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Chinese Platonic Love – Fusion of friendship and romance online

China in the pre-reform era was characterised by social alienation. Social ties that were independent from the state were kept under control to prevent the populace from developing alternative loyalties. In the 21st century, the situation is rather different. China has now become the country with the largest Internet population in the world, albeit under strict government control. The Internet is an important socialization tool for Chinese netizens in which they make friends with others online and online communities of all sorts also emerge.

This study is based on my participant observation at a Chinese domestic social networking site, Love Apartment (www.ipart.cn) where members of same-sex or opposite sex can freely cohabit with one another virtually. Due to the historical condition of sexual segregation of social life between males and females in China, stigma attached to public display of intimacy between opposite sexes remains. These social constraints also inhibit the development of cross-sex friendships in the face-to-face world, especially if they involve people who have married.

The Internet offers netizens a safe avenue to explore cross-sex friendships. Some of those who develop cross-sex friendships online consciously make an effort to confine the relationship within the cyberspace. This type of exclusively Internet-based relationship is sometimes called Platonic love. It represents a fusion of romance and friendship, a desexualized form of intimacy characterised by strong emotional attachment. This paper will also discuss the closely related online phenomenon of cyber-marriage in China. Those who partake in this activity may not be romantically involved, but perceive it as the ultimate form of friendship.