

GENDERED NATURE OF MARRIAGE ASPIRATIONS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Marriage in China has undergone considerable change over recent decades, as increasing rates of cohabitation, rising divorce rates, and increased materialism and individualism have coincided with lower rates of marriage. Using a sample of young women and men, this study examines the aspirations for marriage, framing the analyses within the ecological systems paradigm. The results show that while young females and males have similar marriage aspirations, in regards to the desire for marriage and the timing thereof, the determinants of these aspirations are quite distinct for each sex. Both parental and peer influence are shown, although these are more substantially associated with females' marriage aspirations, rather than males'. The implications of the findings for future marriage patterns are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Aspirations, China, Gender, Family, Marriage, Peer Influence

INTRODUCTION

During the late adolescence and early adult years, individuals begin to formulate aspirations concerning future adult roles, as decisions concerning prospective educational, occupational, and familial statuses come to bear. Many of such aspirations involve the desired financial standing of individuals (Weisgram et al., 2010), as may be affected by educational or occupational status. Frequently, though, more intimate decisions concerning personal relationships and, for many, marriage are foremost in the minds of young women and men (Carroll et al., 2009). Such aspirations do not develop within a vacuum; rather, a multitude of influences, including parents, peers, and their own experiences affect their desires to achieving particular adult roles (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). The broader social context, as well, may influence aspirations concerning marriage, as both cultural and structural factors within societies have been shown to affect marriage aspirations and preferences (Chen et al., 2009; Paat and Hope, 2015).

Within the context of contemporary China, cultural and structural factors which may influence marital aspirations have undergone considerable change over recent decades. Over the past five decades, China has undergone considerable economic, political, and cultural change, resulting in tendencies toward materialism and individualism (Schwartz, 2004). Within its long history, marriage was viewed as a means of continuing family lineage in China (Qi, 2014), and was thus a very stable component of Chinese society. These long-standing patterns

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and perceptions of marriage have been dramatically altered, as the age at first marriage has increased significantly (Feng and Quanhe, 1996), along with increasing rates of divorce (Chen et al., 2012). Alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation, have been increasing (Zhang, 2017). Among adolescents and young adults, sexual activity is common (Blair and Scott, 2019), and the display of intimacy has become increasingly more prominent (Gui, 2017), underscoring dramatic changes in dating and mate selection (Chang and Chan, 2007). All of these changes are likely to have bearing upon marital aspirations, yet the role of gender also needs to be considered.

Throughout its history, traditional Chinese culture has been patriarchal, as men have been seen as authority figures within all social institutions, and particularly so within the family. Beliefs such as women bearing responsibility for household labor and childrearing (Cook & Dong, 2011), along with being virgins at the time of marriage (Pan, 2004) were typical. With increasing modernization over recent decades, there have been dramatic increases in women's educational attainment, occupational attainment, and financial independence (Nakano, 2016; Yu and Xie, 2015), thus providing them with greater decision-making capabilities within personal relationships (Gittings, 2006; Guthrie, 2008). Although the One-Child Policy has been changed, the lasting impact of it is the skewed sex ratio among young people, where there are substantially more young men than young women (Liu et al., 2014), thus making the navigation of the marriage market easier for women, rather than men (in terms of the number of prospective partners). The increases in educational and occupational attainment, coupled with many other forms of cultural and structural change, may have affected the respective marriage aspirations of females and males (Gaetano, 2010; Nakano, 2016). In order to better understand the current state of marriage aspirations in China, this study will focus specifically upon how such aspirations may vary among females and males, and also examine the factors related to such aspirations.

Marriage and Marital Aspirations within the Chinese Context

The expectation of marriage is regarded as a cultural universal, yet in the context of China, this expectation has a decidedly unique history. Throughout its history, families have adhered to a patriarchal structure, and have maintained the additional expectations that adult children reside either with or near their fathers, thus making the patrilocal extended form prominent (Chu et al., 2011). Among the tenets of Confucianism, which arose between 770 BC and 476 BC, was the expectation that men were the authority figures, while women were expected to defer to them (Yu and Chau, 1997). This was evident within traditional Chinese families, wherein wives would provide care for their husbands and children, and also their husbands' aging parents. A core necessity within families was the continuation of the male lineage (Han, 2008), thus making the marriage of sons a central priority for parents, who would typically control the selection of a spouse for their sons through arranged marriage (Wolf and Huang, 1980).

Supporting this practice of arranged marriage was the cultural trait of "*xiao*," or filial piety. Inherent within filial piety in traditional Chinese culture was the expectation that children devote themselves to their parents and families (Han, 2008). For young children, filial piety largely involved obedience, without question, to the directives of their parents (Luk-Fong,

2005), whereas for adult children, filial piety involved assuming primary responsibility for the care of elderly parents (Cong and Silverstein, 2008), as expressed in the notion “*fumu zai, bu yuanyou*” (“as long as the parents are alive, do not go far away”). For many centuries, children were taught to respect and obey their parents, and to recognize that their obligations in life were to their parents, grandparents, and each and every preceding generation of ancestors (Yeh and Bedford, 2003). From the perspective of an unmarried son, the obligations of filial piety meant that he would have to accept their choice of bride, as their priority would be to choose him a wife who could provide suitable assistance to them in their remaining years (Liu et al., 2014).

With the founding of the People’s Republic of China, in 1949, filial piety and its inherent obligations, along with the patriarchal and hierarchical authority of families were viewed as inconsistent with the aims of the new state (Chow, 1991). The PRC moved quickly to establishment mandates which provided for new family roles, most of which were intended to shift away from the long-standing family structures and norms. One year later, in 1950, the New Marriage Law was introduced, with the goal of effectively removing family authority, and particularly so in regard to mate selection and marriage. Centered around the development of egalitarianism, the New Marriage Law stipulated that young adults were free to choose their own spouses, thus eliminating arranged marriage within China. Although the law was well-intended, it nonetheless created a dilemma – there were virtually no existing norms regarding how young adults should go about selecting a partner. Centuries of arranged marriage had left young adults with no guidelines concerning how to go about starting and maintaining intimate relationships.

Although the New Marriage Law, along with its later amendments, was intended to promote freedom of choice in the selection of a spouse, it did introduce some restrictions in regard to the timing of marriage. In its 1950 version, the New Marriage Law established the ages of 18 for women and 20 for men as the minimum age at marriage. These age limitations were effectively controlled through the introduction of a mandatory marriage registration system, put into place to prevent further arranged marriages (Xu and Whyte, 1990). During the 1970s, the minimum age at marriage restrictions were increased, partially in order to suppress fertility levels at that time. In rural areas, women could not marry until 23 years of age, while men were likewise prevented from marrying until they reached 25 years of age. Their urban counterparts were not permitted to marry until the ages of 25 and 28, for women and men, respectively. These age restrictions were reduced during the 1980s, but remain an effective means of state control over marriage onset, with a current minimum age of 20 for women and 22 for men (Yu and Xie, 2015).

Marriage remains a key expectation for young adults, particularly as it is consistent with the notion of filial piety, and likewise conforms to Confucian expectations. Through marriage, daughters and sons can demonstrate their respect for their parents and, in the case of sons, maintain the continuity of the family lineage. Indeed, less than two percent of adults above the age of 30 remain unmarried (Jones, 2007), suggesting that marriage itself remains a highly desired status. However, the timing of marriage continues to fluctuate, and has been increasing over recent decades, largely as a consequence of the higher levels of educational

attainment, which effectively removes students from the pool of eligible marriage partners (Han, 2010).

With the considerable economic change which China has undergone over recent decades, educational attainment rates have increased, as have the more materialistic goals of young adults. The pursuit of wealth, greater social status, and especially homeownership are not only desirable goals for individuals, but are also seen as absolutely essential to entering marriage (Piotrowski et al., 2016). Relative to the expectations of filial piety, such materialistic goals do seem more focused upon individual needs, rather than the more traditional needs of the family (Chuang and Yang, 1990).

The rapid modernization of China, coupled with increasing exposure to representations of love, dating, and marriage in other societies, has prompted young women and men to approach dating in a manner which is considerably progressive, modern, and quite novel (Chan, 2011). The increasing rates of college attendance play a role in this transition, as colleges are considered “love havens,” wherein students engage in dating, public displays of affection, and sexual intimacy (Yang, 2011; Xia and Zhou, 2003). Again, given the lessening of parental control over mate selection, young Chinese adults are essentially creating their own norms concerning how to find that “special someone.” Although behaviors such as sexual intercourse may be regarded as unacceptable by previous generations, contemporary youth in China are forging their own standards. There are, though, limits and boundaries, as even the young women and men, themselves, tend to espouse somewhat conservative attitudes toward dating and sexual intimacy (Higgins et al., 2002). The element of parental and family influence still appears to be quite salient in the mate selection behaviors of young adults, as many still evaluate relationships in terms of how well they may satisfy the needs of the family (Zhang, 2017).

In many ways, contemporary forms of mate selection in China are shaped by forces related to modernization, yet are nonetheless still impacted by traditional concerns and expectations. The pragmatic qualities of prospective partners (e.g., income, education) are given greater emphasis, rather than the passionate and romantic qualities which are highly valued in Western cultures (Gui, 2017; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Researchers have suggested, however, that modernization and increasing individualism in China may be shifting young adults’ perceptions of love and marriage in a direction which is substantially more progressive, and dissimilar to those of their parents (Lange et al., 2015). Ultimately, Chinese parents still actively seek to assist their daughters and sons in finding a suitable partner (Zhang and Sun, 2014), despite the increasingly individualistic approaches of their children (Gui, 2017). Whether young adults follow their own hearts, follow the recommendations of their parents, or some combination thereof, one traditional component of Chinese culture remains a challenge - gender. Even in the context of modernization, the patriarchal nature of Chinese culture typically leads to quite distinct experiences for females and males, and particularly so in regard to their respective roles in marriage.

Gender and Marital Aspirations

Gender and gender roles have an interesting history within the Chinese context, as there are long-standing beliefs that females are expected to be submissive, subservient, and bound to domestic responsibilities, such as household labor and childcare (Lin, 2006). These

beliefs arise from traditional Confucian philosophy, which stipulates that women should obey: 1) their fathers and brothers prior to marriage, 2) their husbands within marriage, and 3) as a widow, their adult sons (Chia et al., 1997). From its beginnings in 1949, the People's Republic of China has attempted to push aside the patriarchal elements of China's past, and has attempted to propagate and instill gender equality. The introduction of legislation, such as the New Marriage Law of 1950, represented a determined effort to improve the status of women, particularly by legalizing freedom of individual choice in the choice of a spouse. When coupled with increases in women's educational and occupational attainment, the opportunity for greater gender equality was certainly present. In some instances, such as within decision-making and bargaining within personal relationships, women's status has, indeed, improved (Guthrie, 2008). However, there is a distinction to be made between the more macro-level forms of change, such as those within the educational and occupational realms, and the more micro-level forms of change, such as those within marriage (Parrish and Farrer, 2000).

Although women in China do have greater opportunities in social institutions, the same cannot necessarily be said of their status within the institution of the family. For many employed women, they are providers for their families, but also must perform a substantially greater share of domestic labor, such as housework and childcare (Yang, 2013). Despite the various forms of modernization in China, along with the increased educational and occupational attainment of women, there is a lingering presence of traditional beliefs, as researchers have noted that many adults maintain traditional beliefs concerning the division of household labor (Cook and Dong, 2011), the responsibilities of child care (Rosen, 1992), and even the provider role within the family (Chia et al., 1997). Working women are thus recognized as wives and mothers, while their careers and financial support of their families are regarded as secondary (Yang, 2013). In many instances, parents of young adults can often make matters even more confusing, as contemporary parents prefer that their daughters and sons marry because of love (Xu et al., 2007), but also expect their daughters or daughters-in-law to be responsible for housework and childcare (Cook & Dong, 2011).

The seeming resurgence of traditional Confucian expectations and norms are evident in the treatment of unmarried, educated, successful women in China, where they are labeled as *sheng nu* (剩女), or "leftover women," and are regarded as being less feminine and less appealing as a prospective spouse, simply due to their pursuit of a career (Gui, 2020). Hence, although the relative standing of female and male roles in China have become somewhat more equal since the founding of the PRC, there remains a distinction, and one which may be shifting back toward more traditional expectations for women (Parrish and Farrer, 2000). The manner in which these shifts affect the marriage aspirations of young individuals remains to be seen.

Gender plays a central role in the developmental processes associated with the aspirations which young individuals have about marriage, affecting the development of such aspirations across adolescence and early adulthood. From the early adolescent years and onward, girls and boys begin to seek intimate relationships, with dating representing their first experiences with beginning and maintaining such relationships. These dating experiences, though, are typically distinct for each sex, and reflect existing gendered expectations. In the selection of a dating partner, young men frequently place a greater priority upon the physical

appearance of women, whereas young women tend to focus upon the economic status of men (Blair and Madigan, 2016; Piotrowski et al., 2016).

Understandably, the impact of gender upon marital aspirations must also be considered within the realities of the existing sex ratio of the population. As a consequence of the One-Child Policy, the sex ratio of never-married adults is 134.5 (Liu et al., 2014), which has created a male marriage “squeeze,” wherein young men’s prospects of securing a partner are considerably less than those of young women doing likewise (Guilmoto, 2012). The skewed sex ratio will obviously affect eventual marriage patterns, but it also likely to impact the preceding marriage aspirations of young individuals. Researchers have posited that the relative scarcity of females is likely to result in greater decision-making power within intimate relationships (Ellinson et al., 2004). Even in regards to physical intimacy, studies have shown that the skewed sex ratio is associated with higher rates of premarital sex among females in China, but lower rates among males (South and Trent, 2010). Oddly, though, the traditional expectation for brides to be virgins remains, despite the higher rates of premarital sex (Pan, 2004). The leverage which females may have is evident in studies which have concluded that women in China are increasingly selective in their selection of partners, and express preferences for men with higher salaries, occupational prestige, and perhaps most importantly of all, their own home (Blair and Madigan, 2016; Liu, 2005; Yu and Xie, 2015). Hence, while men with fewer material advantages (e.g., income, home ownership) to offer a woman may have difficulty in obtaining a spouse, those men whose gender expectations are more traditional may find themselves in even more dire straits (Blair and Madigan, 2016; Peng, 2004).

As young individuals are contemplating marriage, and formulating their own aspirations, they will undoubtedly be aware of the roles of women and men in the larger society. For young women, in particular, the greater opportunities for educational attainment, followed by occupational opportunities, may have substantial bearing upon their views and aspirations of marriage (Gaetano, 2010; Nakano, 2016). Becker (1981) proposed that marital roles tend to be highly specialized, and that the nature of these roles shapes the respective views of marriage. Men view their role within marriage as involving their provision of financial support, while their wives will provide unpaid domestic labor in the form of housework and childcare. Women, on the other hand, regard marriage with the expectation that their husband will provide financial support for themselves and their children. However, economic independence theory (Willis, 1987) posits that when women have greater resources of their own, such as higher levels of educational and occupational attainment, marriage itself may lessen in its appeal. Recent studies have supported this contention, noting that greater resources are associated with higher ages at marriage, among those who do opt to marry (Ono, 2013; Qian and Qian, 2014).

Understanding how young women and men develop aspirations about marriage is challenging, given the wide array of potential agents of influence, including parents, friends, schools, media, and beyond. Given that the focus is upon aspirations for future roles, ecological systems theory is an appropriate framework in which to consider such aspirations (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This model proposes that individuals’ experiences, relationships, and norms produce a combined influence upon the development of aspirations for future roles. Gender and gender norms are regarded as having a fundamental impact upon the development of aspirations (Dornan and Woodhead, 2015). As such, the assessment of marriage aspirations

and accompanying determinants will be conducted in a comparative manner for females and males.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study were collected at public universities in the cities of Nanjing, Shanghai, and Wuhan, with the collection ending in the summer of 2019. Participants were college students who were actively enrolled at their respective schools. Students were randomly solicited by the researchers, and asked to participate in a survey concerning dating and marriage. Of those students who were solicited, 86% agreed to participate, and completed the survey. Following the tabulation of responses, 47 cases were eliminated due to incomplete responses, resulting in a sample of 918 females and 609 males. The survey was provided to students in both Mandarin and English, and had undergone multiple back-translations for purposes of verification. The sample of students ranged in age from 18 to 22, and were all currently enrolled at their respective universities. In regard to relationship status, all of the students in the sample were single and never married. The sample includes both female and male college students, who were attending urban Chinese universities. Any generalizations drawn from the analyses should be limited to that population.

Marital aspirations were assessed through a combination of two survey questions. First, participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statement: "I would like to get married someday." Responses to this item ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). In addition, respondents were asked at what age, ideally, they would like to get married. This item was open-ended, and allowed students to designate their specific preferred age at first marriage. The combination of these two measures should provide a clear picture of both the overall desire to marry, as well as the preferred timing thereof.

Given that previous studies have demonstrated the influence of both familial and individual factors in regard to marital aspirations, a variety of these characteristics were included. In regard to parents, respondents were asked: "When you think about the relationship between you and your parent(s), how close to you feel to them?" Responses to this question included: "not close at all" (1), "somewhat close" (2), "fairly close" (3), and "very close" (4).

Understandably, parents can function as role models in terms of marriage and marital stability. Respondents were queried as to whether either of their parents had ever experienced a divorce (coded as 1=yes, 0=no). Within the Chinese context, filial piety has the potential to influence marital aspirations, as well. Respondents were asked whether they would "be willing to marry someone" of whom their parents did not approve (coded as 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=unsure, 4=somewhat agree, and 5=strongly agree). The rural/urban residence (of the parents) was included in the analyses as a control variable, but is not included in the tables, as no significant differences nor associations were revealed.

Additionally, a number of individual characteristics were also included. First, respondents were asked about the traits which they are looking for in a spouse. Respondents were asked to indicate their preference for particular traits by stating whether each quality was "not at all important" (1) to "extremely important" (7). The various traits were then grouped into three indexed measures of desired qualities. The first of these, pragmatic traits, is created

through the combination of four characteristics: well educated, wealthy, successful, and ambitious (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). The second, caring traits, is created through the combination of the following four characteristics: affectionate, loving, considerate, and kind (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88). The third, appearance traits, is created from the combination of four characteristics: sexy, neat, attractive, and well dressed (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86). Since dating experience may influence marriage aspirations, respondents were asked if they were currently in a dating relationship (coded as 1=yes, 0=no).

As previously noted, China has experienced a substantial increase in cohabitation, over recent years. Respondents were asked if they "would like to live with someone before getting married" (responses ranged from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree). Such progressive behaviors were also assessed with the query of whether respondents would "be willing to have sex on a first date" (coded as 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Attitudes about gender and family role would potentially influence marital aspirations. In this regard, respondents were asked about their beliefs concerning gender roles within the family context. An indexed measure of gender attitudes was created, including responses to the following statements: 1) it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family, 2) both husbands and wives should contribute to family income, 3) a husband should spend just as many hours doing housework as his wife, and 4) the spouse who earns the most money should have the most say in family decisions. The resultant indexed measure of gender attitudes ranged across a five-point scale, with a higher score indicating more conservative or traditional gender role attitudes (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.88). Participants were asked how many of their close friends were currently dating or in a romantic relationship. Responses to this question ranged from "only a few or none of them" (1) to "all or almost all of them" (5).

Marital aspirations may also be influenced by perceptions concerning the benefits of marriage. Respondents were asked how several components of their lives would differ if they were married. The components included their: 1) standard of living, 2) sex life, and 3) overall happiness. Responses to these items ranged from "much worse" (1) to "much better" (5). For many individuals, marriage may be synonymous with parenthood. As such, respondents were asked how many children (open ended) they hoped to have, one day. A measure of self-esteem was included, using responses to the statement: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Finally, respondents were queried about their grade performance in college, with responses ranging from "less than D's" (1) to "mostly A's" (8). In order to assess the relative influence of the aforementioned variables upon marriage aspirations, ordinary least squares regression models will be utilized.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean levels of marriage aspirations among young adults in China, as shown by sex. In regard to their respective desire to marry, females and males appear to be quite similar (3.86 versus 3.88, respectively). Over the five-point scale of this measure, these means suggest that both females and males are seeking to marry, one day, but their enthusiasm is, nonetheless, somewhat muted. Given the age of the respondents (18 to 22 years of age), the degree of this aspiration is understandable. In terms of their preferred age at

marriage, there are distinctions shown between females and males, with females desiring a slightly younger age (26.95) at marriage, as compared to their male counterparts (27.76). If this age difference is compared to the larger population of married individuals in China, it would appear that young adults are adhering to the long-standing expectations of females marrying at a younger age. Within China, the age-gradient among married couples, wherein wives are slightly younger than their husbands, is very much the norm. The aspirations of the young adults in this sample seem to be following that same age-gradient pattern.

Table 1. Mean Levels of Marriage Aspirations among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex

	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
Wants to Marry	3.86 (0.94)	3.88 (0.96)
Preferred Age at Marriage	26.95 (2.51)	27.76*** (3.01)
24 and younger	11.0%	9.5%
25 or 26	38.9	25.3
27 to 29	29.4	31.5
30 to 34	18.9	29.1
35 and older	1.7	4.6

Note: N = 918 females, 609 males; Standard deviations shown in parentheses; Significance levels indicate difference between the means of females and males; *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10

Table 2 presents the mean levels of parent, dating, and individual characteristics among young adults in China, as shown by sex. Both females and males report a rather substantial attachment to their parents. However, the willingness to marry without parental approval is significantly higher among males, rather than females. It is possible that the skewed sex ratio within the mating pool places greater pressure upon males to find a partner, and thus leads them to eschew parental approval. It is also worth noting, though, that a considerable number of young females and males have experienced a parental divorce (16% and 12%, respectively), reflecting the increasing divorce rate within China.

Table 2. Mean Levels of Parent, Dating, and Individual Characteristics among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex

	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
Close to parents	4.28 (0.81)	4.21 (0.83)
Parental divorce	0.16* (0.36)	0.12 (0.33)
Marry without parent approval	2.64*** (1.06)	3.12 (1.05)
Desired qualities in partner:		
Pragmatic	4.86*** (1.03)	4.26 (1.09)
Caring	5.41*** (0.99)	5.25 (1.03)
Appearance	4.72 (1.05)	4.73 (1.05)
Currently dating	0.45 (0.49)	0.48 (0.49)
Willing to cohabit	3.51*** (1.03)	3.73 (0.98)
Willing to have sex on 1st date	1.89*** (1.11)	2.71 (1.28)
Traditional gender attitudes	2.28*** (0.64)	2.74 (0.65)
Number of friends dating	3.09*** (1.07)	3.23 (1.06)
Perceived benefits of marriage:		
Standard of living	3.42*** (0.93)	3.23 (1.00)
Sex life	3.66 (0.88)	3.61 (0.99)
Overall happiness	3.63 (0.95)	3.59 (0.97)
Desired # of children	1.63** (0.90)	1.74 (0.85)
Self-esteem	3.24*** (1.17)	3.40 (1.06)
Grades	5.80*** (1.00)	5.61 (1.17)
N	918	609

Note: Standard deviations shown in parentheses; Significance levels indicate difference between the means of females and males; *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$

Among the measures related to desired qualities in a prospective partner, females appear to place a greater premium upon pragmatic qualities, such as earnings, as compared to males (4.86 versus 4.26, respectively). Similarly, females also report a greater desire to caring qualities, such as affection, as compared to males (5.41 versus 5.25, respectively). While the differences shown between females and males with these two measures do seem to support long-standing gender stereotypes concerning the partner qualities desired by women and men, it should be noted that no significant differences were shown in regard to the desire for appearance qualities (such as being sexy or attractive). Slightly less than half of the sample reported that they were currently in a dating relationship (45% of females, 48% of males). As anticipated, males were more likely to express the willingness to cohabit before marriage, and were substantially more willing to have sexual intercourse on a first date, as compared to females (2.71 versus 1.89, respectively). In conjunction with those differences, males also reported significantly more traditional gender attitudes, as compared to females, and also reported having a greater number of their friends in dating relationships.

In regard to the perceived benefits of marriage, females viewed future marriage as providing them with a greater standard of living. This perception is likely linked to the assumption of having two sources of household income. However, females and males were quite similar in their perceptions of how marriage would affect their sex lives and their overall happiness. Males do seem to associate marriage with parenthood, as they reported a higher desired number of children, as compared to females (1.74 versus 1.63, respectively). Given changes to fertility policies in China, it should be noted that these desired fertility aspirations are much higher than one. Finally, males reported higher levels of self-esteem, while females reported a higher level of performance in school, with a significantly higher grade average. A series of multivariate regression models will now be presented, in order to ascertain how the characteristics of females and males influence their marriage aspirations.

Table 3 presents the ordinary least squares regression models of the desire to marry among young adults in China, as shown by sex. The models for both females and males are robust, and yield a substantial amount of explained variance. Among females, closeness to parents was shown to be associated with the desire to marry ($B = .103$), yet this same effect is not shown to be significant in the model for males. This is rather surprising, as traditional filial piety within Chinese culture would seem to place a greater emphasis upon the bond between parents and sons, and particularly so in regard to marriage. Females' willingness to marry without parental approval is shown to be negatively associated with the desire to marry ($B = -.052$). Although the strength of the association is rather meager, it may suggest a growing independence among young adult females in China, such that they may feel a greater freedom of individual choice, at least as it pertains to parental relationships and marriage.

Table 3. Regression Models of Desire to Marry among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex

	Females		Males	
	B	beta	B	beta
Close to parents	.103***	.089	.003	.003
Parental divorce	.046	.018	-.012	-.004
Marry without parent approval	-.052*	-.058	-.033	-.036
Desired qualities in partner:				
Pragmatic	-.019	-.020	.056	.063
Caring	.127***	.133	.110**	.117
Appearance	-.009	-.010	-.042	-.046
Currently dating	.148**	.078	-.007	-.004
Willing to cohabit	.023	-.026	.168***	-.171
Willing to have sex on 1st date	-.107***	-.126	-.128***	-.170
Traditional gender attitudes	.042	.029	-.146**	-.098
Number of friends dating	.060**	.068	.019	.021
Perceived benefits of marriage:				
Standard of living	.083**	.082	.065	.067
Sex life	.103***	.096	.007	.007
Overall happiness	-.019	-.020	.036	.036
Desired # of children	.236***	.226	.164***	.144
Self-esteem	.119***	.148	.083**	.094
Grades	.032	.034	.071**	.087
R-square	.198		.171	
F	13.048		7.173	

Note: N = 918 Females, 609 Males; *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$

Females and males are similar in regards to how their desired qualities in a partner are associated with the desire to marry. Among both females and males, the desire for a partner with more caring qualities (e.g., affectionate) are positively associated with the desire to marry ($B = .127$ and $.110$, respectively). This association, coupled with the lack of significant influence by the desire for more pragmatic qualities in a partner, may reflect again the growing emphasis upon the more interpersonal and intimate nature of relationships among young adults in China. The shift to individual choice of partner, in conjunction with greater emphases upon materialism and individuality, certainly make the influence of affectional qualities quite understandable.

Among females, being in a dating relationship is associated with a greater desire to marry ($B = .148$), yet this same effect is not shown to be significant in the model for young males. Among males, however, the willingness to cohabit yields a positive association with the desire to marry ($B = .168$). It is quite likely that females and males have quite distinct perceptions of the meanings of relationships within both cohabitation and marriage. The two

sexes are similar, though, in regard to having sex on a first date, wherein such willingness is shown to be negatively associated with the desire to marry ($B = -.107$ and $-.128$ among females and males, respectively). Sexual intercourse on a first date is decidedly progressive within the context of Chinese culture, so it is to be expected that individuals who are willing to engage in sexual activity so early in a relationship would also likely be less eager to engage in the more traditional transition of getting married. Interestingly, traditional gender attitudes are shown to be negatively associated with males' desire to marry ($B = -.128$). This is rather perplexing, as traditional Chinese culture very much encourages sons to marry, and to do so quickly.

Females are also shown to be influenced by their peers, as the number of friends who are dating is positively associated with the desire to marry ($B = .060$). Similarly, the perceptions that marriage will be beneficial to both their standard of living and their sex lives yield significant associations with females' desire to marry ($B = .083$ and $.103$, respectively). These same associations are not significant in the model for young males, again suggesting a clear distinction in how each sex develops their aspirations for marriage. The two sexes are comparable, however, in regard to the desire for children, which is shown to be positively associated with their desires to marry ($B = .236$ and $.164$ among females and males, respectively). Marriage and childbearing are strongly intertwined within traditional Chinese culture, so these associations are to be expected. Self-esteem also yields significant associations with the desire to marry among both females and males. Finally, grade performance is shown to be positively associated with males' desire to marry ($B = .071$), but not those of their female counterparts.

Table 4 presents the ordinary least squares regression models of the preferred age at marriage among young adults in China, as shown by sex. Among females, the experience of a parental divorce is shown to be negatively associated with the preferred age at marriage ($B = -.535$), suggesting that young females who have gone through a parental divorce prefer to marry at younger ages. Among males, this same association is not shown to be significant. Males who prefer a partner with more pragmatic qualities, though, appear to desire a younger age at marriage ($B = -.445$). It is conceivable that, in the context of increasing materialism among young Chinese adults, some young men might seek early entry into marriage as a means of achieving greater financial status. At the same time, however, the willingness to cohabit is shown to be positively associated with males' preferred age at marriage ($B = .414$). With the increasingly progressive nature of young adults' perceptions of relationships, it is possible that many young men may see cohabitation as having similarly favorable attributes, as compared to traditional marriage.

Table 4. Regression Models of Preferred Age at Marriage among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex

	<u>Females</u>		<u>Males</u>	
	<u>B</u>	<u>beta</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>beta</u>
Close to parents	.051	.017	.057	.016
Parental divorce	-.535**	-.077	.401	.043
Marry without parent approval	-.092	-.039	-.119	-.041
Desired qualities in partner:				
Pragmatic	-.109	-.045	-.445***	.162
Caring	.065	.025	.111	.038
Appearance	.022	.009	.125	.044
Currently dating	-.262	-.052	-.007	-.004
Willing to cohabit	.076	-.031	.414*	-.069
Willing to have sex on 1st date	-.004	-.002	.129	.055
Traditional gender attitudes	-.514***	-.133	.079	.017
Number of friends dating	-.197***	-.084	.063	.022
Perceived benefits of marriage:				
Standard of living	-.002	-.001	.087	.029
Sex life	.092	.032	-.159	-.053
Overall happiness	-.322***	-.122	-.184	-.059
Desired # of children	-.479***	-.172	-.058	-.016
Self-esteem	-.249***	-.116	-.098	-.036
Grades	-.016	-.006	.151	.059
R-square	.119		.041	
F	7.158		1.483	

Note: N = 918 Females, 609 Males; *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10

Although young men espoused more traditional gender attitudes, such beliefs yielded no significant association with their preferred age at marriage. Among females, though, traditional gender attitudes were negatively associated with their preferred age at marriage (B = -.514). Hence, traditional gender attitudes are equated with a younger age at marriage, among young adult females. Females were also influenced by their peers, as the number of friends in dating relationships was also negatively associated with the preferred age at marriage (B = -.197). In regard to the perceived benefits of marriage, females' perception of marriage as increasing their overall happiness yielded a negative association with their preferred age at marriage (B = -.322). Additionally, a higher desired number of children was also negatively associated with young females' preferred age at marriage (B = -.479). This finding is consistent with the associations yielded by the desired number of children with young adults' desire to marry (Table 3). However, the desired number of children does not significantly influence

young males' preferred age at marriage. It is possible that the linkage between marriage and fertility is more salient among young women, rather than young men. These findings, along with their implications for future patterns of marriage in China, will now be discussed.

DISCUSSION

This study was initiated with the goal of examining the marriage aspirations of young females and males in contemporary China. Throughout its long history, Chinese culture has been decidedly patriarchal, with males occupying virtually all positions of authority, across all social institutions. In addition, arranged marriage was the norm throughout most of China's history, and was not formally abolished until the introduction of legislation in 1950. Since that time, China has undergone considerable social, economic, and political change, all of which have affected the existing cultural environment in which young adults develop aspirations concerning marriage. Gender and gender ideologies are quite relevant in the development of marriage aspirations, as women have experienced considerable increases in their educational and occupational statuses. In many ways, young adults find themselves in a challenging situation, wherein the forces of modernization encourage them to be more progressive and individualistic, while the cultural traditions which have long defined the very nature of family encourage them to conform to the standards of past generations. Framed within ecological systems theory, this study sought to examine not only the differences between females' and males' marriage aspirations, but also how the influences upon such aspirations may differ by sex.

The results indicate that both females and males have moderately high aspirations for marriage. Given the nature of the sample (students attending college), it is quite likely that most respondents were primarily focused upon their more immediate goal of completing their educational degrees. In regard to the timing of marriage, the results appear to confirm that the marriage gradient, wherein females tend to marry slightly older males, and vice-versa, is a continuing feature among young adults who aspire to marry. Females reported a preferred age at marriage of approximately 27, while males reported a preferred age at marriage of approximately 28. Although legal restrictions do prohibit early marriage in China, these findings suggest that both females and males want to become married while still in their 20s.

Females and males also differed in regard to the factors which might influence marriage aspirations. Males, for example, were significantly more likely to consider getting married without parental approval. This is somewhat surprising, given the valuation of sons by parents, but this may also be reflective of the greater odds of marriage for males, given the skewed sex ratio and smaller pool of eligible partners (as compared to that of females). Indeed, it is possible that the challenges of locating a partner may have contributed to some of the other distinctions between females and males. Males reported a greater willingness to cohabit before marriage, which is a rather progressive step, even in contemporary China. Likewise, men reported a significantly greater willingness to have sex on a first date, which is, again, very progressive and counter to traditional norms. Interestingly, though, males reported significantly more traditional gender attitudes. Such attitudes could, conceivably, put males into a difficult situation, wherein they prefer women who conform to the traditional expectations of being docile and obedient, yet are searching within a pool of eligibles

comprised of women who are well-educated, career-oriented, and egalitarian-minded. To some extent, the more traditional perceptions of marriage were seen within the responses of women, as they expressed preferences for partners who were more pragmatic (e.g., with higher incomes), more caring (e.g., more sensitive), and they perceived marriage as being beneficial to their future standard of living. Such responses do, indeed, support the contention that females and males in contemporary China have distinct aspirations for marriage, and also that their larger perceptions of married life are likewise distinct from one another.

The multivariate analyses revealed several intriguing findings. Among these, females' closeness to their parents, along with their willingness to marry without parental approval, were significantly associated with their desire to marry, while these same factors did not significantly influence males' desire to marry. Given the greater valuation of sons within Chinese culture, it might be assumed that parental influence would be more substantial among males, rather than females. However, given recent increases in female educational and occupational attainment, it is conceivable that parents place just as much, if not more, emphasis upon the adult status outcomes for their daughters. A similar effect was shown in the models of preferred age at marriage, where daughters' preferred age was negatively associated with parental divorce, yet no significant association was shown in the model for males. Again, these suggest that a strong linkage exists between parents and daughters, at least in terms of how parental characteristics impact marriage aspirations.

It was interesting to note that among both females and males, the desire for more caring qualities in a prospective partner were associated with a stronger desire to marry. While this does not necessarily indicate a shift toward the progressive notions of love and romance, such as are found in other cultures, it does indicate that young adults of both sexes are keenly focused upon their desire for greater sensitivity and empathy in a future partner. Among males, however, the desire for more pragmatic qualities in a partner (e.g., income) was associated with the preferred for an earlier age at marriage. While it is difficult to discern the precise meaning of this association, it does suggest that males are aware of the need for having a spouse who can also be a provider. In keeping with masculine stereotypes, though, males who were willing to cohabit were shown to have a lower desire to marry, and to prefer an older age at marriage. Their willingness to have sex on a first date was also shown to be associated with a lower desire to marry. Together, these results do offer some support to the stereotype that males are squarely focused upon the immediate gratification of an intimate relationship, and are not necessarily keen to marry, once those gratifications are made available. Or, to put it more succinctly – if he finds a woman who is willing to cohabit, what is the need for marriage?

Among females, it was also interesting to note the impact of peers. The number of friends in dating relationships was positively associated with females' desire to marry, and negatively associated with their preferred age at marriage. Given that these same associations were not significant among males, it is reasonable to assert that peers and, more precisely, peer pressure impact young women's aspirations of marriage, but not those of young men. There is an abundance of research which has detailed the nature of peer relationships among young women, particularly in terms of how it affects such attributes as appearance and body image. In this instance, however, peer relationships clearly impact young women in ways which

are unique, as the decisions concerning marriage are certainly more meaningful and lasting than issues such as choosing how to style one's hair. Females were also affected by their perceptions concerning the benefits of marriage, while males were not. Among females, the perceptions that marriage would improve their standard of living and their sex life were associated with a greater desire for marriage, and the perception that marriage would improve their overall happiness was associated with a lower preferred age at marriage. Seemingly, the respective perceptions concerning the benefits of marriage are affecting young females' marriage aspirations, but not those of young men. The two sexes were similar, though, in regards to how their desired number of children affected their desires to marry, wherein the linkage between marriage and childbearing was clearly evident among both females and males. However, while the desired number of children was negatively associated with females' preferred age at marriage, no significant association was shown among males.

From the perspective of the ecological systems paradigm, it is evident that the marriage aspirations of both female and male college students are being influenced by a combination of parental, peer, and individual characteristics. The distinctions shown between how these factors influence young females and males also support that contention that gender remains a salient determinant of how individuals develop their own aspirations for marriage. As previously noted, China is undergoing considerable forms of change – social, economic, and political, all of which are likely to affect how young people perceive intimate relationships. While the traditional expectations of getting married and bearing children are obviously still at the center of many young individuals' aspirations for their futures, the changing nature of marriage is perhaps also evident. The combination of high divorce rates, increases in materialism and individualism, along with the increasingly available alternatives to traditional marriage, including cohabitation and premarital sex, may detract from the aspirations of young females and males for marriage. Given the long history of cultural traditions in China, and specifically those related to marriage and family, it is unlikely that those traditions are going to fade away entirely. However, it is undeniable that marriage aspirations, as part of the institution of the family, are dynamic, and change over time. Future studies should attempt to more precisely determine the broader effects of both peer and youth culture upon the development of marriage aspirations.

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