

# A Comparative Analysis of the Concepts of Marriage and Love in The Book of Songs and Contemporary Values

Yanping Wang\*

Hainan University of Science and Technology, Haikou, 571100, China

\*Corresponding author: wyanping078@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The Book of Songs (Shijing) is not only a precious gem of Chinese classical literature but also the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. It serves as an important document reflecting the social life and concepts of marriage and love during the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods. This article aims to explore the sacredness of marriage, the value of loyalty and chastity, and the close connection between marriage and social status as reflected in The Book of Songs, revealing the social structure, moral norms, and profound insights into human emotions contained within. Additionally, it compares the concepts of marriage and love in The Book of Songs with contemporary societal values, identifying their similarities and differences and analyzing the potential impact of ancient marriage concepts on modern society. This study not only provides a historical perspective on contemporary views on marriage and love but also offers cultural references for understanding and handling modern relationships, ultimately promoting a deeper understanding of the integration of traditional and modern concepts in marriage and family, thereby providing theoretical support for building harmonious social relationships.*

**Keywords:** *The Book of Songs; marriage and love concepts; contemporary values; cultural heritage; social change*

## Introduction

The Book of Songs is not only the opening chapter of Chinese literary history but also a vivid record of social culture and ideological concepts during the Western Zhou to Spring and Autumn periods. The rich marriage and love poems in the anthology reflect not only the social structure and ethical norms of ancient China but also a delicate observation and understanding of human emotions.

In modern society, with the awakening of individual consciousness and the evolution of social values, concepts of marriage and love have also undergone significant changes. Modern relationships emphasize the importance of individual freedom, equality, and self-realization but also face unprecedented challenges and complexities. Against this backdrop, re-examining the marriage concepts in The Book of Songs helps us understand the cultural and value systems of ancient society and provides valuable insights for contemporary society.

Through an in-depth analysis of the marriage-related poems in The Book of Songs, this paper explores the connections and differences between these concepts and contemporary social values. It aims to reveal the applicability and limitations of ancient marriage concepts in modern society and how these ideas influence the construction of modern marital life.

## 1. The Concepts of Marriage and Love in The Book of Songs

The Book of Songs is a foundational work of ancient Chinese literature, recording social life from the early Western Zhou to the middle of the Spring and Autumn period over approximately five hundred years. Among its rich collection of poems, those on marriage and love are particularly abundant. These poems, mainly found in the sections Guofeng (National Folk Songs) and Xiaoya (Lesser Court Hymns), depict the marriage system, ethical concepts, and people's pursuit of ideal and real love in that era.

### ***1.1 The Sacredness of Marriage and Family Concepts***

Although ancient society generally followed a marriage system based on "the parents' command and the matchmaker's word," where marriage was often arranged for family interests, The Book of Songs still presents a reverence for the sanctity of marriage and an idealized pursuit of romantic love. In the poem Guangju from Zhou Nan (The South of Zhou), "A graceful lady, a gentleman seeks her," not only praises pure love between a man and a woman but also expresses the pursuit of an ideal partner and respect for marriage. This respect is not only evident in the emotional relationship between the couple but also elevates marriage to the level of being the foundation for family and social stability.<sup>[1]</sup>

Additionally, the sacredness of marriage in The Book of Songs is closely linked with family harmony. In Xiaoya (The Lesser Court Hymns), the portrayal of harmonious relationships between brothers in Changdi reflects the ancient emphasis on the importance of family relationships and the ideal of achieving social stability through harmonious family life.

### ***1.2 The Values of Loyalty and Chastity***

Loyalty and chastity are important themes in the marriage concepts of The Book of Songs. Wei Feng · Mang depicts a woman's loyalty and commitment to her marriage, showcasing the high value placed on female chastity and marital fidelity in ancient society. This emphasis is not only reflected in the expectations for marital relationships but also deeply influences the social evaluation standards for marital morality.

In Mang, when a woman faces betrayal in marriage, she shows great endurance and loyalty. This adherence to marriage reflects the social pressure and ethical responsibilities that women in ancient times faced. Loyalty and chastity were not only the foundation of marriage but also important standards for maintaining family and clan honor. The severe criticism of breaking vows or disrupting marriage further emphasizes ancient society's strong concern for marital stability and high regard for moral chastity.<sup>[2]</sup>

### ***1.3 Marriage and Social Status***

In ancient society, marriage was not only a personal emotional union but also an important bond for consolidating family power and maintaining social status. Poems in The Book of Songs, such as Daming and Song Gao, clearly demonstrate the role of marriage in maintaining clan relations and enhancing social status. In these poems, marriage is portrayed not only as a significant event in an individual's life but also as crucial for the rise and fall of families and the stability of society.

Daming highlights the central role of marriage in continuing royal bloodlines and preserving family power, while Song Gao depicts noble marriages as a means to maintain political alliances and strengthen social class structures. Marriage was not only a private emotional bond but also an important tool for maintaining family honor and expanding social influence. Through strategic marriages, families could solidify and expand their social status, a concept with significant practical importance in the clan-based society of the time.

The marriage concepts in The Book of Songs reflect not only the ethical morals and marriage systems of ancient society but also the aspirations and expectations regarding love, family, and social status. By analyzing the sacredness of marriage, the values of loyalty and chastity, and the relationship between marriage and social status, we can gain a deeper understanding of the multiple functions of ancient marriage and its importance in social structures. These concepts are not only reflections of history but also provide valuable cultural resources and insights for the study of modern marriage and family relationships.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **2. Concepts of Marriage and Love in Contemporary Values**

In contemporary society, the concepts of marriage and love have gradually evolved from traditional models, forming modern values centered on equality, freedom, and individuality.

## ***2.1 Equality and Freedom of Choice***

In modern society, the establishment of marriage relationships places greater emphasis on gender equality and the right to free choice. Unlike the arranged marriages of traditional society, where "parents' orders and the matchmaker's words" guided decisions, contemporary marriages emphasize the primacy of personal choice and individual will. The significant improvement in women's status and the widespread societal recognition of gender equality have made modern marriage relationships focus more on equal standing and mutual respect between partners.<sup>[4]</sup>

### ***2.1.1 Strengthening the Concept of Equality***

With the rise of gender equality awareness, the rights and duties of both parties in marriage are gradually becoming more equal. In modern marriages, women's involvement in family affairs, career choices, and property distribution has significantly increased. Both partners share family responsibilities, make joint decisions, and grow together. This equal relationship not only enhances the stability of marriage but also strengthens emotional bonds within the marriage.

### ***2.1.2 Ensuring Freedom of Choice***

Modern legal systems and social norms emphasize the autonomy of individuals in their choice of marriage partners, opposing forced and arranged marriages. This freedom of choice extends not only to the formation of marriages but also to their dissolution. With rising divorce rates and greater social tolerance toward divorce, individuals' autonomy in marital relationships has been better protected.

## ***2.2 Emotions and Personal Happiness***

Contemporary concepts of marriage place greater importance on emotional communication and personal happiness, viewing marriage as an important pathway to emotional fulfillment and self-realization. In modern society, marriages are more focused on emotional compatibility and individual inner needs.

### ***2.2.1 Emotions as the Primary Focus***

In contemporary society, marriage is no longer merely a means of maintaining family interests or social status but is based on the sincere emotional connection between partners. Love in marriage has become the core value, and the emotional connection between spouses is regarded as the foundation of marital happiness.<sup>[5]</sup>

### ***2.2.2 Prioritizing Personal Happiness***

With the widespread influence of individualism, modern people pay more attention to personal happiness and self-fulfillment within marriage. Emotional satisfaction, self-realization, and personal growth are viewed as important indicators of marriage quality. Compared to traditional societies, contemporary marriages place higher importance on individuals' happiness and the realization of their self-worth.

## ***2.3 Individuality and Autonomy***

Modern society places a high value on the development of individuality and autonomy. Marriage is no longer just the result of family responsibilities or social arrangements but a personal choice. Autonomous relationships and free marriages have gradually become mainstream concepts in society, creating a stark contrast with the marriage concepts in The Book of Songs, which emphasized family and social duties.<sup>[6]</sup>

### ***2.3.1 Emphasizing Individuality***

Modern marriages place more focus on individuals' unique needs and personalities. Partners in marriage are expected not only to adapt to each other's lifestyles but also to respect each other's individuality and independence. The development of individuality makes marital relationships more flexible and diverse, offering both partners more freedom and space.

### ***2.3.2 Enhancing Autonomy***

Autonomy is increasingly prominent in contemporary marriages. Individuals have greater freedom in choosing a partner, maintaining their marriage, or ending it. The openness of society and respect for individual freedom have made autonomous love and free marriage the norm. Marriage has gradually

been liberated from traditional familial and societal constraints, becoming a reflection of personal will and choice.

#### ***2.4 Diversification of Marriage Forms***

With social development, the forms of marriage have also become more diverse. Contemporary society has shown greater acceptance of different forms of marriage, reflecting the pluralism and openness of societal values.

##### ***2.4.1 Same-Sex Marriage***

In many countries and regions, same-sex marriage has been legalized and is gradually being accepted by society. The legalization of this form of marriage is not only a further affirmation of marital freedom but also a recognition and protection of human rights.

##### ***2.4.2 Childless Marriages***

An increasing number of couples are choosing not to have children, resulting in childless marriages. This choice reflects a rethinking of the meaning of marriage, where the focus is no longer on procreation but rather on the emotional connection and quality of life between the spouses.<sup>[7]</sup>

##### ***2.4.3 Other Forms of Marriage***

Contemporary society has also seen the emergence of various forms of marriage, such as international marriages, long-distance marriages, and cohabiting partnerships, reflecting the diversity and inclusivity of modern marriage concepts.

### **3. Comparative Analysis of The Book of Songs and Contemporary Concepts of Marriage and Love**

From the ancient clan and social order to modern individual freedom and emotional needs, concepts of marriage and love not only reflect changes in social structures but also embody the transmission and innovation of cultural values.

#### ***3.1 Evolution of Values***

From The Book of Songs to contemporary times, the concepts of marriage and love have undergone a profound transformation from traditional to modern values. In the era of The Book of Songs, marriage was more about maintaining family and social order; marriage was not only the union of individual emotions but also the continuation and consolidation of clan and social relationships.<sup>[8]</sup>

However, with the passage of time, contemporary views on marriage and love place greater emphasis on individual emotional needs and self-realization. In modern society, marriage is more seen as a pursuit of personal happiness, emphasizing love, equality, and the right to freely choose a partner. Personal emotional satisfaction and happiness have become the core values of marriage, in contrast to the responsibility and obligation emphasized in traditional societies. The differences between these views reflect the transformation of social structures, the awakening of individual consciousness, and the changing definition of happiness.

#### ***3.2 Cultural Inheritance and Innovation***

Despite the enormous changes in eras and social structures, some views on marriage and love in The Book of Songs still carry timeless value. These views continue to play an important role in modern society, particularly in the pursuit of family harmony, loyalty, and chastity within marriage.

The line “A graceful, virtuous lady is the ideal match for a gentleman” from Zhou Nan·Guan Ju expresses the pursuit of an ideal partner and the respect for the sanctity of marriage. This pursuit remains an important foundation for marital happiness in modern society. Furthermore, the emphasis in The Book of Songs on loyalty in marriage and family responsibilities, such as the loyalty of a woman to her husband in Wei Feng·Mang, remains a significant component of modern marriage ethics. These traditional views on marriage and love not only provide moral and ethical support to contemporary marriages but also offer historical and cultural references for innovating modern marital concepts.

### ***3.3 Challenges and Reflections in Modern Society***

Marriage relationships in modern society face numerous challenges. The prevalence of materialism, the strengthening of individualism, and the fast-paced lifestyle have weakened, to some extent, the responsibility and commitment within marital relationships. Many people, in their pursuit of personal happiness, overlook the responsibility inherent in marriage and the stability of family life.

## **4. Practical Insights from Ancient and Modern Views on Marriage and Love for Contemporary Society**

While modern society enjoys freedom and individuality, it should draw from the traditional wisdom about family and marriage found in *The Book of Songs* to strike a balance between personal happiness and family responsibilities. This integration of historical and modern concepts not only enriches contemporary views on marriage but also provides valuable guidance for addressing the challenges faced by today's society.<sup>[9]</sup>

The understanding of marriage in *The Book of Songs* offers a useful reflection for modern society. For instance, people in contemporary society can draw lessons from *The Book of Songs* about the importance of responsibility and commitment in marriage, recognizing that marriage is not only a tool for personal happiness but also a crucial foundation for social stability and family harmony. The wisdom from *The Book of Songs* reminds us that, while pursuing individual freedom and happiness, responsibility and commitment within marriage remain indispensable. This fusion of traditional wisdom and modern values can help modern society find a more balanced approach when facing challenges in relationships.

### ***4.1 Returning to the Essence of Love***

Although modern relationships exhibit more diversity and freedom, the essence of love remains unchanged. *The Book of Songs* frequently expresses the pursuit of true love, such as in Zhou Nan·Guan Ju, where “A graceful, virtuous lady is the ideal match for a gentleman” reflects the longing and yearning for beautiful love. This emphasis on pure love remains highly relevant in modern society. In the face of materialism and growing social pressures, modern individuals should place more importance on internal emotional communication and genuine soul connection, rather than simply focusing on external matching conditions. The purity of love and the emotional connection within it are core elements for maintaining marital happiness.

### ***4.2 The Importance of Responsibility and Commitment***

With the growing emphasis on personal freedom and independence, the pursuit of individual happiness in modern marriage is increasingly highlighted. However, marriage, as both a social institution and a personal commitment, cannot maintain long-term stability without the support of responsibility and commitment. *The Book of Songs* repeatedly stresses loyalty and responsibility within marriage, such as in Wei Feng·Mang, where a woman's unwavering loyalty to her marriage shows how much ancient society valued marriage responsibilities. Modern society should learn from this and understand that marriage is not only the pursuit of personal happiness but also a commitment and responsibility. This commitment is crucial not only for family stability but also for social harmony and progress. In the pursuit of personal freedom, finding a balance between responsibility in marriage and family stability is a challenge that modern society needs to address thoughtfully.

### ***4.3 Combining Tradition and Modernity***

When constructing contemporary views on marriage and love, it is essential to combine traditional wisdom with modern values. While the views on marriage in *The Book of Songs* stem from ancient times, the wisdom they contain holds timeless value. For example, the emphasis on marriage and family relationships in Xiao Ya·Lu Ming, which reflects ancient people's aspiration for harmonious families, is still relevant. These traditional views do not conflict with modern notions of freedom and equality; rather, they can complement each other. By integrating the classic wisdom of love and marriage from *The Book of Songs* with contemporary values, a new type of marriage view can be formed that respects individual freedom while also emphasizing family responsibility. This integration can not only help people build more stable and happy marriages in modern society but also contribute

to the inheritance and innovation of Chinese cultural wisdom in marital views.

#### **4.4 Reflection on Addressing Modern Marriage Challenges**

Modern marriage relationships face numerous challenges, such as the rise of materialism, pressures from fast-paced lifestyles, and the growing influence of individualism, which have diminished the sense of responsibility and commitment in marriage. The emphasis in *The Book of Songs* on responsibility within marriage and loyalty to family offers a reflective perspective for modern society. By drawing lessons from *The Book of Songs*, modern individuals can reassess the essence of marriage and, when facing real-life pressures, find a more balanced view of marriage and practical approaches. This reflection will help alleviate marriage problems caused by misaligned views in modern society and promote social harmony and progress.

In conclusion, the integration of the views on marriage and love in *The Book of Songs* with contemporary values not only provides rich cultural resources for modern marriage relationships but also offers practical guidance and insights for addressing marriage issues in modern society.

#### **Conclusion**

Through the comparative analysis of the marriage and love concepts in *The Book of Songs* and contemporary values, we find that, despite significant differences in many aspects, there are shared core values. The marriage and love concepts in *The Book of Songs* primarily reflect the maintenance of family and social order, emphasizing marriage as the continuation of social relationships and the fulfillment of responsibilities.

Although contemporary views on marriage and love differ in form and emphasis from those in *The Book of Songs*, core values such as the sincere pursuit of love, loyalty, and responsibility in marriage still remain common. In the face of modern challenges such as materialism and individualism, the marriage and love concepts in *The Book of Songs* remind us that while marriage and love relationships can take diverse forms in modern society, the core values of responsibility and commitment should still adhere to traditional ideals.

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