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## "Glamorous" Violence? Aggressive Dating Behavior of Women in Beijing

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# **“Glamorous” Violence?**

## **Aggressive Dating Behavior of Women in Beijing**

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### **Background**

Though never officially released in China,<sup>1</sup> the Korean film *My Sassy Girl* was very popular among Chinese young people in 2001. The film is a love story: Gyeon-woo, a college student, falls in love with a pretty girl, but as their relationship progresses, he begins to discover how crazy she really is: she is often angry, she frequently hits him, and she always wants him to please her (Neveu, 2001). The film creates a cute but aggressive image of a woman, an image that can be found in many other recent cultural texts. Together, these texts establish a new model of dating couples: girls are cute, willful, and aggressive, while boys are, loving, tender, and fragile. They seem to offer an implicit message to women: their violence is “acceptable or even glamorous” (Worcester, 2002).

Psychological research, popular media, and our own everyday understanding associate aggression very closely with the masculine gender (Squire, 1998). However, the media image of *My Sassy Girl* offers an interesting entry point for exploring new images of masculinity and femininity through Chinese women’s aggression in dating relationships. This paper focuses on women’s aggression and attempts to answer the following questions:

How do young people perceive the image of the sassy girl? How do young women and men make sense of their own or their girlfriends' violence? How do young adults "do" their gender through women's aggression and their interactions with each other? What are the discourses which have made women's aggression in dating relationships socially acceptable? To what extent does women's aggression create new images of men and women in dating relationships in contemporary China?

## **Literature Review**

Violence research in China has a relatively short history of less than 20 years. Most studies of violence focus on domestic violence, especially wife battering; violence in other intimate relationships including dating violence and other forms of domestic violence such as child abuse have been neglected (Hester, 2000; Wang, 1999; Xu, Campbell, & Zhu, 2001). Thus, in the field of violence research, "women have traditionally been seen exclusively as victims, their own aggression all but ignored" (McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987).

In the West, the school of social conflict was the first to acknowledge women's aggression. Many quantitative studies on dating violence revealed that "reciprocal" or "mutual" violence is more common in dating relationships than is domestic violence (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Straus, 1997, 2004).

Second-wave feminists have criticized the school of social conflict for practicing "victim-blaming" (Kurz, 1993). They tend to see women's violence within the context of

self-defense (DeKeseredy & Saunders, 1997; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2000; Tedeschi, Smith, & Brown, 1974) or as a reaction to years of abuse (Saunders, 2002), thereby creating the myth of non-aggressive women (White & Kowalski, 1994) which implicates aggressive women as being either *bad* or *mad* (Gilbert, 2002). They believe that the denial of women's aggression, a result of the pressure on researchers to be "politically correct" (Saunders, 2002), "will damage the credibility of feminist scholarship and interfere with the future development of feminist theory" (Stith & Straus, 1995).

Third-wave feminists have attempted to find a balance between the myth of non-aggressive women (White & Kowalski, 1994) and "real inequalities that exist between women and men" (White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredo, 2000). They want to take violence by women seriously "without losing sight of the general patterns in intimate partner violence that need to guide antiviolence work" (Worcester, 2002, p. 1392). This paper adopts the standpoint of third-wave feminists (Weedon, 1997; Worcester, 2002) to understand Chinese women's aggression, and explores how it is possible for them to make use of different discourses that offer positions of resistance from which women can seek to change the power of male dominance.

## **Methodology**

In-depth semi-structured interviews with 42 young people, 29 women and 13 men, were conducted between May and July 2004. Three focus groups were also held. This paper mainly focuses on the cases of the 13 women who admitted to showing some form of violence toward their boyfriends, and the 7 men who said they had been treated violently

by their girlfriends. The film *My Sassy Girl* was used as a stimulus material<sup>2</sup> in the interviews to explore how young men and women make sense of women's aggression in dating relationships.

In order to achieve empirical representativeness, theoretical sampling was used to choose informants (Mason, 1996). One category was related to their relationship status and the intensity of their commitment to their dating relationships.<sup>3</sup> The other included sociological variables such as age and education.

The main purpose of the interviews was to explore the individual's experience of dating violence. The purposes of the focus groups were to provide a space for young people to express their attitudes and opinions on violent dating relationships, and to enable the researcher to bring the questions and problems she had encountered in the interviews to the group for discussion. The first group consisted of six undergraduate female students (FG 1), the second group of five postgraduate male students (FG 2), and the third group of more than 20 volunteer counselors for the Youth Hotline (FG 3).<sup>4</sup> All the interviews and focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. All quotations were translated into English by the author.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

### **Am I a sassy girl?**

Many of the girls said that not only did they like *My Sassy Girl*, but they also felt they

were “sassy” to some extent. Many of the men, on the other hand, stated that they would not put up with a girlfriend as aggressive as the girlfriend in the film.

The young women’s identification with the sassy girl shows that they use a cute and aggressive image to redefine the image of traditional Chinese women, and have a more positive and proactive attitude about their power and rights in dating relationships. The young men’s rejection of *My Sassy Girl* shows that they still hang on to the conservative concept of masculinity and expect that their girlfriends should maintain all the traditional values of Chinese women: tenderness, goodness, moderation, humility, austerity, tolerance,<sup>5</sup> and being a “helpful wife and a wise mother.”<sup>6</sup> Although the young men and women had different attitudes and opinions about the movie, they seemed to agree on one point: they did not think that the sassy girl’s behavior in the movie should be counted as violence. However, they gave different reasons for why they felt this was so. The female group was inclined to define the act of hitting a man as playful behavior. The male group held a double-standard: the same behavior that is violence when a man displays it toward a woman is not violence when displayed by a woman toward a man.

### **Ren Xing girls: A sassy image in China**

The idea of *Ren Xing* (willfulness) was often used to justify why women exert violence in dating relationships. In the words of one of the female participants, *Ren Xing* means “what he wants me to do, I definitely will not do, and meanwhile, what he doesn’t want me to do, I will definitely do” (Zheng Xin, F, 23). Generally, *Ren Xing* describes people who are emotional and just follow their will to do whatever they want, and who are



often regarded as somewhat childish because they are spoiled. In this study, it was found that not only did men and non-violent women define violent girls as *Ren Xing* rather than violent, but also violent women identified themselves as *Ren Xing*. Since women's aggression is just an act of *Ren Xing*, then it is due to a childish personality and thus is no big deal. According to these women's logic, being spoiled by a boyfriend causes them to become more *Ren Xing*, and since their aggression is a result of their boyfriend's spoiling them, their boyfriend should be willing to accept it. Such behavior should not be seen as a form of violence.

However, women's *Ren Xing* may also be related to the one-child policy. In the study, the target group was those youths born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which were the first generation to be affected by the one-child policy. Being only children, they would generally have been spoiled by their parents. This meant that they would end up being more *Ren Xing*, and so they would be more prone to conflict in their relationships.

Obviously, different men will have different attitudes to their girlfriends' willfulness. Chen Bing, a university lecturer, revealed that he was helpless when facing his girlfriend's willful behavior:

Sometimes I do not know whether I am dating a girlfriend or nurturing a daughter.

You know, it is so tiring to have to take care of her like this. (Chen Bing, M, 29)

He Rong, an undergraduate student, was often slapped by his girlfriend when she was not satisfied with him. He justified his willingness to endure his girlfriend's aggression as

follows:

I feel that a girl is born to be spoiled by men and loved by men. Whatever she does to me, I still respect her. ... I'm always the one to say sorry. (He Rong, M, 23)

These young men's narratives describing their *Ren Xing* girlfriends reveal that their attitudes are inconsistent with the way they talked about the image of women depicted in *My Sassy Girl*. When they talked about the movie, they clearly rejected this image and insisted on the ideal images of femininity and masculinity. However, when they deal with real life situations, they show a willingness to accept different images of masculinity.

### **“It's not violence, it's just normal”**

Deng Li, a director of a small media company, described how she used aggression toward her boyfriend:

After we quarreled with each other, I always asked him to say sorry. If he didn't comply, I would pinch him. Once, because I pinched him really hard, he pushed me away. ... I was very angry. So I picked up a stone, a very rare and expensive stone, and threw it at him ... It's not violence, it's just normal. (Deng Li, F, 33)

Thus, the participants indicated that they believe women's aggression can be a form of playful fighting, a way of releasing negative feelings, a method of communicating, or a way of adjusting to each other's relating style. Some of them even thought that women's

aggression could increase affection between couples.

According to O’Keefe (1997), both sexes are more accepting of females’ use of dating violence than males’. The women justified their behavior by describing it as “normal” and refused to label themselves as violent because traditional Chinese femininity still had a strong influence on them. As Deng Li said, “I am fundamentally a conservative woman who wants to be a helpful wife and a wise mother.” After hearing her story, though, it is quite difficult to believe that she could describe herself in this way.

Men, on the other hand, do not regard women’s aggression as violence because they have a sense of superiority, both mentally and physically. This may explain the double-standard held by the participants in the male focus group and their tolerance of women’s aggression.

### **“My violence is just because of his cheating”**

In an “ordinary” dating context, both young men and women consider that women’s aggression is normal and should not be counted as violence. But in the context of infidelity, women often use the word “violence” to describe their behavior. Xu Ling, an office worker, had dated a guy for more than one year. After she found out that he had cheated on her, she decided to break up with him. When their relationship was so enmeshed and they could not break up, she found that violence was a way out:

One day I slapped him as hard as I could; the week before last, I choked him for a

long time; last week, I pinched him black and blue all over his body. ... I am afraid that I use violence to solve problems, but I feel accustomed to it. (Xu Ling, F, 24)

In the West, studies on women's violence often examine it within the context of self-defense (DeKeseredy & Saunders, 1997; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2000) and see it as a result of long-term suffering. Here, women's aggression seems like self-defense, but it isn't. It is a type of punishment: when these women find out that their boyfriends have cheated on them, they feel they have the right and the power to punish them. It is more aggressive and proactive than self-defense. Furthermore, the guilt that the women's boyfriends feel because of their infidelity also makes them see the violence as justified.

One of the male respondents, He Rong, referred to his girlfriend's cheating as a form of psychological violence against him. But he didn't hit her as a form of punishment; instead, he wanted to treat her better in order to win her back:

She really broke the basic principle that I believe in, but so what? When you find the thing that you love and care about the most, then you must give up the principle. (He Rong, M, 23)

According to Eigenberg (2001), on the positive side, men are perceived to be more independent, aggressive, calm, dominant, active, competitive, and self-confident; women are perceived as more vulnerable, passive, emotional, submissive, placid, cooperative, and insecure. On the negative side, people are more likely to describe women as spineless and whiny, and men as arrogant and selfish (Spencer, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979). However,

this study offers a different picture: women can be aggressive, dominant, willful, and selfish, while men can be tender, tolerant, and spineless.

### **Redefining mutual violence as domestic violence**

Even in a mutually violent relationship, women tend to define the situation as domestic violence, blame the other party, and ignore their own violent behavior. Wang Fang had dropped out of university and did not have a job at the time of her interview. She was living with a man who was also unemployed. She described the most violent situation in their life:

He was a little bit drunk and patted my head. He thought he was just teasing me, but I thought he was hitting me. I was angry and threw a bowl onto the floor. Then he became angry because the bowl was filled with food that he had specially cooked for me, and so he slapped me. I was very angry because in my family, no one had ever done that to me .... I could not believe that I had been exposed to domestic violence. After that, I swallowed 20 sleeping tablets. (Wang Fang, F, 25)

There are two things worth noting in this story: 1) Wang Fang defined the mutual violence she was involved in as domestic violence: she was the victim, while her boyfriend was the perpetrator; and 2) she tried to kill herself. It seems as though she made use of the image of herself as the victim to blame her boyfriend for the violence and to define him as the perpetrator, while at the same time trivializing her own violent behavior by directing aggression toward herself.

As mentioned in the literature review, in China, violence has become a symbolic marker which signifies severe wife battering. This makes it easier for women to see themselves as victims. On the one hand, women's trivializing of their own violence in the context of mutual violence is influenced by the stereotyped concept of violence in Chinese discourses on domestic violence. On the other hand, women's violence or over-reaction in the context of mutual violence is symbolic of how they have gained more power in the relationships, and reveals that they have a number of choices of how to deal with intimate violence: they can be a submissive victim or they can fight back. It also reflects that they are forming a new image of a more independent, competitive, and proactive woman.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to a more in-depth understanding of women's aggression in dating relationships in Beijing. First, the study helps to broaden the concept of violence in China by paying attention to an aspect of women's aggression which has been ignored for a long time. We see a new image of willful or *Ren Xing* women in everyday dating relationships which is quite different from the traditional image of victimized women in violence research.

Second, unlike Gilbert (2002), who argues that gender stereotypes continue to permeate our society and create the discourse that violent women are mad or bad, this paper shows that competing and multilayered discourses in contemporary China regarding gender, love, and sex have left some space for young adults to justify women's aggression

in different contexts. Chinese discourses include Confucianism, which says that women should be tender, moderate, and humble, and the Communist discourse, which says that “men and women are equal” and which evokes the image of the “iron woman” who has to give up her femininity to compete with men. These discourses have made it possible for women to express their emotions, even in willful ways. Western discourses include the idea of equality promoted by feminists, and materialist consumerist ideologies regarding what the good life is and what women should get from their boyfriends. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between Chinese and Western discourses, especially with globalization. The importance of honesty and the importance of sexual loyalty, which the interviewees evoked in this study to justify their using violence to punish their boyfriends, are rather difficult to put into one category. The interviewees often appropriated different discourses to help them meet their own needs.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The film wasn't publicly released in Beijing theaters, but many young people have seen it on DVD.

<sup>2</sup> "Have you seen the movie *My Sassy Girl!*?" was often used as an opener to break the ice. This would be followed by other questions: What's your opinion of the sassy girl in the movie? Would you like the sassy girl to be your girlfriend (for men)? Do you think that the behavior of the sassy girl in the movie is violent? What is your understanding of the term "dating violence"?

<sup>3</sup> Some studies (Billingham, 1987; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989) have shown that in more committed dating relationships (that is, steady, longer, serious, monogamous relationships), there will be more violence. These studies led me to choose commitment to the relationship as an important sampling criterion.

<sup>4</sup> The Youth Hotline is a famous volunteer organization offering a hotline counseling service to adolescents and young adults all over China.

<sup>5</sup> Wen liang gong jian rang – 5 virtues that women should have.

<sup>6</sup> Xian qi liang mu – good wife and good mother.