Chinese mate preferences: Cultural evolution and continuity across a quarter of a century

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ABSTRACT

Expressed mate preferences provide unique windows into the cultural evolution of values and evolved mating psychology. The current study used two research instruments—one ranking procedure and one rating procedure—to examine mate preferences in mainland China. We compared modern Chinese ($n = 1060$) with Chinese studied a quarter of a century earlier ($N = 500$). Results revealed several cultural changes in values – a dramatic decrease in the importance of *virginity*, and an increase in the importance of *good financial prospects* – changes that occurred for both men and women. In contrast to those cultural changes, gender differences in mate preferences for cues to fertility (youth, physical attractiveness) and resources (good financial prospects, social status) remained invariant. Discussion highlights limitations of the study, and stresses the importance of both cultural evolution and evolved mate preferences.

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1. Introduction

Mate preferences acquire scientific importance for several key reasons. First, mate preferences influence who is chosen and who is excluded from mating, thus influencing the current direction of sexual selection (Darwin, 1871). Second, mate preferences of one sex determine which members of the opposite sex are considered to be high and low in mate value, which influences variables ranging from the desirability of the mate one can attract to social status within the group (Buss, 2003). Third, mate preferences of one sex influence which mate attraction and mate retention tactics will be effective in members of the opposite sex—tactics that embody the desires of the individual a person is trying to attract or retain (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Fourth, some mate preferences may be evolved psychological adaptations, representing important solutions to cardinal problems of mating such as choosing a mate who is fertile or a mate willing and able to invest in offspring (Buss, 1989). Fifth, mate preferences reveal important cultural values, and when examined over time, can be used to assay the cultural evolution of values (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). For all these reasons, the study of human mate preferences represents an exceptionally important and necessarily ongoing scientific endeavor.

China is especially interesting for studying mate preferences because it has undergone dramatic cultural changes over the past 25 years. Prior to 1989, China was relatively closed to Westerners; since then, it has become increasingly open. Economically, wages and variance in wages were low compared to those in Western cultures. Wages have risen as a majority of businesses have shifted from being state-owned to becoming privately owned. Consequently variance in wages has increased. In the mating domain, sexuality has become less restricted and premarital sex more common. A key question is whether Chinese mate preferences have changed to reflect these dramatic cultural changes. Has the increased variance in economic resources across individuals led to increased importance attached to a mate's resource capacity? Has the loosening of sexual restrictions led to decreased importance Chinese individuals attach to virginity in mates? These are key questions addressed by the current study, which seeks to contribute to knowledge about cultural evolution as well as cultural continuity and universality (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006).

The dramatic cultural changes in China also make it a scientifically interesting culture for testing key evolutionary hypotheses about gender differences in mate preferences. Because fertility cannot be observed directly, evolutionary psychologists hypothesized that men value physical appearance in mates because appearance provides a wealth of observable cues to fertility (Buss, 1989; Symons, 1979). Because human fertility is sharply age-graded, evolutionary psychologists hypothesized that men have evolved preferences for young mates (Symons, 1979). Because reproductive

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biology involves the heavy obligatory parental investment of nine months of pregnancy, evolutionary psychologists have hypothesized that women have evolved preferences for mates able to acquire resources and willing to invest resources in them. These sex differences are hypothesized to be universal across cultures (e.g., Badahdah & Tiemann, 2005; Buss, 1989; Gottschall, Martin, Quish, & Rea, 2004; Khallad, 2005). This study was partly designed to examine whether these sex differences persist in a culture that has undergone dramatic changes over the past quarter of a century.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study consisted of two groups of participants. The modern sample, with data gathered in 2008 in the city of Shanghai, totaled 1060 individuals—475 males and 585 females. These data were collected from 30 different work units—companies, factories, and universities. Participation was voluntary. This sample was compared with a Chinese sample gathered from four major cities (including Shanghai) in the mid-1980s, consisting of 500 individuals—265 males and 235 females—who were part of the 37-culture International Mate Selection Project (see Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990 for details). The relationship status of the two samples was comparable. For the 1980s sample, 15.2% were married, with the rest single or dating. For the 2008 sample, 15.1% were married.

2.2. Research instruments

Two research instruments were used – *Preferences Concerning Potential Mates* and *Factors in Choosing a Mate*. The first is a ranking procedure in which participants received this instructional set:

Instructions: Below are listed a set of characteristics that might be present in a potential mate or marriage partner. Please rank them on their desirability in someone you might marry. Give a "1" to the most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "2" to the second most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "3" to the third most desirable characteristic; and so on down to "13" for the 13th most desired characteristic in a potential mate. Rank these 13 characteristics from Most (1) to Least (13) Desired in a Mate. Following these instructions were 13 characteristics derived from a previous factor analysis of a larger set of 76 characteristics (see Buss & Barnes, 1986).

Factors in Choosing a Mate, initially developed by Hill (1945), requested information about age, sex, the age at which the participant preferred to marry, and the age differences they preferred between themselves and their spouse. This was followed by a rating procedure: Please evaluate the following factors in choosing a mate. If you consider it

indispensable, give it......................3 points
important, but not indispensable..........2 points
desirable, but not very important.........1 point
irrelevant or unimportant.................0 points

These instructions were followed by 18 characteristics. Both instruments were translated into Chinese by a bilingual speaker; back-translated by a second bilingual speaker; and discrepancies resolved by a third bilingual speaker.

3. Results

3.1. Age and mate preferences in a partner

Table 1 shows the participants' ages, the ages at which they preferred to marry, and the age difference preferred between self and spouse. The 2008 sample was approximately three years older than the 1983 sample. We correlated age with mate preferences for the 2008 sample (we were unable to perform these correlations for the earlier sample due to the manner in which the data were transcribed prior to sending them to the last author). The correlations were uniformly low; only two exceeded .20. Older people expressed a slightly stronger preference for good housekeeper ($-.21$, $p < .001$) and wants children ($-.23$, $p < .001$).

There was no sex difference in the 1983 sample in the age participants preferred to marry (26.73 and 27.72 for men and women, respectively). In 2008, men expressed a preference to marry about a year and a half later than women (28.98 and 27.46; $t = -4.24$, $p < .001$).

The age differences preferred between self and spouse strongly support the hypothesis that men have an evolved preference for young fertile partners. In 1983, men preferred partners 2.15 years younger than themselves; in the 2008 sample, men preferred spouses 3.41 years younger. Chinese women preferred spouses older than themselves—3.45 and 4.15 years older for the 1983 and 2008 samples, respectively. These sex differences have large effect sizes, with ds of -2.61 and -3.67. These are among the largest psychological sex differences ever documented in the psychological literature (see, e.g., Geary, 2009).

3.2. Validity check for preferred age difference between self and spouse

Conceptually, mate preferences cannot be invariantly translated into actual mating decisions. Individuals cannot always get what they want. They are limited by their own personal mate value and by the existing pool of available mates (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Nonetheless, mate preferences cannot have evolved unless they influenced actual mating behavior during the time period during which they evolved.

Table 1
Age and age preferences for marriage.

Age variable		1983	2008	Sex diff. 1983		Sex diff. 2008		Cross-time dift	
				t	*d*	*t*	*d*	*t*	*d*
Age of participants	Male	23.37 (4.87)	26.65 (5.97)	1.93[*]	0.18	3.79[***]	0.24	−8.05[***]	−0.60
	Female	22.46 (5.29)	25.34 (5.09)					−7.21[***]	−0.56
Age prefer to marry	Male	26.73 (8.06)	28.98 (2.55)	−0.16	−0.10	7.58[***]	0.65	−4.24[***]	−0.38
	Female	27.72 (10.98)	27.46 (2.10)					1.01	0.03
Age difference preferred between self and spouse	Male	−2.15 (2.49)	−3.41 (2.17)	−28.66[***]	−2.61	−37.34[***]	−3.67	5.40[***]	0.54
	Female	3.45 (1.73)	4.15 (1.94)					−4.16[***]	−0.38

Note: Means for age, age prefer to marry, and age differences preferred between self and spouse are expressed as years. For age difference preferred between self and spouse, negative values reflect a preference for a younger partner; positive values reflect a preference for an older partner. d = Cohen's (1988) effect size index, with |0.20| = small, |0.50| = medium, |0.80| = large.
  [*] Significance level = $p < .05$ (all two-tailed).
  [**] Significance level = $p < .01$ (all two-tailed).
  [***] Significance level = $p < .001$ (all two-tailed).