

Original Paper

Insider Perspectives of Mate Selection in Modern Chinese Society

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Abstract

With the increased exposure to Western cultures and the transition towards modernization, Chinese society has experienced substantial social change, which has influenced marital relationships. Although recent research has documented contemporary patterns of marital interaction, less is known about what Chinese adults consider to be an ideal marital partner. The values of contemporary Chinese adults about mate selection preferences were addressed by conducting six focus groups in Taipei, Taiwan. The focus groups included a total of 51 participants (male=25; female=26) and included separate groups for middle-aged married men, middle-aged married women, younger married men, younger married women, never-married young adult men, and never-married young adult women. The results from qualitative analysis indicated three major themes in an ideal partner: family-of-origin, which included similar family background and good relationship with in-laws, personal qualities, which included financial stability and being responsible, and relationship qualities, which included getting along, communicating well, mutual respect, and gender equality. These results indicate that contemporary Chinese adults value a combination of traditional Chinese (e.g., similar family background) and Western (e.g., good communication) values. Overall, the young Chinese participants showed greater incorporation of Western values than the older participants. These findings suggest that modern Chinese society is being increasingly influenced by individualistic Western values.

Keywords

Chinese mate selection, family background, focus groups, communication, qualitative research

1. Introduction

There is a significant knowledge base about marital relationships in traditional Chinese culture. Accounts of traditional family life has been described in great detail in Chinese fiction (Chin, 1972; Tsao, 1958), philosophy (Chin, 2008), and history (Chang, 1991). The norms of three-generational households and the unequal gendered power structure of marriage are well documented (Lu & Lin, 1998). In addition, it is well known that marital relations in Chinese culture has traditionally been characterized by a sense of loyalty and duty, rather than the Western ideals of love and romance (Chen & Li, 2007).

Over the past 75 years, Chinese society has experienced substantial social change, with dramatic economic modernization, universal education, and increased Western interaction and influence. For example, Toro-Morn and Sprecher (2003) indicated that the People's Republic of China is one of the fastest growing markets for Western products such as movies, food, and other material culture. At the same time, Taiwan has also moved toward a modernized, democratic, and industrial society (Han, Li, & Hwang, 2005).

With the increased exposure to Western cultures and transitions to modernization and universal education, both Taiwan and China have experienced substantial changes in gender role ideology, as well as family structure and norms. For example, family structure has shifted dramatically from intergenerational to nuclear households (Lin, 2009; Xu & Lai, 2004). The increased divorce rates in Taiwan suggest that women have more opportunity and power through education and gender-equality laws on marriage and divorce (Huang, 2005a; Huang, 2005b). Also, the Taiwanese government has promoted egalitarian gender roles, hoping to increase the balance of father and mother involvement with their children (Ho, Ko, Tran, Phillips, & Chen, 2013).

Changes in family norms are reflected in marital relationships, in general, and mate selection, in particular. In traditional Chinese society, marriage had the primary purpose of maintenance, continuity, and well-being of the larger family system (Xu, Xie, Liu, Xia, & Liu, 2007). Consequently, arranged marriages, where parents choose their children's spouses, was a long-held tradition in Chinese society (Chun & Sue, 1998). However, there is evidence that marriage is transforming from being shaped by external forces or institutional control to personal choice (Chang & Chan, 2007). Chinese people have more autonomy for admiration, romantic love, and mutual respect between individuals in marriage (Chen & Li, 2007).

However, with the values and norms of Confucianism still an important piece of Chinese society, both China and Taiwan are still considered collectivistic societies, emphasizing harmonious interpersonal relationships and interdependence (Lee & Mock, 2005). In addition, the core Confucius principle of filial piety, which is defined as upholding honor for the family and having proper manners with parents and moral responsibility, is still highly valued in Chinese societies, including Taiwan (Chen & Yi, 2011; Liu, 2013).

In the context of the interaction between social change and traditional Confucian values and norms, the values, norms, and patterns of mate selection in Taiwan are not well understood. This study used qualitative methods to understand contemporary Chinese values, beliefs, and attitudes on mate selection. Specifically, the study used a focus group methodology to gather Taiwanese adults' perspectives on contemporary attitudes about mate selection. With an insider's perspective of contemporary Chinese marriage, we examined contemporary Chinese mate selection values, beliefs, and norms.

1.1 Mate Selection in Traditional Chinese Culture

In traditional Chinese culture, marriage was universal and was arranged by parents (Yu & Liu, 2014), often with the help of hired go-betweens. Marriage was viewed as a solemn and important event, with the purpose of marriage being maintenance, continuity, and well-being of the larger family system (Xu et al., 2007). Individual interests and preferences regarding mate selection were of secondary importance in order to promote harmonious interpersonal relationships in the family and in the community (Thornton et al., 1984). Children followed the wishes of their parents because of the strong social norm of filial piety (Pan et al., 2013). Consequently, children honored and respected their parents by suppressing their wishes and complying with their parents' decisions and expectations concerning whom they should marry (Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

Desired individual characteristics centered on traditional gender roles. The Chinese idiom, “男主外、女主內” (“men take care of external affairs; women take care of internal affairs”), illustrates the traditional role of men as breadwinners and the role of women as caregivers (Walton & Takeuchi, 2010; Yao, 2000). Within the home, the husband's responsibilities were providing financially, disciplining the children, and governing the family, while the wife's responsibilities emphasized nurturing children, taking care of domestic needs, assisting in the fathers' discipline with the children, and maintaining harmonious relationships with other family members (Li & Lamb, 2013; Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hyun, 2004). Thus, the traditional expectations of gender roles informed the mate selection criteria.

1.2 Mate Selection in Contemporary Taiwanese Society

Research indicates that mate selection norms and patterns are changing dramatically in Taiwan. Much of the change is due to an increasing level of education among Taiwanese young adults, especially among women (Ji & Yeung, 2014; Kuo, Hung, & Pai, 2011). In addition, increased education and professional opportunities among Taiwanese women have made many of them intolerant of restrictive gender roles associated with traditional Chinese marriages.

With young adult children now having more of a say in who they marry, it is not surprising that desired characteristics in a spouse have expanded beyond the focus of their ability to perform gendered responsibilities in the family. A few studies have examined mate selection preferences in Chinese societies since the turn of the 21st Century (Chang et al., 2011; Guo, Feng, & Wang, 2017; Kline &

Zhang, 2009). For example, Chen, Austin, Miller and Piercy (2015) conducted an online survey of 656 Chinese and 604 American young adults. Participants were asked to rate the minimum mate selection criteria from a list of 21 characteristics. The most highly rated characteristics of the Chinese young adults were (in order) honest and trustworthy, healthy, kind and understanding, friendly, and easygoing. Although these characteristics reflect characteristics that are not generally associated with traditional Chinese culture, the authors found that traditional Chinese values were still perceived as important. They found that Chinese participants rated a higher level of importance to criteria related to status (e.g., high social status) and family orientation (e.g., good family background), while American participants had a higher preference for personality traits, physical attractiveness, and religiosity.

1.3 Summary

Chinese societies, including Taiwanese society, have experienced dramatic change in mate selection patterns. Arranged marriages are no longer the norm, and the criteria for mate selection are no longer primarily based on social and political considerations between families. A few studies in recent years have examined mate selection preferences among Chinese young adults (Chang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2017). However, these studies have used survey designs, where researchers have presented Chinese young adults with lists of potential mate selection criteria and had them report which ones are most important to them. Even in cases where participants were given open-ended questions and asked to list the characteristics that they desired in a romantic partner (Chen et al., 2015; Kline & Zhang, 2009), the survey design of the studies prohibited elaborations of their write-in responses or the opportunity for researchers to ask follow-up questions.

What is needed is a qualitative study that captures the voices of Chinese people as they describe their perceptions of what characteristics are important when looking for a potential marriage partner. A qualitative design that allows for follow-up questions and elaboration would provide much richer data than can be gathered using a quantitative questionnaire. Thus, the purpose of this study was to use focus groups to learn about adults' perceptions of desired qualities of a marriage partner in Taiwan.

2. Methods

Data for this study were gathered using focus groups. Focus groups involve an interactive group discussion on a particular topic within an open and non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1988). The open-response format and group discussion often create rich information that is impossible to obtain through individual interviews or quantitative research (Edmunds, 1999). Focus groups are helpful for researchers to understand the phenomenon from a group of people who have experienced the phenomenon and developed their views and perspectives. Due to the practicality and enjoyable environment for participants, focus group research is becoming more popular in the social sciences, such as in political science, sociology, and marriage and family therapy (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005).

2.1 Procedures

The focus group study was approved by the IRB at the sponsoring university. Separate focus groups were conducted in 2015 for men and women in order to facilitate more candid responses to sensitive gender-related questions. In addition, rapid societal changes have created cohort differences among married adults in Chinese societies (Pimentel, 2000); consequently, older and younger married adults were interviewed in separate focus groups, with groups being held separately for younger married adults, 39 years or younger, and married middle-age adults between the ages of 40 and 64. These participants were not married couples; rather, they were adults who are married. In addition, focus groups were conducted for never-married young adult women and men. Thus, there were six separate groups: middle-aged married men, middle-aged married women, younger married men, younger married women, never-married young adult men, and never-married young adult women. The design of homogeneity among focus group members in this research was meant to facilitate participants to express their thoughts more freely based on their similarity in terms of age, gender, and marital status (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998). The goal was to have eight to ten people in each focus group. Morgan and colleagues (1998) suggested that this size of a focus group creates an environment for each participant to contribute more in-depth information on a topic. Groups that contain fewer than six people or more than 12 people have potential to create some difficulty in generating a diversity of ideas or in-depth information from all participants (Green & Hart, 1999).

The participants were recruited by a snowball sampling method by employing 20 to 25 contact people who each recruited four or five potential participants. This strategy has been utilized in past focus group research to ensure that the gender, age, and marital status requirements of the different focus groups are met (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). The contact people were graduate students at Fu Jen University in Taiwan, and they targeted potential participants in Taipei City and New Taipei City (Xinzhuan District) areas of Taiwan. This method for recruiting research participants has been used numerous times by faculty in the Child and Family Studies Department at Fu Jen University, and it has proven to be effective and efficient. The participants were compensated a total of US\$ 32.64 (NT\$ 1000) for their participation in the focus group, which is a typical reimbursement rate in Taiwan. In addition, each contact person received an incentive of US\$ 3.26 (NT \$100) for participating in recruitment and another incentive of US\$ 3.26 (NT\$100) for each participant they recruited, which is the rate that faculty at Fu Jen University have used in past research.

Informed consent forms were provided to participants at the beginning of the focus group to inform them of risks and benefits of their participation in the study. After signing the consent forms, the participants completed a one-page questionnaire about demographic information. The focus group started with general information provided to participants, including a welcome statement, a statement about the purpose of study, ground rules (such as confidentiality), and some ice-breaking questions. Then the interview proceeded with questions on the topics of marriage preparation, mate selection

norms, characteristics of a desired marital partner, and marital dynamics. In each group, there was one facilitator and one assistant facilitator. The facilitator was responsible for asking questions and guiding the group back to the topic when they got off topic. The assistant facilitator was responsible for handling logistics, recording the focus group session, and taking notes during the focus group, as well as assisting in asking questions.

The facilitators were two graduate students who were in a marriage and family therapy program. Both were native Taiwanese, and the assistant facilitators were students at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. The facilitators and the assistant facilitators received training in the method of focus groups and qualities of effective facilitators before they conducted the focus groups (Krueger, 1988).

2.2 Participants

A total of 51 participants (male N=25 (49.02%), female N=26 (50.98%)) were included in the study, and all participants identified themselves as ethnic Chinese. There was a total of six focus groups with 7 to 10 participants in each group. Among the single groups, the male focus group had eight participants, and the female group had nine participants. The average age was 27.41 ($SD=5.88$), and 94.12% were college graduates. Among the younger married groups, nine males and seven females participated. Their average age was 31.69 ($SD=3.61$), and 68.75% were college graduates. They had been married an average of 3.61 years ($SD=3.01$), and they had an average of 1.00 ($SD=.73$) children. Eight males participated in the older marriage male focus group, and 10 females participated in the older married female focus group. Their average age was 51.56 ($SD=5.07$), and 22.22% were college graduates. They had been married an average of 23.78 ($SD=7.35$) years, and they had an average of 2.28 ($SD=.89$) children.

2.3 Measures

Open-ended questions were used to prompt discussion among the focus group participants. The focus groups discussed a wide range of topics about marriage in Taiwan. The questions that were asked that pertain to the present study included: “What is the ideal marriage like in Taiwan”, “What preparation (school, job, finances, etc.) does a woman/man need before she/he is ready to get married?”, “What characteristics are women/men looking for in a husband/wife when they are looking to get married?”, “How do you tell the difference between a good husband/wife and not so good husband/wife in Taiwan today?”, “What characteristics make up a really good spouse in Taiwan today?”, and “What characteristics should they avoid in a spouse?”

2.4 Analysis

An audio recording machine was used to record the conversations during the focus group sessions so that the discussion was captured verbatim for subsequent analysis. The audiotapes were then transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The Chinese transcriptions were analyzed by a native Taiwanese graduate student and a team of native Chinese undergraduate students, using standard inductive, qualitative data analytic methods (Cavanagh, 1997; Creswell, 2013; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kondracki,

Wellman, & Amundson, 2002; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

The coders developed codes, categories, and themes directly drawn from the data. The coders determined preliminary coding by immersing themselves in the data by reading each transcript several times and looked for similar and different concepts to create the categories (Cho & Lee, 2014). Similar codes were grouped into the same category. Categories were reorganized, revised, and refined during the coding process to make sure each category was mutually exclusive in order to establish the final categories (Cho & Lee, 2014). The coders labelled the final eleven categories as subthemes and organized the subthemes into three main themes of this study. Each main theme, which was accompanied by subthemes, exemplary quotes and examples taken directly from the data, comprised the results of the study.

In terms of the actual process of coding, at least two native Chinese coders independently conducted the data categorization and analysis of each focus group. After they finished their coding, they met with the other coders for that focus group and compared their results and resolved differences to minimize researcher bias and increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). The senior author, or lead coder, took the codes from each of the focus groups and consolidated them into a single set of codes. She shared them with a senior family therapy faculty member, and they discussed the merits and weaknesses of each code. After discussing them, they reached a consensus on a set of codes. Once a coding scheme was developed, the coders placed each meaningful participant statement into the appropriate category. The lead coder then met with the coders and reviewed their coding. When the lead coder thought that a statement should be moved into a different category, they discussed the issue until a consensus was reached. The lead coder then met with the senior faculty member, and they reviewed the coding. The focus group interviews were subsequently translated into English so that exemplary quotes and examples could be reported in English in the report of the study.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis found three major themes for an ideal partner for marriage in Taiwan: family-of-origin qualities, personal qualities, and relationship qualities. Each theme had several subthemes.

3.1 Family-of-Origin

Many participants discussed the importance of the family-of-origin. Two subthemes of the family-of-origin emerged: good relationship with in-laws, and similar family background. The quality of family-of-origin relations was found to be a significant theme for the majority of female participants. Females of all ages and marital status suggested that their partner having a harmonious relationship with both families was crucial to the marriage. Single males also reported the importance of the family-of-origin. Many participants reported that the similar family background of the partner would likely increase the harmonious relationship with both in-laws and their family of origin.

Over half of the participants in both single female and male focus groups reported the importance of their partner having a good relationship with the in-laws, meaning their own parents. For example, a 36-year old single female woman who has a masters degree and works full-time stated, “Taiwan’s society cares about relationships. If two families cannot get along harmoniously, even if the male has a lot of cars and houses, it doesn’t matter anymore”. A single female reported, “I would like to have a partner who can have a good relationship with my family. A family-oriented person is very significant, and I want to make sure my parents would like him”. A single male, stated, “It is the same for both boys and girls. If the boy doesn’t fit in with the parent in-laws, the marriage will never be harmonious”. Another single male participant reported, “She (my ideal partner) needs to have good EQ [emotional quotient], able to socialize with my family. She may be temperamental, but she needs to avoid conflicts. She needs to have her own ways to manage her temperament so that my family would have a good impression on her”.

Interestingly, despite the age of the participants, all the married females reported the importance of getting along with the in-laws, whereas none of the married males made any statements regarding the in-law’s relationship. A young married female said, “His parents. The family-in-laws is very important. If the parents-in-law are not easy to get along well, then living together afterward will be a big factor for affecting marriage”. Another young married female also shared, “Parents getting along well. It is important to have family being in harmony in a marriage, whether it is the husband’s family or wife’s family”. An older married female also stated, “The mother-in-law is also very important so that the marriage can be maintained”.

Many participants believed that a marital partner with a similar family background was an important quality of an ideal partner. Over half of the focus groups mentioned a Chinese proverb, “門當戶對” (“a marriage between families of well-matched social and economic status”), or similar ideas, during the focus group interviews, demonstrating the importance of the similar family background in mate selection. A single male reported, “Two people must have a certain degree of similarity in their family background. If the difference is too large, you will never understand what the other person is thinking. Although it will not necessarily cause conflict, it creates distances between the couple as time goes by”. An older married female stated, “In the past, people said it needs to be a perfect match. Because everyone comes from different families, similar family backgrounds would have similar values and values would be closer”. Another older married female, added, “In fact, it is a Chinese traditional concept that martial partners with similar family background are the perfect match. I think we still have this traditional concept even if we have the influence of Western culture”.

3.2 Personal Qualities

The second major theme was related to the personal qualities of a desirable partner. Unlike other themes, personal qualities do not involve family or relational qualities. Several subthemes emerged, including financial stability, responsibility and diligence, love and loyalty, and physical attractiveness.

When it comes to marital partner quality, participants from all of the female groups considered finances to be the most important quality, regardless of marital status and age. This personal quality was emphasized because it involves issues of living quality, relationship with the in-laws, and economic pressure. A single female reported that her partner needs to “be wealthy or be financially stable”. Another single female stated, “Finances is the first consideration”.

For married participants, the importance of financial stability was not taken lightly either. An older married female shared, “The primary consideration for an ideal partner is the economic foundation for sure, or they (the couple) will not want to discuss marriage”. A young married female, said, “In an ideal situation, his (the ideal partner’s) income is stable, and he has his own business”. A young married female added, “A man who is not able to provide financially is unacceptable”.

The men in the study seemed to understand the importance of their own financial stability in the eyes of women. A single male stated, “A stable income, a girl will then want to marry you”. One young married male shared that “It would be impossible that I marry a pretty girl and starve myself if finance is a problem for me. Even if she is very beautiful, it is impossible that she would want to starve to death with me”. An older married male shared a similar ideal that “the wealthier you are, the more women you are able to choose from”.

Some older married participants mentioned that an ideal partner would have certain job skills to work, in general, rather than financial resources, specifically. An older married female stated, “Professional skills and money should be considered” in a marital partner. An older married female regretted that today’s society seems to value money over skills. She said, “People all look at money and the financial foundation (how much saving) nowadays, instead of looking at skills and talents. It used to be said that if boys were hard working, skilled, and then girls would be willing to marry them. This is not the case now. Everyone considers the finances”.

Interestingly, some men did not appreciate the fact that women want a partner who was financially secure. An older married male shared, “I don’t like people nowadays only focusing on money, and men should have a house... The concept is getting more and more different than our times”. Another older married male echoed, “Having abilities to work is more important than having money”.

The majority of the female participants reported the qualities of responsibility, independence, and diligence as important in an ideal partner. A single female reported, “From how diligent he is will show if he could be reliable at work. If he’s very diligent and proactive, I don’t mind what he does for work”. Another single female stated, “Being responsible is a necessary quality. I don’t want to get a man that’s spoiled by his family, or I’ll have to take care of him after getting married”. Two older married females stated that the man “must be responsible”, and “responsibility is very important”. Another older married female suggested that a man who “does not love working and spends the majority of time on playing video games” does not qualify for marriage.

None of the males in the study or any of the married females mentioned that their ideal partner would love them or show affection. Only two single female participants reported that their ideal partners needed to love them. One single female stated, “My first consideration is to make sure he is nice to me. I think if the boy loves the girl more, things will be a lot easier”. The other single female shared, “I care a lot if my future husband loves me or not. Those who like to play around and cheat on girls are not acceptable”.

Only a few participants mentioned physical appearance as one of their ideal partner’s criterion. More than half of the single female participants reported that the physical characteristics of a husband are important, but it was more in terms of their future children’s physical appearance, rather than the man, himself, being attractive. For example, one stated, “Genetic consideration is required. Height and appearance influence your children”. There were a few females, though, who said that the person cannot be “too ugly either”. One young married male suggested, “Ideally, people look for men who are rich, tall, and handsome and women who have a fair skin, wealthy, and pretty”. However, he reported that physical appearance is not one of his ideal partner’s criteria. In fact, the male participants in this study did not consider physical attraction as a primary criterion because other qualities seemed to be more important to them. A young married male stated, “It is impossible to find a spouse who takes care of the children, fulfill domestic needs, is employed, and beautiful at the same time. It is impossible that you can find someone with all the idea qualities”. Another young married male, shared that “If my finances are a problem and my ideal partner is fine with it, I would be with her even if she is larger in her physical size (less attractive)”.

3.3 Relationship Qualities

Relationship qualities are interpersonal attributes regarding how a person interacts with his or her partner. There were five subthemes in relationship qualities that emerged from the data: getting along, communication, mutual respect and support, common values and goals, and equal partnership. Results from the analysis indicated that the younger participants had greater emphasis on this general category than the older participants did.

Many participants reported getting along with their partners is an important aspect of an ideal partner. A young married female said, “A person who can easily get along is important. I want to be with a person who I can be myself and be very comfortable with”. Most of the participants believed that the partner’s personality and a good fit between their two personalities largely determines whether they can get along or not. A single female stated, “He (my ideal partner) has to be nice to me and our personality fits each other”. A young married female participant reported, “Personality is very important. If he is hard to get along, how can we together for the rest of the life?” An older married female participant shared, “(an ideal partner) depends on whether his personality matches with me”. The personality can be referred to as a person who is “optimistic and easy-going”, according to a single male participant. To know if a person’s personality matches with their partner, an older married female suggested that

couples should evaluate if “the couple can tolerate each other’s personality before entering marriage”. A single male believed, “The couple will get into fights whenever they are together if two people’s personality don’t match”. A young married male participant reported, “If two people’s personalities match, both people can discuss things together. If they face any challenge or difficulty, they can share and talk about it together”.

The partner’s quality of getting along with each other was particularly important among young male participants. More young male participants reported the importance of getting along with the partner, especially the single male participants, whereas only a few female participants mentioned it. None of the older male participants emphasized this quality. A single male shared, “Finding someone that fits my personality is the most important part. I don’t really care about other things. Is she able to get along with me, or I can get along with her? I think this is the most important, while the other qualities are not very important”. Similarly, one young married male participant reported, “It is about finding a suitable person. Because I have thought to myself, is marriage about finding someone who is right for you, or is it to find someone you love? My point of view is to be with a suitable person who can adjust herself to my personality. Thus, I chose the one that was most suitable, allowing me to live comfortably for the rest of my life.

Communication refers to the ability to resolve conflicts and discuss challenges in the relationship. Participants suggested that the relationship has fewer conflicts and can reach a harmonious state when partners know how to communicate with each other. A single female stated that her ideal partner needs to “know how to communicate”. A single female reported, “It is important to be able to communicate. Two people have to live daily with each other; therefore, communication is very important”. A single male participant said, “Communication skills are quite important... She needs to have the communication skills to solve the problems in the relationship. I think for two people to get along, communication is the most important thing to have”. One older married female stated, “If there is good communication and interaction between the husband and wife, this is better marriage quality”. Another older married female participant suggested, “The partner can’t be too self-centered. People who are too self-centered can’t communicate with others”. A single male shared, “I think it is necessary to understand the change that the other person tries to make in the marriage. Two people work together and put in effort to change for the better for the family’s sake. A couple does not simply bear the burdens of an extra person, but a home and family. Thus, a person needs to know how to communicate and understand with each other”. A single female said, “If I am thrilled and happy to share my passion, I would get very frustrated when my partner does not listen to me or care about my interests”. Good communication was most commonly mentioned by women in the study, although a few men mentioned it.

Some participants reported that their partners need to respect and support of them. The couple needs to have the quality of understanding each other and accepting who they are. Understanding facilitates mutual respect. With mutual respect, the participants reported that the relationship is more harmonious and has fewer conflicts. A single male stated, “Both husband and wife need to adjust themselves to be as compassionate and tolerate of each other as possible. We can get along and avoid a lot of trouble, such as divorce. I think adjusting to other’s personality is the key to harmonious relationship”. One single female reported, “We both need to appreciate and respect each other”. Two older married female participants reported the importance of mutual respect and support too. One older married female stated, “Mutual respect is very important” in the relationship, and the other one agreed and added, “Understanding your partner and be considerate of each other is very important”.

Many participants reported that a partner with common values and goals is important, although more females than males mentioned it. For example, over half of the older married female participants suggested this quality is important in an ideal partner. One single female stated, “Our values cannot be too different because we will live together”. Another single female participant agreed, “Having common interests is an important factor”. A single male reported, “I personally feel that the most important thing is values, which must be nearly the same”. With common values and goals, the couple can get along better and have more positive interaction. Another older married female added, “(Similar) values are important. Only in this way we can have an endless chat”. The same religion is one of the common values mentioned among the older married participants. An older married female shared, “The couple can share the same belief. Beliefs are also important. For example, Christians marry Christians. It is easy to get into disagreement if they are in different religions”. One older married male reported, “Having a shared religious belief is important”. Other participants suggested that the ideal partner needs to have the same goal of entering a marriage and working as a couple. One single female reported, “My spouse has to have the same goals with me, having a willingness to enter a marriage and start the next phase of life”.

Traditionally, the roles of men and women are the breadwinners and the caregivers, respectively, with men having more power in the relationship (Walton & Takeuchi, 2010; Yao, 2000). Unlike these traditional Chinese gender roles, many young married participants in the study reported that it was important for an ideal partner to value equality in a partnership. More female participants expressed the desire for their partner to treat her as an equal. In the young married female focus group, a woman suggested that men who are “very male chauvinist and traditional are not appropriate. He needs to be considerate of the domestic needs and help taking care of the children”. Another woman stated that men who “help doing the housework and take care of children is good enough”. Two of the young married female participants complained that their spouses rarely assist the domestic needs and expect the women to fulfill the traditional gender role, thus expressing their belief that ideal partners are equal and equitable in the relationship.

Among the older married participants, some males still held more traditional gender roles in a marriage. One older married male shared that “women just need to be kind and take good care of the family”. Another older married male reported that women should have the quality of “three obediences and four moral standards” which is the idea of people of our age”. The participant is referring a set of Confucian moral principles specifically for women. The three obediences refer to a woman’s obedience to her father, to her husband, and to her sons when she is widowed. Another older married male stated, “Women just need to be nice and listen to their husband. According to my age, my wife should listen to my opinions more. Even though two people have different views, I believe that I am more intelligent than she is. My decision is better, so I think my wife should listen to my thoughts and decisions”. None of the older married female participants reported gender equality as a quality of an ideal partner, but they mentioned the generational transition towards gender equality in contemporary Chinese society. One older married female reported, “Previously, housework was generally women’s responsibility. Now, the men will help out the chores, which it is more mutual. Young men are now willing to share the house chores”. Another older married female stated, “Nowadays, both husband and wife want to be treated equality. They will have better relationship and marriage when they are equal in interaction and communication”.

3.4 Differences by Gender, Marital Status, and Age

Overall, female participants reported more traits of their ideal partners than male participants. In other words, females in the study reported more qualities of an ideal partner than did males. Both female and male participants, regardless to the marital status and age, equally reported the importance of family of origin in their ideal partners. However, female participants reported more personal quality traits than male participants. For example, only women reported that the ideal partner should be financial stable, independent, responsible, and diligent. Male participants seemed to understand the expectations of female partners regarding these expectations and preferences. In regards to the qualities of love and physical attractiveness, only a few females, but none of the males, reported that these qualities were important in an ideal partner. In the relationship qualities for the ideal partner, both male and female participants equally reported the importance of having a partner who they can getting along with and share common values. However, males focused almost exclusively on getting along and having common values, as well as communication; they did not report other relationship qualities in an ideal partner. On the other hand, both single and married female participants reported additional relationship quality traits of their ideal partners, including mutual respect and support, and equal partnership. A few males mentioned and acknowledged that they were expected to possess these traits.

Interestingly, there were not many differences regarding marital status. The only exception was that, among the female younger groups of participants, only the married females talked about the importance of having an equal partnership. None of the young single female participants reported it as an important quality in an ideal partner.

There were substantial differences in the ideal partner qualities between ages, with more traditional values among the older participants. The older participants, especially males, held more traditional values than the younger participants. For example, they held more traditional beliefs regarding gender roles and marital power, believing men as the breadwinner, women as the caretakers, and men with more to say in decision-making and conflicts. Besides holding more traditional values, few older participants emphasized financial stability as a criterion for an ideal male partner. Most older male and female participants believed that the ability and the willingness to work were more crucial than simply being financial stable.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceived qualities of an ideal partner among contemporary Chinese. The qualitative analysis from the focus groups indicated three major themes for an ideal partner for marriage in Taiwan: family-of-origin qualities, personal qualities, and relationship qualities, with several subthemes under the three major themes. The results indicate that contemporary Chinese adults value a combination of traditional Chinese (e.g., similar family background) and Western (e.g., good communication) values.

Having a harmonious relationship with both the partner and the in-laws was crucial for the Chinese adults in the study. They reported that the ideal partner who has a good relationship with in-laws and a similar family background, which are the two subthemes of the family-of-origin category, increases the probability for harmonious family relationships. This suggests that Taiwanese adults still hold the collectivistic values of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships (Lee & Mock, 2005). These results are similar to those found by previous studies that found that Chinese young adults were more likely than U.S. young adults to value a good family background in a potential spouse (Chen et al., 2015; Kline & Zhang, 2009). However, in contrast to the findings in the present study, the Chinese young adults in the Chen and colleagues (2015) study rated a good family background as less important than personal qualities, such as being healthy, friendly, easy going, kind, and understanding.

Being financially stable was the main personal quality that the participants in the study, especially women, looked for in an ideal partner. The finding that financial stability is an important quality of a good husband is consistent with previous research (Kline & Zhang, 2009). In Chang and colleagues' (2011) study of young adults living in Shanghai, females only rated being kind and being healthy as being more important than the qualities of being a college graduate, being intelligent, and having good earning capacity in a marriage partner. Moreover, previous research has found that this quality was more important among females than males (Chang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2015).

Unlike adults from Western societies, who highly value physical attractiveness and feeling loved by their partner (Boxer, Noonan, & Whelan, 2015), love and physical attractiveness were rarely mentioned by the participants in the study as being important qualities in a potential marital partner. This finding

is consistent with previous research that found that physical attractiveness was rated as having low importance among Chinese females, and only as moderately important among Chinese males (Chang et al., 2011; Kline & Zhang, 2009). For example, in the study by Chen and colleagues (2015), physical attractiveness was only ranked 15th out of 21 qualities among the Chinese participants.

In addition, although previous research has found that filial piety is still a desired mate selection criterion for both Chinese men and women (Guo et al., 2017), none of the younger participants in the study reported filial piety as a criterion of their ideal partner. Only a few older participants reported that filial piety is an important trait in a partner. These findings, which came as a result of study participants volunteering criteria of an ideal partner, rather than responding to a list of possible criteria, suggest that traditional values have become less important in the mate selection criteria of Chinese young adults.

Within the relationship quality theme, the ability to get along with their partner was the most common desired quality. Interestingly, most of the participants related the ability of getting along with their partner as primarily a function of their partner's personality, as well as the two partners having personalities that meshed well together. The importance of a partner's personality is echoed in the study by Chen and colleagues (2015), where they found in their content analysis of respondents' answers to open-ended questions that personality was the most frequently quality mentioned.

Some participants, especially women, mentioned the importance of having an equal relationship. This finding is consistent with previous research that has found that the traditional gender roles, with men as breadwinners and women as caregivers (Walton & Takeuchi, 2010; Yao, 2000) and being housebound, submissive, and second-class (Higgins et al., 2002), have diminished among the younger participants. The results showed, though, that some older participants still hold more traditional values on gender role and decision-making in the marriage.

Overall, the findings concerning the ideal partner's criteria suggest that contemporary Chinese adults are influenced by Western values but have not completely deserted the traditional Chinese values despite gender and marital status. Moreover, the younger Chinese adults are more influenced by Western values than the older Chinese adults.

Two limitations of this study are the sample size and the application to different regions of Chinese population. First, the sample size of the focus group was relatively small. Although the overall sample of 51 participants may not be considered small by the standards of qualitative research design, these 51 adults were divided into six focus groups, representing different demographic characteristics. A second focus group for each of the six groups of participants would have increased the sample size and robustness of the findings. Second, the participants were recruited in urban Taiwan, and the result may not generalize completely to the Chinese population in Mainland China or other regions in the world. The Chinese population in each region may experience different degrees of Western influence, especially the level of the modernization of each the region.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative nature of the study allowed for a richness of data that adds important information about mate selection preferences in the Chinese society. Instead of simply responding to a predetermined list of possible ideal qualities in a spouse, the participants in the focus groups were able to provide much more nuanced information. For example, while previous research had found that personality is an important issue in choosing a partner (Chen et al., 2015), the participants in the focus groups were able to elaborate on the ideas of “good personality”, such as having a personality that matches each other enabling them to get along with one another in a relationship. In addition, the fact that physical attractiveness and filial piety were rarely volunteered by the participants in the focus groups as important qualities of an ideal partner provides important information about their perceived lack of importance in the mate selection process.

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