Physical Attractiveness, Attitudes toward Career, and Mate Preferences among Young Chinese Women

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Abstract: We examined young Chinese women’s mate preferences as a function of their self-perceived attractiveness and career attitudes. A total of 264 young Chinese women rated their own attractiveness, reported their attitudes toward career, and rated the importance of 20 mate characteristics. The characteristics encompassed four facets that individuals typically consider when seeking a long-term mate: good-genes indicators, good investment ability indicators, good parenting indicators, and good partner indicators. We found that both self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward career were positively associated with the importance attached to several of the characteristics. Moreover, women who had high career focus but low self-perceived attractiveness attached more value to intelligence, ambition, and industriousness than women who had low career focus but high self-perceived attractiveness; women with low career focus but high self-perceived attractiveness attached more value to physical attractiveness in a mate than women with high career focus but low self-perceived attractiveness. We discussed the limitations of our research and directions for future research.

Keywords: self-perceived attractiveness, attitudes toward career, mate preferences

Introduction

Women calibrate their standards for a prospective mate on the basis of their own personal qualities. For example, women’s mate preferences are tied to their personalities (Botwin, Buss, and Shackelford, 1997), personal life experiences (Koziel and Pawlowski, 2003), menstrual phase (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2006; Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-
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Apgar, and Christensen, 2004; Jones et al., 2005, 2008; Little, Jones, Burt, and Perrett, 2007; Puts, 2005), intelligence (Stanik and Ellsworth, 2010) and income (Vigil, Geary, and Byrd-Craven, 2006). As a cardinal component of women’s mate value (e.g., Buss and Barnes, 1986), physical attractiveness is also related to women’s standards (e.g., Todd, Penke, Fasolo, and Lenton, 2007; Waynfforth and Dunbar, 1995). Buss and Shackelford (2008), for example, found that highly attractive American women express high standards for all desired qualities in a mate. Women’s career aspirations, which should also be a component of women’s mate value, may link to their mate preferences as well. The current study was designed to investigate how attractiveness and attitudes toward career are tied to women’s mate expectations in a non-Western sample.

Physical attractiveness and mate preference

A large body of research has revealed that women’s physical attractiveness is closely tied to their mate preferences. Generally, women tend to choose men whose overall desirability as a mate matches their self-perceived attractiveness, and are more choosy when perceiving themselves as attractive than not (Todd et al., 2007; Waynfforth and Dunbar, 1995). Several lines of research have provided evidence that attractive women have elevated standards for a potential mate’s physical attractiveness. For instance, women who perceived themselves to be attractive showed stronger preferences for male faces that displayed masculinity and symmetry (two cues indicating attractiveness and heritable fitness; Little, Burt, Penton-Voak, and Perrett, 2001), as well as more masculinized male voices (Feinberg et al., 2006). Echoing the results from an early meta-analysis on assortative mating (Feingold, 1988), several recent studies found that attractive individuals expected to date targets who were as attractive as they were (Montoya, 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that heterosexual romantic couples’ facial symmetry were found to be positively correlated (Burriss, Roberts, Welling, Puts, and Little, 2011). Besides holding a high standard on potential mates’ physical attractiveness, attractive women also set high requirements for mates’ resources and resource acquisition potential. For instance, young and attractive women set higher standards for prospective mates’ financial and occupational status than their less attractive counterparts (Bereczkei, Voros, Gal, and Bernath, 1997). Women with a more attractive waist-to-hip ratio also expressed stronger preferences for mates with resources (Pawlowski and Jasienska, 2008).

Indeed, attractive women seem to have stringent criteria for all the desirable characteristics in a mate (Buss and Shackelford, 2008). Buss and Shackelford classified 21 qualities women desire in a mate into four clusters: a) good-gene indicators (e.g., being masculine, physically attractive, and intelligent), b) good investment ability indicators (e.g., possessing resources and resource acquisition potential), c) good parenting indicators (e.g., having desire for children and home), and d) good partner indicators (e.g., being loyal and devoted to one’s partner). The researchers then comprehensively investigated the associations between observer-assessed physical attractiveness and the standards women imposed on potential mates for the four clusters of characteristics. They found that attractive women held higher standards for virtually all the four clusters of traits, with just a few individual trait exceptions (i.e., being intelligent [a good gene indicator]; being ambitious and industrious, and having favorable social status or rating [good investment...
ability indicators]; being kind and understanding [a good parenting indicator]; and being loyal and devoted to you [good partner indicators]).

Whether Buss and Shackelford’s (2008) findings, based on a study conducted in a Western society, are generalizable to Eastern cultures remains unknown. Therefore, the focal investigation was aimed to replicate this research among a sample of young Chinese women. In China, as in Western cultures, women value resource acquisition characteristics in potential mates to a larger extent than do men, whereas men put more emphasis on potential mates’ physical appearance than do women (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun, 2002). Given the high mate value connoted by women’s physical attractiveness, we hypothesized that young Chinese women’s physical attractiveness would be positively associated with the importance they attach to mate characteristics.

**Attitudes toward career and mate preferences**

Many women today expect to have a job outside the home, even after entering marriage and parenthood, and this employment expectation is not necessarily based on financial needs (Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, and Frame, 2005; Zhang, 2006; Zhou, 2006). Although women are often expected to take on a traditional care-giving role, many women manage to have both family and a career (e.g., Becker and Moen, 1999). In addition, an increasing number of women pursue traditionally male-dominated careers, and the gender gap in earnings is closing (Blau and Kahn, 2007; England and Folbre, 2005). In China, a report from Xinhua News Net demonstrated that women accounted for 45% of the total labor force in 2007 (Wei, 2011).

Some research has investigated how women’s earning capacity is tied to their mate preferences (e.g., Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1992; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, and Trost, 1990). According to the structural powerlessness hypothesis (Buss and Barnes, 1986), women value earning capability in potential mates because they have historically been excluded from access to resources themselves; this hypothesis, however, has received little support. Instead, women of higher expected vocational status and income tend to place more emphasis on potential mates’ resource-acquisition characteristics (Anderson and Klofstad, 2012; Wiederman and Allgeier, 1992). There are several potential explanations for this phenomenon. For instance, it is possible that good earning prospects enhance women’s position in the marriage market (Sweeney and Cancian, 2004), thus enabling them to have elevated requirements for earning capability in potential mates. The “similarity breeds liking” rule may also play a role (Botwin et al., 1997; Buston and Emlen, 2003; Feingold, 1991), in that career-oriented women seek mates who match them in earning capacity. Moreover, even in cases of women who have access to material resources, the principle of seeking a mate who is more capable of acquiring resources than themselves may still guide their mate selection (Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, and Kenrick, 2002). Therefore, the better their economic prospects are, the higher are their standards for earning capabilities in a mate. We hypothesized that women’s attitudes toward career would be positively associated with the value they attach to Buss and Shackelford’s (2008) good investment abilities in a potential mate.

Both expected access to economic resources and an employee role may predict career-oriented women’s high requirements for parenting and partner characteristics in a
mate. First, women with better financial prospects may be of greater mate value in general (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, and Larsen, 2004; Sweeney and Cancian, 2004) and thus can have higher standards for mates’ parenting and partner qualities. Second, due to the limited time and energy that career-oriented women can devote to domestic work, they may expect their partners to be understanding and share more domestic duties. Several recent studies have lent support to this proposition (Eagly, Eastwick, and Johannsen-Schmidt, 2009). Specifically, when asked to envision being a provider, as compared to being a homemaker, both men and women placed more importance on prospective mates’ homemaker qualities (e.g., desire for home and children, good cook and housekeeper). Moreover, women who aspire for a career may also endorse a more egalitarian gender ideology than other women, which legitimize their requirements for men’s participation in domestic work (Zuo and Tang, 2000). Therefore, it should be reasonable to expect that a career-oriented woman may attach more value to parenting and partner qualities in a prospective mate.

Due to the generally higher mate value (Sweeney and Cancian, 2004), one may expect that women who are more career-oriented may also raise their standards on good genes qualities in a mate. However, there seems to be little evidence supporting the association between women’s access to economic resources and the physical attractiveness they expect in their mates, a central indicator of good genes characteristics. For instance, men, but not women, raised their expectations of potential mates’ physical attractiveness after being exposed to resource-related cues (Yong and Li, 2012). Hence, women’s better financial prospects may not necessarily translate into a higher requirement of physical attractiveness in a mate. Moreover, gender differences in the preferences for physical attractiveness do not seem to be smaller in nations with higher sociopolitical gender parity (Schmitt, 2011). That is, women in more gender egalitarian societies do not demand higher or lower levels of men’s attractiveness than do women in less egalitarian societies. Therefore, we did not expect to observe a positive association between attitudes toward career and requirements for good-gene characteristics.

Overview of the current study

The first aim of the current study was to replicate Buss and Shackelford’s (2008) study, and to investigate the associations between physical attractiveness and mate preferences among a sample of young Chinese women. One important difference between the current study and Buss and Shackelford (2008) is that we utilized women’s self-ratings of their attractiveness rather than outside judges’ ratings of their attractiveness. Though self-ratings of attractiveness may not correspond perfectly to objective physical attractiveness, it is still meaningful to examine its associations with mate preferences. First, people do calibrate their expectations of a potential mate based on the traits or characteristics they think they possess (Buston and Emlen, 2003). In addition, much past research has used women’s self-rated attractiveness to predict their mate preferences and has demonstrated acceptable validity (Todd et al., 2007; Waynforth and Dunbar, 1995). Moreover, in some cases, self-perceived attractiveness may be more efficient than observer-rated attractiveness in predicting women’s mate choice. For instance, Little and Mannion (2006) found that women’s preferences for masculinity were stronger after

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viewing unattractive women than after viewing attractive women, which suggests that it is women’s subjective impressions of their attractiveness, rather than objective indices of their attractiveness, that influence their mate preferences.

Following Buss and Shackelford (2008), we divided mate characteristics into four categories—good genes indicators, good investment ability indicators, good parenting indicators, and good partner indicators. Some characteristics were tailored for the current sample of participants; details are provided in the Materials and Methods section. Our first hypothesis was that women’s self-perceived attractiveness would be positively correlated with the importance they place on mate characteristics (H1).

The second aim of the current study was to investigate the associations between women’s attitudes toward career and their mate preferences. Based on previous studies and the above theorizing, we hypothesized that women’s attitudes toward career would be positively associated with the importance they placed on good investment ability indicators, good parenting indicators, and good partner indicators, but not associated with the importance they placed on good genes indicators (H2).

Moreover, we also aimed to conduct an exploratory comparison of mate preferences between attractive women and career-oriented women. The importance of physical attractiveness in predicting women’s mate choice has been well-documented, but we know relatively little about the role attitudes toward career play in women’s mate choice. It has been advocated that good earning prospects boost women’s mate value (Sweeney and Cancian, 2004). However, it is not clear whether attitudes toward career are as powerful as physical attractiveness in swaying women’s mate preferences, and whether career-oriented women seek the same characteristics in a mate as attractive women. Given the fact that more and more young Chinese women today tend to receive higher education and are enthusiastic about developing a career (Wu and Zhang, 2010), it would be informative and interesting to explore these questions.

Attractive women and career-oriented women may represent two somewhat distinct types of women. Both are of high mate value and yet, as we have theorized above, are endowed with distinct characteristics. One may expect that women’s career aspirations might be somehow associated with their self-perceived attractiveness, considering the fact that confident women may be both ambitious about their career and think highly of their appearance. On the other hand, it is also possible that the self-worth of career-oriented women may be less contingent on their appearance. Therefore, they may have a more realistic evaluation of their own appearance. The comparison between attractive women (but with low aspiration for career) and career-oriented women (but low on self-perceived attractiveness) would disentangle these two concepts and clarify the independent links of attractiveness versus career focus. To this end, we created two groups for comparison: women who are high on career but low in self-rated attractiveness, and women who are low on career but high in self-perceived attractiveness, and we compared the mate preferences of these two groups.
Materials and Methods

Participants

Two hundred and sixty-four undergraduate and graduate female students from a university in Nanjing (China) participated in this study. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted across the campus. The mean age of the participants was 21.94 years (SD = 2.03, range 18-30 years). All participants were heterosexual and unmarried. Participants were compensated with CNY 15 (around US $2.50) for their time.

Procedure

Participants completed the self-administered questionnaire individually in our laboratory. Participants learned from the advertisement that they were taking part in a study examining mate preferences of young women. They were assured that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and be used exclusively for research purposes. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. In the first section, participants were instructed to provide some personal information, including their self-perceived physical attractiveness and attitudes toward career. In the second section, participants were shown a list of 20 characteristics and were asked to indicate the importance of each characteristic when seeking for a long-term mate. In the third section, participants were asked to provide demographic information, such as age, relationship status, and sexual orientation.

Instruments

Self-perceived physical attractiveness. Self-perceived physical attractiveness was assessed by a single item: “How would you rate your own physical appearance, as compared to other women your age?” Ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not attractive at all) to 7 (very attractive).

Attitudes toward career. Five items were used to assess participants’ attitudes toward career. These items included “It would be very important for me to have a job outside of the home,” “It would be very important for me to be financially independent,” “I want to have a successful career,” “How important would career pursuits be, as compared to family pursuits?” and “How would you like to allocate your time and resources to your career and your family?” Participants responded to the first three items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the fourth question, ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 stood for “family pursuits are far more important than career pursuits,” 4 stood for “career pursuits and family pursuits are equally important,” and 7 stood for “career pursuits are far more important than family pursuits.” Participants responded to the fifth item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (family always has a higher priority than career) to 7 (career always has a higher priority than family). Cronbach’s α of the five items was .77. Responses on these items were averaged to represent a participant’s general attitudes toward career. Participants with a higher score were regarded as more career-oriented.

Mate preferences. Participants were asked to indicate the importance of a list of 20 characteristics of a prospective long-term partner. “Long-term” was explicitly defined as “dating someone for a long time with the possibility of marriage” (Stewart, Stinnett, and
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Rosenfeld, 2000). The characteristics were similar to those used by Buss and Shackelford (2008), with several exceptions. Specifically, five characteristics (i.e., “intelligent,” “physically fit,” “sex appeal,” “physically attractive,” and “more masculine”) served as good genes indicators. For good investment ability indicators, in addition to the five characteristics examined in Buss and Shackelford’s study (i.e., “favorable social status or rating,” “potential income,” “ambition and industriousness,” “good earning capacity,” “college graduate”), we also examined two related characteristics: “parents’ socioeconomic status” and “having housing.” These characteristics were selected because a pilot study showed that they were considered to be important by the current sample of participants.1 The good parenting indicators were “kind and understanding,” “desire for home and children,” “fond of children,” “being a good cook and housekeeper,” and “emotional stability and maturity.” In the good partner category, we included characteristics associated with love and loyalty (i.e., “loyal,” “devoted to you,” “being a loving partner”). Ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (irrelevant or unimportant) to 7 (indispensable). The single order in which characteristics were presented was determined referring to a random number table.

Results

The mean of self-perceived physical attractiveness was 4.06, (SD = .97). The mean of attitudes toward career was 5.13 (SD = .79). Self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward career were orthogonal to each other, r = .00, ns., indicating that the two variables are indeed distinguishable. Table 1 displays mean importance ratings for each mate characteristic. Within each cluster, importance ratings varied widely. For instance, it was not as important for a potential long-term mate to be physically attractive (M = 4.03, SD = 1.28) as to be physically fit (M = 6.34, SD = .86), t(263) = 26.47, p < .001. Ceiling effects emerged on several characteristics, such as being physically fit, having desire for home and children, being kind and understanding, being a loving partner and being loyal and devoted to you, indicating that nearly all women perceived them as very important.

Following Buss and Shackelford’s (2008) analytical procedure, we computed the correlations between women’s physical attractiveness and their mate preferences. We also examined the associations between attitudes toward career and mate preferences. Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations between women’s self-perceived physical attractiveness and attitudes toward career with perceived importance of the characteristics. Since our classification of mate preferences into the four clusters was based on Buss and Shackelford (2008) and these examinations involved multiple comparisons, we used Bonferroni correction by setting threshold p as alpha (0.05)/number of items in each cluster. Only those correlations with a p value exceeding the thresholds are reported as significant. As hypothesized, participants’ self-perceived attractiveness was positively correlated with

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1 A pilot study involving 32 young women (mean age was 22.3 years) was conducted to explore indigenous mate characteristics among Chinese women. In the study, participants listed the characteristics they personally valued or they believed other women would value in a long-term partner. “Parents’ socioeconomic status” was nominated 12 times, and “having housing” was nominated 22 times.
the importance they attached to some of the good genes indicators and the good investment ability indicators. Specifically, the more attractive women perceived themselves to be, the more value they placed on a potential mate’s masculinity \((r = .17, p = .006)\) and sex appeal \((r = .17, p = .006)\). Self-perceived attractiveness was also positively associated with the perceived importance for a potential mate to possess good earning capacity \((r = .27, p = .000)\) and have housing \((r = .23, p = .000)\). However, none of the correlations of self-perceived attractiveness with good partner and good parenting indicators were significant, \(rs < .15, ns\). Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the importance of each characteristic \((n = 264)\)

| Good Genes Indicators                  | Mean  | SD  |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-----|
| More Masculine                        | 4.15  | 1.40|
| Physically Attractive                 | 4.03  | 1.28|
| Sex Appeal                            | 4.97  | 1.28|
| Physically Fit                        | 6.34  | .86 |
| Intelligent                           | 5.60  | 1.12|
| Good Investment Ability Indicators   |       |     |
| Potential Income                      | 5.88  | 1.27|
| Good Earning Capacity                 | 5.18  | 1.36|
| Ambition and Industriousness          | 5.90  | 1.20|
| Favorable Social Status or Rating     | 4.56  | 1.21|
| Parents’ Socioeconomic Status         | 4.94  | 1.28|
| Having Housing                        | 4.60  | 1.48|
| College Graduate                      | 5.34  | 1.17|
| Good Parenting Indicators             |       |     |
| Desire for Home and Children          | 6.14  | 1.00|
| Fond of Children                      | 5.02  | 1.56|
| Being a good cook and housekeeper     | 4.22  | 1.41|
| Emotional Stability and Maturity      | 5.43  | 1.26|
| Kind and Understanding                | 6.27  | .98 |
| Good Partner indicators               |       |     |
| Being a Loving Partner                | 6.71  | .69 |
| Devoted to you                        | 6.33  | .92 |
| Loyal                                 | 6.65  | .70 |

Women’s attitudes toward career were positively associated with the importance they placed on a prospective mate’s masculinity and intelligence, \(r = .18\) and \(.17, ps = .003\) and \(.006\), respectively. Women with higher career aspirations also ascribed more importance to a potential mate’s ambition and industriousness \((r = .28, p = .000)\), and...
college degree ($r = .18$, $p = .004$). The more career-oriented a woman was, the more important a potential mate’s emotional stability and maturity would be, $r = .17$, $p = .005$. Women who aspired more for career also valued loyalty to a larger extent than those who had a lower level of aspirations for career, $r = .26$, $p = .000$. Therefore, women’s attitudes toward career did predict at least one characteristic in each of the good investment ability, good partner, and good parenting categories, lending support to H2.

**Table 2.** Women’s importance ratings in relation to their self-perceived physical attractiveness and attitudes toward career ($n = 264$)

| Good Genes Indicators          | Self-perceived Attractiveness $r (p)$ | Attitudes toward Career $r (p)$ |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| More Masculine                | .17* (.006)                          | .18* (.003)                     |
| Physically Attractive         | .13 (.035)                           | -.06 (.353)                     |
| Sex Appeal                    | .17* (.006)                          | .03 (.634)                      |
| Physically Fit                | .08 (.194)                           | .12 (.054)                      |
| Intelligent                   | .10 (.121)                           | .17* (.006)                     |

**Good Investment Ability Indicators**
- Potential Income: .04 (.488), .05 (.388)
- Good Earning Capacity: .27* (.000), .13 (.041)
- Ambition and Industriousness: .13 (.040), .28* (.000)
- Favorable Social Status or Rating: .10 (.114), .07 (.253)
- Parents’ Socioeconomic Status: .13 (.029), .08 (.175)
- Having Housing: .23* (.000), .04 (.523)
- College Graduate: .13 (.032), .18* (.004)

**Good Parenting Indicators**
- Desire for Home and Children: .08 (.205), .05 (.433)
- Fond of Children: .03 (.578), -.01 (.889)
- Being a Good Cook and Housekeeper: .05 (.430), .05 (.418)
- Emotional Stability and Maturity: .06 (.318), .17* (.005)
- Kind and Understanding: .06 (.340), .04 (.518)

**Good Partner indicators**
- Being a Loving Partner: .15 (.018), -.02 (.742)
- Devoted to You: .10 (.117), .06 (.355)
- Loyal: .02 (.741), .26* (.000)

*Note:* * Significant after the Bonferroni correction

To create the two groups, a “high attractiveness/low career” group (i.e., women with high self-perceived attractiveness and low career aspirations) versus a “low
attractiveness/high career” group (i.e., women with low self-perceived attractiveness and high career aspirations), we standardized self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward career. Those who had standard scores of self-perceived attractiveness larger than zero and standard scores of attitudes toward career smaller than zero were included in the former group (31 cases), and those who had standard scores of attitudes toward career larger than zero and standard scores of self-perceived attractiveness smaller than zero were included in the latter group (117 cases). We conducted a series of independent samples t-tests to examine the differences in the importance placed on the characteristics by the two groups. Results revealed that high attractiveness/lower career women valued potential mates’ physical attractiveness more than did low attractiveness/high career women, \( t_{(146)} = 2.57, p < .05 \). On the contrary, low attractiveness/high career women valued potential mates’ ambition and industriousness, and loyalty more than did high attractiveness/lower career, \( ts_{(146)} = 2.32 \) and 1.98, \( p_s < .05 \). Therefore, although high attractiveness/lower career women and low attractiveness/high career women both had high standards for potential mates, they seemed to emphasize different aspects of potential mates.

**Table 3.** Comparisons between the high attractive/lower career group and the low attractive/high career group on the importance attached to each characteristic (\( n = 264 \))

|                      | High Attractiveness/ Low Career | Low Attractiveness/ High Career | \( t \) (\( p \)) | Cohen’s \( d \) |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| **Good Genes Indicators** |                                |                                |                  |                 |
| More Masculine       | 4.26 (1.24)                    | 4.02 (1.33)                    | .49 (.63)        | .01             |
| Physically Attractive| 4.55 (1.29)                    | 3.89 (1.26)                    | 2.57* (.01)      | .52             |
| Sex Appeal           | 5.23 (1.20)                    | 4.91 (1.35)                    | 1.20 (.23)       | .24             |
| Physically Fit       | 6.32 (.75)                     | 6.44 (.82)                     | .69 (.49)        | .14             |
| Intelligient         | 5.48 (1.12)                    | 5.63 (1.09)                    | .65 (.52)        | .13             |
| **Good Investment Ability Indicators** |                                |                                |                  |                 |
| Potential Income     | 5.74 (1.50)                    | 5.87 (1.24)                    | .49 (.62)        | .10             |
| Good Earning Capacity| 5.42 (1.36)                    | 5.12 (1.38)                    | 1.08 (.28)       | .22             |
| Ambition and Industriousness | 5.87 (1.12) | 6.31 (1.87) | 2.32* (.02) | .47 |
| Favorable Social Status or Rating | 4.52 (1.06) | 4.63 (1.21) | .49 (.63) | .10 |
| Parents’ Socioeconomic Status | 4.84 (1.29) | 5.00 (1.24) | .64 (.53) | .13 |
| Having Housing       | 4.81 (1.62)                    | 4.55 (1.48)                    | .85 (.40)        | .17             |
| College Graduate     | 5.45 (1.26)                    | 5.30 (1.24)                    | .61 (.55)        | .12             |
| **Good Parenting Indicators** |                                |                                |                  |                 |
| Desire for Home and Children | 6.19 (.98) | 6.23 (.95) | .19 (.85) | .04 |
| Fond of Children     | 5.06 (1.61)                    | 4.92 (1.74)                    | .41 (.68)        | .08             |
| Being a Good Cook and Housekeeper | 4.13 (1.38) | 4.23 (1.49) | .34 (.73) | .07 |
| Emotional Stability and Maturity | 5.61 (1.58) | 5.52 (1.20) | .15 (.71) | .03 |
| Kind and Understanding| 6.32 (1.01)                    | 6.35 (9.5)                     | .14 (.86)        | .03             |
| **Good Partner indicators** |                                |                                |                  |                 |
| Being a Loving Partner | 6.68 (.75) | 6.77 (.65) | .68 (.50) | .14 |
| Devoted to You       | 6.48 (.93)                     | 6.38 (.90)                     | .58 (.57)        | .12             |
| Loyal                | 6.55 (.67)                     | 6.78 (.53)                     | 1.98* (.05)      | .40             |
Discussion

In the current study, we examined the associations between self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward career with mate preferences among a sample of young Chinese women. In addition to an attempt to replicate the associations found in Buss and Shackelford (2008) between women’s physical attractiveness and their requirements in terms of a variety of characteristics in potential mates, we also explored the relationships between women’s attitudes toward career and their mate preferences, and compared the mate preferences of women who scored high on self-perceived attractiveness but low on career aspirations with preferences of women who scored low on self-perceived attractiveness but high on career aspirations.

Physical attractiveness and importance of the mate characteristics

We hypothesized that women’s self-perceived attractiveness would be positively correlated with the importance assigned to all of the four categories of indicators. This hypothesis was partially supported. Specifically, consistent with Buss and Shackelford (2008) study and other previous studies (e.g., Bereczkei et al., 1997; Little et al., 2001), we found that physical attractiveness was positively associated with the importance women placed on some of the good genes indicators (e.g., masculinity and sex appeal) and the good investment ability indicators (e.g., earning capacity and having housing). As expected, women who rated themselves as physically attractive had more stringent requirements for all these characteristics. Nevertheless, whereas Buss and Shackelford (2008) showed that women who are more physically attractive set higher standards for good parenting indicators, none of the associations between self-perceived physical attractiveness and the importance of good parenting indicators reached statistical significance in our study. Such a discrepancy may be explained by cultural differences in gender ideology. In cultures where a traditional gender ideology is prevalent and men are supposed to work outside of the home while women undertake more, if not all, household labor, men and women are more likely to emphasize different aspects of a potential mate than people in cultures with a more egalitarian division of labor (Johannesen–Schmidt and Eagly, 2002). China is a more traditional and less gender egalitarian society than Western societies such as the United States (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina, and Nicholson, 1997) and the United Kingdom (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, and Sun, 2002). Though the majority of Chinese urban women are now involved in paid employment, domestic burdens such as raising children, cooking, and house-keeping may still be regarded as mainly women’s responsibilities (Choi and Chen, 2006; Pimentel, 2006; Zhang, 2006). Therefore, men’s capacity and willingness to share domestic chores may not be regarded as very important. Indeed, men who are good at domestic work may be seen as violating the traditional expectation of men and being unpromising. Hence, even women who perceive themselves to be highly attractive might not expect their partners to participate much in domestic chores.

Attitudes toward career and importance of the mate characteristics

As hypothesized, women’s attitudes toward career were positively associated with
the importance they placed on two characteristics that related to investment ability: ambition/industriousness and college graduate. Therefore, as in several previous studies, the current study also failed to provide support for the structural powerlessness hypothesis which predicts a negative association between women’s attitudes toward career and the value they assign to potential mates’ investment ability (Anderson and Klofstad, 2012; Wiederman and Allgeier, 1992). In addition to the explanations we have provided in the Introduction section, it is worth noting that the traditional gender ideology, which prescribes that men should be the main breadwinners of families, may also play a role in influencing the extent to which career-oriented women valued the investment ability of a mate (Chia, Allred, and Jerzak, 1997; Fan, 2003; Yu and Chau, 1997; Zuo and Bian, 2001). It is possible that although many women aspire to work outside of the home, they may not expect to or want to undertake the role of primary breadwinner. Hence, women may seek mates with equal or better earning prospects so as to maintain the quality of life after marriage.

The predicted positive correlation between women’s career aspirations and the importance attached to good parenting indicators was observed for only one characteristic - emotional stability and maturity. The greater importance ascribed to maturity and emotional stability may be a reflection of a general tendency to value individuality and independence among women who adopt more positive attitudes toward career. It has been found that an employee role bestows women with the characteristics that are identified with employees, such as being competitive and individualistic (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Eagly and Steffen, 1984). Therefore, career-oriented women may prefer mates who are also independent, such as those demonstrating maturity and few emotional problems (Botwin et al., 1997). We failed to find support for the hypothesis that women who adopted positive attitudes toward career would show preferences for mates capable of childrearing and household work. These results seemed to be in conflict with the results from Eagly et al. (2009), which found that when envisioning a provider role, individuals attached more importance to potential mates’ homemaker characteristics. However, as aforementioned, having aspirations for career may not inevitably mean that women will embrace a provider role. In addition, the prevalence of traditional values may preclude women from judging men according to their domestic capacities. Therefore, neither self-perceived physical attractiveness nor attitudes toward career predicted the importance of a mate’s domestic capacities. It is also possible that career-oriented college women do not aspire for family and children themselves (Zhou, 2006). For instance, they may want to enter into marital and parental roles later, or they may even not want to have children. Hence, whether a potential mate can take care of children and the family may not be of great importance for them.

In addition, for the good genes indicators, women who had more positive attitudes toward career placed higher importance on a potential mate’s masculinity and intelligence than women who were less career-oriented. It should be noted that both masculinity and intelligence are not simply indices of good genes; they are also predictive of success in career. For instance, intelligence is strongly associated with success and income (Sternberg, 1997; Zagorsky, 2007). Moreover, both masculinity and intelligence are important characteristics in perceptions of leadership (Lord, De Vader, and Alliger, 1986). Identified
with the employee role, career-oriented women may generally value success in career more, as compared to their less career-oriented counterparts. Therefore, career-oriented women may appreciate masculinity and intelligence in a mate to a larger extent than those who do not aspire for a career.

Comparing mate preferences between attractive and career-oriented women

We compared the mate preferences of high attractiveness/low career women (i.e., those who got a standard score of self-perceived attractiveness larger than zero and a standard score of attitudes toward career smaller than zero) and those of low attractiveness/high career women (i.e., those who got a standard score of attitudes toward career larger than zero and a standard score of self-perceived attractiveness smaller than zero). The comparison revealed that high attractiveness/low career women valued potential mates’ physical attractiveness to a larger extent than low attractiveness/high career women, whereas low attractiveness/high career women placed more importance on potential mates’ ambition and industriousness than high attractiveness/low career women. The similarity principle may account for this pattern of results (Buston and Emlen, 2003); that is, women are attracted to potential mates who demonstrate the same qualities as they do themselves. It is worth noting that the effect of the similarity principle may be limited only to some characteristics. Other characteristics, such as earning capability and being a good cook and housekeeper, may be subject to impacts of multiple factors other than similarity, such as sexual strategies in mate selection cultural gender ideology (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Buss et al., 2004).

Interestingly, we found that low attractiveness/high career women regarded it more important for a potential mate to be loyal to them than did high attractiveness/low career women. It seems that men are generally more likely to be involved in sexual infidelities than women (Treas and Giesen, 2000). Career-oriented women may not have to accept an unfaithful partner since they do not rely on him to access economic resources. Moreover, career-oriented women tend to endorse a more egalitarian gender ideology and reject the submissive role of women in heterosexual relationships (Zhang, 2006). Being more financially independent and less submissive, career-oriented women may be less tolerant of infidelity and thus value loyalty to a larger extent than attractive women.

Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations of the current study. First, we adopted a cross-sectional design. Therefore, virtually no causal relationship could be drawn regarding individual differences (i.e., self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward career) and the importance attached to mate characteristics. However, we contend that mate preferences should be more likely to be a consequence rather than an antecedent of physical attractiveness and attitudes toward career. After all, it is more reasonable to set requirements for a potential mate according to one’s own characteristics than vice versa. Second, all variables were self-reported, which may lead to biases in the assessed variables. For the measure of self-perceived physical attractiveness, we used only one item. Nevertheless, many of the correlations between self-perceived physical attractiveness and importance of mate characteristics were very similar to what were found in Buss and
Shackelford (2008), where physical attractiveness was assessed by objective observers. In addition, it should be noted that some correlations were small (see Table 1), probably because of the substantially restricted ranges for nearly 1/3 of the characteristics, which may bias our interpretations of the associations. One potential explanation for the relatively weak effects may be that our sample was composed of undergraduate students and graduate students, and hence was of restricted range and variability when it came to career attitudes. Indeed, the mean of attitudes toward career was well over the theoretical midpoint, and we had far more “high career/low attractiveness” women than the reverse. Perhaps, with a broader community sample of women, we would see more robust and consistent links between their career attitudes and mate preferences. Finally, it should be noted that the importance attached to each mate characteristic, as self-assessed in the current study, may not reflect women’s decision when choosing a mate in reality, for it is well known that people have only limited recognition of the reasons behind their behaviors, and there are innumerable constraints in the real process of finding a mate (e.g., Eastwick and Finkel, 2008).

Future studies may examine potential mediators between women’s attitudes toward career and their mate preferences. For instance, it is possible that when a woman has a positive attitude toward career, she may be less likely to endorse the traditional female role, which may in turn influence the characteristics she seeks in a potential mate. Future studies may also examine the interaction between physical attractiveness and attitudes towards career on the requirements of specific characteristics, or include other important factors, such as potential income and willingness to be a provider, to enrich our understanding of women’s mate preferences.

Conclusion

Women’s mate preferences are closely tied to their personal qualities. As their counterparts in western cultures, attractive Chinese women also set high standards for a potential mate’s assorted characteristics. In addition, Chinese women’s career aspirations are also associated with the importance they attach to desirable qualities in a mate. Moreover, although there are many similarities in the mate preferences of attractive women and career-oriented women, these two types of women also seek different characteristics in a man. Specifically, attractive women value a mate’s physical attractiveness more, whereas career-oriented women value a mate’s traits such as industriousness, ambition and loyalty more.

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