation was omnipresent, anyone who placed great value on love and inner qualities was accused of being an unrealistic dreamer” (p. 158). For German people, independence (i.e., economic and social status) is a primary concern, and a vital factor in getting married as well as developing romantic love at the same time (p. 168).

In China, traditional beliefs of love persist, and a conservative sexual culture remains up to the present day; hence, the prevalence of passionate love is denied in Chinese culture (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002). Among conventional values, family appears to have a great influence on children’s mate-selection preferences and marriages, as exemplified by prearranged marriages (p. 75). However, changes are taking place in people’s attitude towards love with the adoption of Western culture (p. 76–77). This leads to the “modern” view—love match (Higgins et al., 2002; Xu & Whyte, 1990). Nonetheless, marriage is still considered as an important event for Chinese (Higgins et al., 2002, p. 77).

Chinese and German ethnicities have diverse cultures and perceptions of values. It is interesting to investigate the interpersonal perception within relationships and gauge the gap between these two cultures. How do young Chinese Malaysians nowadays perceive the love relationship between men and women as described in an unusual fairy tale (*Maid Maleen*) written in 19th century Germany? What love themes are specifically demonstrated in this fairy tale? How do the Chinese Malaysians sympathize with the characters’ attitudes and behaviours in Grimm’s fairy tale? How do the Chinese Malaysians interpret the depicted love relationship between men and women? This paper measures the perception of love among young Chinese Malaysians based on the fairy tale mentioned above. The objective is to find out whether Chinese Malaysians are inclined to practical and rational relationships or emotional and romantic relationships.

2.0 Human Perception of Relationships

Literature is generally acknowledged as a rich natural resource that reflects the cultures, values and practices of a society at different points in history. In fact, a literary approach has previously been employed to understand relationships (e.g., romantic, family, friendship, social, working, etc) between people. Formalization and prevalent features of friendship were highlighted using French literary texts in one study (Contarello & Volpato, 1991, p. 49). The texts were analysed, and all the materials regarding friendship were extracted to explain briefly the development of the relationship’s characteristics. The relationships were categorized as (a) giving versus denying affection, (b) giving versus denying status, and (c) intimacy

versus formality (p. 51). The findings pointed out that the central core of friendship consists of “intimacy, respect, mutual help, shared activity, confrontation” (p. 70). Literary works clearly have an impact on social studies, owing to the theoretical and practical circumstances demonstrated in texts.

In addition, literary texts are also used to illuminate and make sense of personal relationships, since the narrative approach offers insight into the behavioural aspects of living. Even though the narrative approach is used frequently, only one study (Wood, 2001) was found which is similar to the present study. Interviews and inductive analyses were conducted to discover how heterosexual women who were involved in violent romantic relationships perceive violence in heterosexual romantic relationships through the use of romance narratives (p. 239). Each interviewee told the story of their relationship (p. 246). The researchers relied on the stories (which entailed both romantic and dark elements) in order to understand violence in their personal relationships (p. 239). The study underlined the need to connect alternative narratives with the structures and practices of culture (p. 239). The findings pointed out that women enjoyed the romantic relationship as portrayed in romance narratives, yet their relationships began to involve violence, which is where the dark romance narratives came in (Wood, 2001).

On the other hand, a growing number of articles in human interpersonal perception have devoted attention to several studies on relationships and revealed that findings are hardly the same based on data from ethnic groups in different countries or cultures. One can assume that love is understood by people in different ways all around the world. However, when it comes to the comparison of Eastern and Western cultures, people of Asian descent are said to be more open to pragmatic relationships, whereas Europeans are said to strive more for emotional and romantic love (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997; Jackson, Hong, Cheng, & Xiao, 2006; Pimentel, 2000).

While the study of love relationships is a legitimate field in the West, little research has been done concerning love attitudes in Asia (Jackson et al., 2006, p. 447). Moreover, the current research emphasizes the voices of respondents themselves instead of stressing the opinions of expert individuals (e.g. researchers) through literature. It is not known to us whether any research has been done on the pertinent topic in Malaysia. With these considerations in mind, an investigation was carried out to examine romantic relationships perceived by the new generation through a literary text. This investigation was oriented towards the search for fundamental aspects underlying romantic relationships in cultural and literary perspectives and particularly towards observing possible differences in attitude and behaviour in the relationship between East and West.

3.0 Methodology

In the present research, content analysis of the Grimm’s fairy tale *Maid Maleen* was conducted. A questionnaire was devised based on previous works in the literature review section. The finalized 32-item questionnaire was distributed in an online form as well as paper form. A series of items, included in the questionnaire, formed five groups or focal points for analysis.

The survey consisted of two types of items: closed-ended and open-ended. The closed-ended items were presented in the form of a five-item Lickert-scale, whereas the open-ended items encouraged the respondents to express their opinions freely via the continuation of the sentences: ‘Please state what’, ‘Please state how’ or ‘Please state why’. The respondents were first asked to read the attached *Maid Maleen* before answering the questionnaire. By putting the opinions into words, the respondents would feel less shy or embarrassed about revealing their intimate affairs. Although the questionnaire was issued in English, the respondents were allowed to answer in Mandarin in case they felt more comfortable remarking upon their thoughts and feelings in their mother tongue.

The data presented in this paper deals with the view of love among undergraduates and postgraduates from a tertiary institution in Malaysia. The survey started in early 2013 and involved 68 highly educated young adults ranging in age from 20 to 25 years old. For the purpose of this study, “Chinese” refers to the Malaysian residents who were born and are currently living in Malaysia. The socio-demographic data show that the respondents were 25% male and 75% female.

The German authors, the Brothers Grimm, collected hundreds of fairy tales, which are representative of various periods of history and are held to be of importance for the study of the history of German or even European civilization (Crane, 1917, p. 608). For this study, a Grimm’s fairy tale called *Maid Maleen* (1812), which was translated by Margaret Hunt in 1884, was chosen for three major reasons. Firstly, the present study was looking for a story that did not belong to commercialized fairy tales well known by the public. Therefore, the respondents were not expected to be influenced by the depictions of the characters in movies, since some Grimm’s fairy tales have been modified when adapted into movies. The second reason to choose *Maid Maleen* is the influence of the family in romantic relationships in the story, which nowadays plays a bigger role in Eastern culture compared with Western culture (Higgins et al., 2002; Pimentel, 2000, p. 44). Lastly, the chosen fairy tale reflects the history of German culture in the 19th century, notably the politics, attitudes and social behaviour. Thus, this particular fairy tale is taken as a medium to explore the attitude towards love between men and women as seen by young adults. The decision to limit the attention to the works of the Brothers Grimm, apart from personal interest, was that it makes it easier to select research material generally acknowledged by others. In order to facilitate the discussion, a summary of *Maid Maleen* is provided:

Maid Maleen was a princess who fell in love with a prince from a kingdom not as mighty as her own. Conflict over her choice in partner occurred between her and her father. Her father objected to her choice and urged her to marry another man. Upon her refusal, he locked her up in a tower for seven years to put her love to test and to cure her disobedience. The only companion she had was her lady in waiting, who was also locked in the tower. When the time of her imprisonment elapsed, nobody came to set them free. Therefore, they were forced to find a way out of the tower by themselves. Immediately after escaping from the tower, they realized that the kingdom no longer existed. Her father was dead and the land lay in ruins, conquered by a more powerful king. *Maid Maleen* found no support from her own people, and after some time of struggle, she left for another kingdom, where she got a job in the royal kitchen. The prince of this kingdom happened to be none other than her long-lost love, whom she was not allowed to marry. However, the prince was about to enter a pre-arranged marriage. The new bride sent *Maid Maleen* to substitute her at the wedding ceremony because she was ugly and too shy to attend the wedding herself. *Maid Maleen* did as she was told and was recognized by the prince. In the end, the prince stays with *Maid Maleen* and the other woman is beheaded.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Love attitudes are discussed based on the following five focal points, derived from *Maid Maleen*: (a) the readiness to sacrifice for love; (b) the readiness to date a person from a lower social status; (c) the necessity for loyalty or wealth as a foundation for a successful relationship; (d) the relationship experience before finding true love; (e) the readiness to protect the partner and the relationship.

4.1 The Readiness to Sacrifice for Love

In *Maid Maleen*, the romantic relationship between the princess and the prince was disapproved of (Grimm, 1884). However, the princess insisted on her decision because she was ready to make sacrifices for the prince she truly loved. The data concerning the first focal point, the readiness to sacrifice for love, show that

the majority (62%) of the respondents were willing to invest both time and money to find true love because they likely understand that the person would become the one they would spend their entire lives with. Table 1 presents a summary of each item.

Table 1 Sacrifice for Love

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I think it is worth sacrificing for love.	11.76	14.71	32.36	29.41	11.76
I would spend time and money to find my so-called true love.	5.88	11.76	20.59	33.83	27.94
If I were punished by my family for my love, I would give up on my love.	14.71	42.65	29.41	10.29	2.94
I would just give up if love is too difficult to maintain.	11.76	26.47	33.83	23.53	4.41

When asked whether they would sacrifice for love, and what exactly they would sacrifice, “time” and “money” appeared in the answers. Money is mentioned only a few times, while time is pointed out frequently as what the princess did in the story—spending seven years pursuing her true love. The respondents might think that true love should not involve money (e.g., materialistic concepts or reciprocal relationships). On the other hand, time equates to an “unlimited resource” in Chinese society (Faure & Fang, 2008, p. 204), and that may have played a role. Young Chinese Malaysians (26%) disagree over the sacrifices for love because they have other priorities in their life. On the contrary, true love was everything to the princess because she paid little attention to her father’s will and herself. Furthermore, only 38% of respondents would refuse to end the relationship under any circumstances; a higher percentage (58%) of respondents would be reluctant to give up their relationship even if they would be punished because of love. In this regard, the respondents do not show stronger determination to hold onto the relationship than the princess and the prince did. The contrary suggests the distinction between the view of love of the characters in the selected German fairy tale and the respondents. In the story, while the prince was rejected, “they would not give each other up” because “they both loved each other with all their hearts” (Grimm, 1884). Chinese Malaysians are obviously willing to spend time looking for their true love, like Maid Maleen. However, they do not show persistence to keep it going if they encounter severe difficulties in their relationship.

4.2 The Readiness to Date a Person from a Lower Social Status

When the mighty king disapproved of the princess’s decision and wished her to marry another prince, she told her father, “I can and will take no other for my husband” (Grimm, 1884). In this case, Maid Maleen struggled to free herself from arbitrary family dictates and controls because of the difference in social status (the prince’s kingdom was not as mighty as her own) was not a concern to the princess. Item was posed to determine if the respondents were ready to date or marry a person who was from a lower social status. Only 18% of the participants were particular about social status because they expect their partner to match their financial standards or to be higher (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2 Date a Person from a Lower Social Status or Lower Education Level

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I am ready to date/marry a person who is from lower social status than my family.	7.35	10.29	26.48	33.82	22.06

In contrast, the majority find no difficulties in accepting a partner with a lower social status. This result indicates that Maid Maleen and the respondents have a similar attitude towards love.

Social status has little impact on the respondents while making the decision to accept or date someone, as with the princess in the story *Maid Maleen*. This indicates that they are willing to go for the person they love rather than giving up the relationship due to their background.

4.3 The Necessity for Loyalty or Wealth as a Foundation for a Successful Relationship

The items of loyalty show the salient point of the results. In total, 84% of respondents disagree with dating other people, while their partners are away. The results of the third focal point are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Loyalty or Wealth in a Successful Relationship

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I date other people while my partner is far away.	50.00	33.83	8.82	7.35	0.00
I start a new relationship if I have to choose between a long-distance relationship and a new one.	33.82	32.36	22.06	11.76	0.00
I think loyalty is the foundation of a successful relationship.	2.94	2.94	5.88	22.06	66.18
I think wealth is the foundation of a successful relationship.	14.71	17.65	41.17	23.53	2.94
I am faithful to my lover now and forever.	2.94	1.47	26.47	39.71	29.41

This result again exposes the similarity of behaviour between the prince, the princess and the respondents. When the princess was kept in the tower with her lady in waiting, “the King’s son often went around and around the tower, and called their names” (Grimm, 1884). Seven years later, Maid Maleen remained single until she met the prince, the man she loved, once again. Very few of the respondents (7%) expressed that they would see or be with someone else in the absence of their partner.

Loyalty to the partner, according to respondents, plays the main role in a successful relationship. It is valued higher when compared to wealth in terms of a good foundation for a successful relationship, yet the respondents are not ready to remain faithful to their partners forever. From the results, 66% of all respondents strongly agree that loyalty is important, and only 29% of them strongly agree with the notion of keeping their loyalty to the same partner for their entire life, as the prince did. “His father had chosen another bride for him, whose face was as ugly as her heart was wicked”, however, the prince accepted the prearranged marriage even though he had once been betrothed to Maid Maleen (Grimm, 1884).

4.4 Relationship Experience before Finding True Love

When determining how many experiences one needs in order to recognize true love, more than half of the respondents (54%) were confident that they could identify true love without having been in a relationship before. Table 4 provides the results of the fourth focal point in percentages.

Table 4 Experience a Relationship before Finding True Love

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I need to experience a relationship with another man/woman before I find my true love. Otherwise I do not know what true love is.	25.00	29.41	22.06	17.65	5.88
I mind if my partner has had many relationships.	13.24	22.06	38.23	19.12	7.35

In this case, they show faith in “the Chinese notion of *yuan*” (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997). This culture-specific concept is derived from Buddhist belief in predestiny and fate in relationships (p. 85), as exemplified by a traditional Chinese saying, “if you have *yuan* for each other, though you are thousands of miles apart, you will still meet. If you don’t have *yuan*, even if you are face-to face, you will never know each other” (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997, p. 86). In Chinese culture, it is inevitable that two single individuals with *yuan* will meet (p. 87). Similarly, Maid Maleen resolved to follow her heart right from the beginning. In the end of the fairy tale, she said, “I am Maid Maleen, who for [your] sake was imprisoned seven years in the darkness, who suffered hunger and thirst, and has lived so long in want and poverty. Today, however, the sun is shining on me once more, I was married to [you] in the church, and I am [your] lawful wife. Then they kissed each other, and were happy all the days of their lives” (Grimm, 1884). Her persistence finally brought her the happiness she was waiting years for.

4.5 The Readiness to Protect the Partner and the Relationship

In determining what would happen if a relationship was opposed by the respondent’s family or the partner’s family, the following data was found (see Table 5).

Table 5 Protect the Partner and the Relationship

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I would go against my family's will when it comes to love.	13.24	30.88	35.29	16.18	4.41
I would obey my family's wish and marry a person I do not love.	64.71	27.94	4.41	1.47	1.47
I would defend my love and fight for it whenever needed.	1.47	2.94	30.88	47.06	17.65
If the relationship is opposed by my family, I would try to convince them to accept my partner.	2.94	1.47	16.18	48.53	30.88
If the family of my beloved is against our relationship, I would try to change the mind of his/her family.	1.47	8.83	27.94	50.00	11.76

Only 21% were clear that they would follow their heart, rather than their family's concerns. Among the reasons stated for obedience are: family is more important; "parents love me, so there must be a reason behind their disparagement", and "my parents must be good advisors, because they went through a lot in their life". An obvious difference in attitude to family influence is found between respondents and the princess because most of the respondents argue that the parents should be placed higher than the partner. This clearly suggests that Chinese Malaysians strongly practice filial piety or *xiao* toward their parents. Filial piety is another Chinese cultural value that emphasizes the children's duties (paying respect, showing affection, making sacrifices, etc) to their parents in day-to-day living (Sung, 1997, p. 88; Yeh, 2004). In contrast, Maid Maleen followed her own wish.

Eighty per cent of the respondents would try to convince the family to change their mind about their lover. On the contrary, Maid Maleen disobeyed her father and opposed his will directly without involving any discussion between them. A lower number of the respondents (62%) would make an attempt to change the mind of the lover's family if their relationship met with disapproval. One respondent would keep her silence, "because it is a sensitive issue," while the others would put effort into a discussion and a direct action. Most of them would wish to give the partner and the family an opportunity to get to know each other well by arranging meetings, taking the partner for family vacations and asking the partner to impress the family.

This study also tried to determine if the respondents would still obey their family's will when it comes to an arranged marriage. In 19th century Germany, people practiced the system of monarchy. Indeed, both kings (Maid Maleen's and the prince's father) in the story selected the marital partners for their children, as exemplified by the princess' father "wished to give her another [prince]" who enjoyed higher social class, while the prince's father, who "had chosen another bride for him" (Grimm, 1884). The culture of marriage seems similar for Germans and Chinese because in China, the marriage is also arranged by the parents in accordance with Chinese social hierarchy (i.e., family status, wealth, etc)(Higgins et al., 2002, p. 75; Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990). Prearranged marriage is common, yet the parental influence is weakening considerably in democratic societies (Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990, p. 709). A significant number of respondents (93%) would not marry somebody they have no feelings for. In this case, there is no difference between the attitude towards love for Maid Maleen and the young respondents. In modern Chinese culture, young people are no longer restricted to parental influence and are given a "freedom of choice" to play the "dominant

role” in choosing the person they wish to marry (Xiaohe & Whyte, 2008, p. 709). The results related to fighting for their love in general terms show that the majority (65%) are willing to put their foot down to defend their relationship.

The importance of family among Chinese Malaysians has clearly been shown. Although the previous findings indicate that Chinese Malaysians possess a romantic mindset (e.g., they sacrifice time for love, are loyal to the lover, ignore social difference, etc), their family still means a lot to them. They would readily make an effort to persuade them and discuss with them if the relationship was not accepted. Apart from the family influence over partner selection, the action against prearranged marriage (as undertaken by the princess in the story) is similar for both Chinese Malaysian and German cultures. A romantic spirit drives them to seek true love by themselves.

5.0 Conclusion

As a conclusion, the findings reported in this paper provide a cultural comparison of the romantic relationship of Germans and Chinese Malaysians through a literary approach. The literary text overall received a moderate acceptance. The behaviours of the abstract characters in the story were perceived positively by the Chinese Malaysians, except concerning prearranged marriage (by the kings) and disrespect for parents (by Maid Maleen). This shows that traditional Chinese culture (i.e., *yuan* and filial piety) is deeply embedded in Chinese Malaysians’ love attitude.

Chinese Malaysians are found to be optimistic in love matters and view relationships in an enlightened state of mind. The majority take their relationships seriously, as they are willing to defend their love when it is necessary. Therefore, most young Chinese Malaysians are ready to make sacrifices for the sake of their true love. The readiness to protect the partner and the relationship is relatively strong in general terms, but it weakens when it comes in conflict with family members. Most of them make an effort to reconcile their lovers with their own families, and more than a half of them will also actively try to change the point of view of the partner’s family. However, Chinese Malaysians most likely listen to their families and give up the relationship eventually. One of the matters that they cannot compromise on is prearranged marriage. Additionally, more than a half of the respondents would not hesitate to get involved with a person from a lower social status. It is believed that Chinese Malaysians are becoming open minded about personal relationships, owing to the “combination of structural modernization [and] cultural Westernization” (Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990, p. 709).

New insight into cross-cultural differences between Germans and Chinese Malaysians concerning love attitude is provided. The results have contributed to the understanding of the intercultural practices in question and its social values by observing how a romantic relationship has been represented in a German fairy tale. In other words, the current study is not only the cross between geographical boundaries (Germany and Malaysia) as well as cultural identities (German and Chinese Malaysian), but it also involves the cross between temporal changes (19th and 21st century). To anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, lecturers in literature and parent consultants, it is hoped that the findings of this study support general views, offer alternative perspectives and add-on to the existing knowledge.

6.0 References

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