Yale Daily News

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2026

WEEKEND

THE LANGUAGE WE HAVE FOR LOVE

MISCHA PERZANOWSKI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



ILLUSTRATION BY TASHA FU

"Tīngshuō xiànzài yǒu bùshǎo rén dōu shì zhǐ tán liàn'ài bù jiéhūn de, zhèyàng de rén zuì hǎo gēn tā yìdāo-liǎngduàn."

Earlier this week, I learned this sentence in my Chinese class, roughly translating to: "I hear there are quite a few people nowadays who only date and don't get married; it's best to make a clean break with someone like that."

It seems even my Chinese textbook has noticed that something about dating has changed.

We grew up with stories that gave love a clear trajectory: meet someone, fall in love, get married and live happily ever after. We grew up with grandiose imagery of chasing one another to the airport before the plane leaves or standing outside the window with a boombox and a rose in hand.

Now, dating feels more like a landscape of low-commitment, non-exclusive situationships than clearly labeled relationships. The internet has only expanded the vocabulary: the three-month rule, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, the loneliness epidemic and more. We may have fewer rules for how dating is supposed to work, but we have invented increasingly specific language to rationalize the irrationality of falling in love.

There is the talking stage, which is somehow both more and less than dating. There are situationships, which can apparently last months without either person knowing they are in one. There are rules about how long to wait before texting back, how long to date before becoming exclusive and how long to know someone before deciding whether your feelings are real.

Warren Deaton '30 offers his own explanation for why dating looks this way. "I believe the most significant shift in contemporary dating has been from that of perceived necessity and convention to that of spontaneity," he wrote in a text message. "This spontaneity has made the emotion much more vivid behind authentic connections but can also cause transience."

That transience takes on a different weight in college, an unusually strange place to fall in love. Thousands of young adults with stars in their eyes arrive on campus at the same time, having left behind the people and places that previously told them who they were. In trying to figure out who we are, we naturally attempt to figure out who we want.

Deaton points to a similar tension between the way Yale students date and the relationships they ultimately want. "We engage in things like hook ups and other things to sometimes distract ourselves from the reality that our actions are of much more weight and significance now," he wrote. "We yearn for relationships yet subject ourselves to passing joys."

Perhaps part of that tension comes from the strange position we occupy when we're 18. We might want something lasting while still having no idea what we want our lives to look like at 22, let alone 30. We might not even know what we want our Friday night to look like next week.

And yet a relationship asks us to make room for another person in a life, the shape of which we can barely predict for ourselves. "Who am I?" becomes "Who are you?" and "What are we?" These questions sound almost embarrassingly serious for a first-year relationship, yet they are also strangely difficult to answer.

Meeting his current girlfriend before first semester, Abel Mamo '30 has an experience that is, in some ways, the opposite of the stereotypical first-year relationship. One of the common concerns about entering a relationship during the first semester is that the student will spend too much time with their partner, making it harder to branch out and build a wider community.

For Mamo, his relationship has done the opposite. "Having met my girlfriend at First-Year Scholars at Yale gave me a group of friends and people I knew coming in," he said. "Having that relationship gave me access to the people she became friends with, allowing me to widen my circle of people."

For Min Mandy Chen '29, however, a partner can easily become a substitute for the broader community students are still trying to build. "A surprising amount of people (including myself) found themselves entering their first relationship in college," she wrote in a text message. "The novelty of such coupled with the standard honeymoon phase can make it difficult to branch out, after all, your partner is a built in best friend."

She added that "community comes at the cost of discomfort," while having a partner can provide "an easy out to awkward interactions" and the friend-making that happens during first year.

Maybe this is what makes first-year relationships different from relationships later in college. You are not simply adding a person to an already-established life; you are adding a person while life itself is still being built. You might grow together or grow apart. You might learn something you could not have learned alone. Or it might simply be a relationship you had at 18. At Yale, though, a relationship rarely exists in isolation. A breakup does not make someone a stranger when you still share friends, dining halls, parties and the walks between classes. When dating becomes so woven into the life you are building, being single can feel like something you are supposed to solve.

"There is a lot of pressure I feel to be in a relationship, where I feel like a chud because I haven't found someone here," Zachary Minter '28 said. "Thinking that you have to check a box or get something out of this makes sense because it's such a short amount of time, where I think about graduating and going to another city, where it's going to be awkward. But nobody knows, and I'm not going to stand here and fight and beg to be in a relationship."

Maybe Zach is right. Maybe the problem isn't that we don't know enough about relationships. Maybe we expect ourselves to know too much about ourselves. Fall semester is already a period of uncertainty and transition; perhaps that is why relationships formed in it can feel like such an additional weight to carry. You are already trying to figure out who you are, where you belong and what your life here will look like. Adding another person means accepting uncertainties that are no longer entirely our own: We can control our own feelings, but never fully predict another person's. And that uncertainty does not necessarily end with the relationship; sometimes, it follows you out of it.

Since move-in day, I have wondered what exactly we mourn when a relationship ends. Do we mourn the person, or the life we imagined with them? Do we miss them, or who we were with them? And how much of what we remember belongs to the relationship itself, rather than the life we were living at the time?

I still don't have a particularly satisfying answer. Yet maybe that is the point. I arrived in New Haven sure of who I was as a person, a student and a future professional. Now, a month has passed, and I have accumulated only more questions. Not only "Who am I?" but also "Who do I want to become?" "What do I actually want from another person?" And "How do you know when it is time to let a relationship become part of your past?" Maybe these are questions I was always going to ask at 18. Maybe Yale just gave me more reasons to ask them.

Oh, and, most importantly, will I ever master Chinese?

My textbook seems to be teaching me something other than Chinese: that love can be neatly defined — date to marry, or cut your losses. However, maybe love is like Chinese. There are rules. There are patterns. There are words for things you didn't know had names. And no matter how much you study, sometimes you still 不懂 (bù dǒng, don't understand).

Contact
MISCHA PERZANOWSKI
at
mischa.perzanowski@yale.edu