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Whom Do Young Female College Students Want to Marry? A Comparative Study on Middle- and Working-class Women's Preference for Marital Partners in Shandong Province, China

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Studies on partner selection showed that homogeneous marriages based on ascribed status make up the majority in China, setting it apart from other countries. However, research on homogeneous marriages in China has focused only on shifting trends and paid little attention to why they occur. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with 30 middle-class and working-class women in Shandong Province, China, this study explores the different preferences for marital partners by women from the two classes and explains why such patterns occur. This study reveals that the women's partner selection preference is profoundly influenced by their family and local structural factors. This tendency stems from the women's aspiration to maintain class habits, inherited from their parents and original family lifestyle, and guanxi culture in China. This research contributes to the literature by illuminating why the combination of achieved-status- and ascribed-status-based homogeneous marriages is increasing in modern China.

Keywords: *partner selection, homogeneous marriages, class, Bourdieu, habit, China*

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Introduction

Partner selection is the focus of considerable scholarly attention, as the motivations and behavioral patterns of partner selection play a decisive role in family formation, leading to broad social changes (Gan 2007). Specifically, the rate of heterogeneous marriage is considered an indicator of degree of social and cultural openness, so whether homogeneous or heterogeneous marriages are more frequent is a major topic in studies on partner selection (Corti and Pisati 2021). High rates of heterogeneous marriages may increase social and cultural openness and integration, whereas high rates of homogeneous marriages, including endogamy or homogamy, may perpetuate the maintenance of class position, as couples' social, cultural, and economic resources are accumulated and transmitted through marriage (Kalmijn 1998; Birkelund and Heldal 2003). Modernization theory asserts that as modernization progresses, barriers between groups will gradually weaken, leading to a decrease in homogeneous marriages and an increase in heterogeneous marriages (Cherlin 2012).

While a majority of contemporary marriages are heterogeneous—that is, between men and women with dissimilar socioeconomic status (Lee and Boyd 2008)—such claims of an increase in heterogamy may not be applicable everywhere. An increase in heterogamy will not consistently lead to the cessation of marital homogamy, as evidenced in the literature on homogeneous marriages in countries in North America and Asia (Kalmijn 1991; Li 2013). In China and South Korea, a high rate, even increasing numbers, of homogeneous marriages persists (Li and Lu 2008). Homogeneous marriages in China have different features from those in North America and South Korea. While homogeneous marriages in North America and South Korea are based mostly on achieved status, such as education and occupation, homogeneous marriages in China are contingent on ascribed status, such as family background (Blackwell and Lichter 2004; Katrňák and Manea 2020; Li 2020; Li and Lu 2008). This difference implies that heterogenous marriages facilitated by diversity and openness through urban development and occupational diversification are not widely observed in contemporary China, whereas homogamy based on ascribed status, including class and family background, is common.

However, research on why class-based homogeneous marriages remain dominant in rapidly modernizing China is limited. Studies on homogeneous marriages in China mainly described shifting patterns and trends (Ma 2015;

Xu and Zhou 2020), overlooking underlying cultural mechanisms. Studies on partner selection suggested that women's preference for men evolved from a single socioeconomic factor to men's physical attractiveness, psychological characteristics, and value systems (Cheng 2019; Kalmijn 1998; Le and Roseneil 2014; Pearse and Connell 2016) but ignored how one's preference is deeply rooted in one's family class and cultural background. Young college students' social interactions are influenced by factors such as family upbringing, relationships, and interactions, which differ from mere economic background (Liao 2017).

China is an ideal setting to examine how familial culture plays a significant role in one's partner selection. As a country that preserves its conservative values, Chinese culture gives individuals little autonomy over partner selection (Bystrov 2014). Yang (2011, p. 92) suggested that *men dang hu dui,* a historically inherited norm of partner selection in China that emphasizes homogeneity between husband and wife, remains, leading people to search for homogeneous partners when deciding whom to marry in modern China. In addition, parental opinions are highly involved in partner selection, as a strong family-oriented culture preserving traditional norms permeates China (Cheng 2019). Despite China's modernization, homogeneous marriages are preferred by Chinese women who aspire for class position stability amid increasing stratification (Wang and Xu 2011; Qi 2012).

To explain the high rates of homogeneous marriages in China, in this study, we aim to explore how family upbringing by class background affects women's partner selection preference and how family culture, embedded in one's class position, as well as local Chinese culture, shape women's partner selection preference. To answer these questions, we conduct in-depth interviews with 30 young female college students residing in Shandong Province, China. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of tastes, we determine whom the young college women prefer to marry and the reasons for their preference. The findings of this research suggest that class-based homogeneous marriages should not be reduced simply to economic pursuits; rather, hidden structural and cultural factors unique to the Chinese context may be involved.

Literature Review

(1) Partner Selection in Homogeneous Marriages

Research on homogeneous marriages, or homogamy, identifies two types: homogeneous marriage by ascribed status, in which the social background

(class, race, and religion) of the marital partners is highly analogous, and homogeneous marriage by achieved status, in which the personal achievements (education, occupation, and income) of the marital partners are highly congruent. In the former, one's partner selection for marriage is highly associated with one's family and class background, and in the latter, one's partner selection for marriage is highly related to one's individual characteristics, such as education level, and other factors (Kalmijn 1991).

Homogeneous marriages by achieved status are common in Western society. For example, in six European countries, a recurrent trend of small increases in educational homogamy followed by small decreases was observed from 1990 to 2016 (Katrňák and Manea 2020). In contrast, though an overall increasing trend in educational homogamy is observed in South Korea and China, a slight decrease was witnessed in recent years mainly owing to structural factors. For instance, educational homogamy among couples over the age of 30 in Korea increased from 45.9% in 1970 to 60.8% in 2000, then decreased to 54.5% in 2015. The decline in educational homogamy is caused mainly by the increasing rate of downward marriages owing to the improvement in women's average education level (Lee 2000). Similarly, the rate of educational homogamy in China increased from 45.0% in 1979 to 69.7% in 2009 then decreased to 67.9% in 2014 (Liang et al. 2018). The decline in the importance of education in marriage is linked to the narrowing gender gap in education, making it increasingly difficult for women to marry highly educated men, while age, as a symbol of accumulation of economic resources, has become a substitute for education as a proxy for men's high status (Mu and Xie 2014).

In terms of homogamy by ascribed status, it is worth noting that China shows a uniquely consistent trend, differing from the West and Korea. In Western and European countries, partner selection generally shifted from ascribed status to achieved status, thereby suggesting that marriage partner choice became individualized (Blackwell and Lichter 2004; Kalmijn 1991). Thus, Western society witnessed a consistent decline in homogeneous marriage by ascribed status, as young people's partner selection is no longer limited to similar race, class, religion, and geographic region. In Korean society, most of the existing studies are on achieved status homogamous marriages in terms of education (Lee 2000; Lee 2021), and the few studies on ascribed status homogamy have focused on religion, demonstrating the long-term stability of religious homogamy (Bae 2018; Woo and Kim 2015). For example, Woo and Kim (2015) point out that holding the same religious beliefs is the most important factor in Protestant women's criteria for

choosing a partner, due to the conflict between Protestant culture and other religions and even traditional Korean culture. In order to obtain a partner with the same value system, culture and lifestyle, Protestant women tend to set strict religious boundaries when choosing a marriage partner. However, in this case, it is difficult to grasp the trends of homogeneous marriages of other ascribed statuses.

However, studies in China have demonstrated a contrasting trend. In China, there has been an upward trend in homogamy by ascribed status, especially by family background. In terms of family economic background, 67.4% of couples reported having similar economic and family backgrounds at the time of marriage (Li and Lu 2008). However, research on homogeneous marriages of ascribed status in China has mainly focused on numerical trends (Ma 2015; Liang et al. 2018), with only a few studies suggesting that the rapid social changes driven by deepening market economy reforms and the subsequent uncertainty of social life may have contributed to the importance of ascribed status (Qi and Niu 2012). However, this assumption ignores subtle cultural mechanisms, and Oh and Kim's (2022) study points to the need for future research to explore the impact of family background (i.e., parental socio-economic status) on adult children's demographic behavior from a cultural perspective to supplement research on the transfer of inequality between generations. This is because the socio-economic status of parents is not limited to the mere embodiment of family income or educational level, but can have an impact on the formation of children's cultural, social and charismatic capital based on such resources. On this basis, it is necessary to focus on the impact of cultural mechanisms and to conduct empirical research that goes beyond enhanced macro and theoretical speculation.

(2) Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class proposes "habitus" as a key element in class reproduction. Cultural capital, which includes participation in objective cultural activities and cultural material resources, is a type of capital that explains the transmission of various resources and knowledge, whereas habitus focuses on one's subjective attitudes and dispositions that shape one's cultural tastes (Bourdieu 1987). Bourdieu's (1987) concept of class incorporates the concept of habits and lifestyles in addition to material conditions, meaning people with not only similar material resources but also similar habits and lifestyles make up a class. Thus, individual actors situated in similar positions are likely to share the same life circumstances and possess

common habits (Bourdieu 1977). Habits can be acquired from experience (e.g., family experience) and have an effect on other fields of experience (e.g., occupation), thereby making them transferable. That is, habits formed in one's original family or original class continue to influence other fields throughout an individual's life. Thus, when actors bring their habitus to multiple fields, they first choose the ways inherited and characterized by their habitus.

Habitus is a concept expressed as lifestyle and various behaviors. Habitus is the built-in and subconscious way we perceive and categorize the world, based on how we were raised, that structures our etiquette, tates, and actions (Robbins 2005). Etiquette, referring to whether one's way of speaking and behaving is in line with the social norms of one's class, and taste, referring to one's preference for consuming a certain dress, diet, and transportation, can operate as ways to distinguish oneself from others (Liu 2003). As this lifestyle can demonstrate a person's appreciation of art and knowledge, it is also known as an aesthetic judgement. For Bourdieu, lifestyle differences best reflect the environment where individuals are raised and are the most convincing expression of class identity (Bourdieu 1987). When individuals enter the marriage market, they will subconsciously consider their partner in a way that will align their original family lifestyle to that of their future family. Owing to the persistence and transferability of habits, individuals' expectations of their partner will reflect this requirement in various aspects. Therefore, when analyzing partner preference, assessing how an individual's "original family" or "original class" influences their lifestyle expectations is important.

Studies suggest that individuals belonging to the upper class are likely to prefer individualism, demonstrate an independent and autonomous attitude, and consider themselves as individuals with distinctive personalities (Markus and Kitayama 2010), because the middle class is rarely threatened by the external environment owing to relatively high incomes and stable jobs. In contrast, individuals belonging to the working class are likely to exhibit collectivist traits, such as concern for others, vigilance toward the social environment, and belonging to a larger group (Iacoviello and Lorenzi-Cioldi 2019). The working class is more vulnerable to external threats than the upper middle class and thus will likely value intergroup cooperation and collectivist norms (Chen and Xie 2018). Eventually, such class background of original families can shape one's partner preference in a way that individualistic middle-class women are likely to prefer a partner who meets their individual needs, and collectivistic working-class women are likely to

prefer a partner who meets their collective needs (Lu 2020; Wang 2010; Yang 2019).

Context of China

(1) *Men Dang Hu Dui* (門當戶對)

In China, *men dang hu dui* operates as the cultural backbone guiding individuals' partner selection, which intersects with one's family background in society. *Men dang* and *hu dui* were originally components used in housing construction. *Men dang* refers to a pair of plaster figures in front of the gate to the house, where civil officials used round *men dang*, and military officials used square *men dang*. Thus, from a distance, one could tell whether the owner of the house was a civil official or a military official. *Hu dui* refers to wooden blocks on both sides of the lintel, and the size of the *hu dui* is proportional to the official rank. Therefore, *men dang* and *hu dui* reflect identity, status, and family situation.

Men dang hu dui is a metaphor for a perfect match of the family background of two parties. As a traditional concept of partner selection, *men dang hu dui* endured but changed over time, along with fluctuating social structures in modern China. During the feudal dynasty, individuals typically chose partners from families with similar backgrounds to maintain their family status, as one's access to resources depended largely on the social rank of one's original family. From the early liberation period to the Cultural Revolution (1949-1976), social classes were divided into two rival camps: the proletariat (working class) and bourgeoisie (upper and middle classes). Therefore, individuals' political stance, intersecting with their class and resources, was the most important factor when choosing a partner.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, individuals were free to compete for resources based on their family background, education, social capital, and so on in a market environment. Since the "reform and opening up" in 1978, China has undergone a transition from a planned economy to a market economy (Li 2019). Free competition has replaced state distribution as the main way people obtain resources. In this context, personal abilities (including education, connections, social skills, etc.) have an unprecedented decisive impact on resource acquisition. However, as China's social transformation was carried out in the context of poverty and lack of a welfare system, people inevitably rely on family for resources (including economic support, network sharing, child-rearing support, etc.), reinforcing the importance of family background as well. Therefore, after China's economic

reform, family matchmaking also evolved into the dual pursuit of personal homogeneity and family background homogeneity (Diao 2009; Wang 2007; Wang and Xu 2011). Overall, the Chinese concept of *men dang hu dui*, which essentially refers to the pursuit of class homogamy, and its variations, reflect the continuing power of class-based homogeneous marriages in Chinese society.

(2) *Guanxi Culture* (關係文化)

Existing in China for thousands of years with a high rate of legitimacy, *guanxi* refers to an individual's social network of mutually beneficial personal and business relationships. The character *guan* (關) means "closed," while the character *xi* (係) means "system." Together, the term refers to a closed system of relationships that is somewhat analogous to the term "old boy network" in the West (Li et al. 2019). *Guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) culture allows individuals to obtain resources through social bonds with actors. Individuals can expand their social networks to achieve the effect of sharing information, promoting cooperation, and reducing risks and transaction costs (Fukuyama 2001; Guo and Ding 2014). As individuals expand their social networks, they can effectively enhance their employment and income level (Bian 2010). Therefore, establishing a relationship network is important, as it can determine one's access to resources.

Particularly reforms to the economy left Chinese formal institutions, such as government offices and other systems, in a state of relative imperfection or semi-functionality. *Guanxi* thus became an important complement or alternative to informal institutions, operating as implicit rules within the market (Zhou 2021). Ye et al. (2016) suggest that the influence of *guanxi* appears to increase as marketization progresses in China. Even when the formal institutions that preserved *guanxi* culture changed for the better, people were reluctant to abandon this practice in the past out of concern for the cost of deviating from collective norms.

In such a pervasive *guanxi* culture, partner selection can be viewed as an important part of the construction of a broad relationship network, indicating not only a direct relationship with an intimate partner but also broad network-building with a partner's relationship network. Therefore, a homogeneous partner may bring a homogeneous network based on similar economic and cultural backgrounds, which is generally easy to expand, but a heterogeneous partner will bring a heterogeneous network, which is typically difficult to integrate owing to diverging backgrounds. Hence, the persistence of *guanxi* culture may operate as one of the causes of extensive homogeneous

marriages in China. It is worth noting that the role of *guanxi* varies by class. The returns of *guanxi* are U-shaped based on one's class in urban areas, meaning that the middle class has the lowest *guanxi* returns from their relationships, whereas the working and upper classes have the highest returns from their relationships (Guo 2014). This finding implies that the contribution of *guanxi* to income improvement, occupational advancement, and resource acquisition is prominent for the upper and working classes; thus, the importance of *guanxi* networks may be a factor influencing the upper and working classes to pursue homogeneous marriages.

Data and Methods

The participants of this study are 30 women from middle-class and working-class families from the Shandong Agricultural University in Shandong Province. We conducted the interviews from November 2019 to January 2020, in Chinese. As we aimed to recruit young women of a similar age to the first author, an informal network of acquaintances helped the first author recruit participants. After interviewing several women, the first author was able to reach out to other women through the informal network. The snowball sampling method is practical and convenient, but also carries several limitations. As prospective participants are generated by recommendations from previous participants, this means that a similar pool of participants is generated, often containing relatives, friends, and classmates of acquaintances, as well as people close to participants, meaning there may be similar characteristics and shared values between participants. Therefore, given the limitations imposed by sampling, and the wide variation in education, region, ethnicity, family structure and economic background of young Chinese people, the experiences and views of the women in this study only reflect the marriage preferences of young women in urban areas, and cannot be generalized to a wider group.

However, this sample also has significant strengths. As this study aims to explore what women value in their partner selection process, the extent to which they value it and, in particular, why they value these factors, it requires an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' background—here, young women living in urban areas—to understand how women's partner selection preferences fit in with their life experiences. Involving such depth and detail often requires trust and acceptance between the interviewer and the participants. Fortunately, the first author had a close relationship with the

gatekeeper and the gatekeeper had a high reputation among the students, so the research participants who were introduced through the gatekeeper felt safe to answer the questions honestly. And as a young woman with similar interests, the first author found it easier to build rapport with the participants as the interview progressed. Participants engaged more freely and actively in the interviews, disclosing more of their personal history to explain how their preferences were developed and what the factors they valued meant to them. The rich and nuanced stories they shared helped the study to look beyond the statistical figures and discover the motivations behind them.

The average age of the participants, who were all undergraduate or graduate students, was approximately 24. Given the early average age for the first marriage and considering the relationship to marriage in China, the participants' partner preference during school years or immediately after graduation can be an important clue for predicting their marital choices. In terms of their class background, we considered the participants' original family. As their personal social class during this period is highly influenced by the class of their original family, we used the social class of their original family, specifically, their father's occupation, as a marker of their personal social class. In this study, we adopted Lu's criterion of social stratification, stating that the middle class includes professionals and technicians, white-collar workers, and self-employed individuals, and the working class includes commercial service workers, industrial workers, agricultural workers, urban and rural jobless individuals, unemployed individuals, and semi-unemployed individuals (Lu 2002).

The first author conducted the interviews in a café near the participants' school or in the participants' living quarters. Interviews lasted from one and a half to three and a half hours. The first author used an interview guide to conduct a systematic interview. The interview guide was composed of three parts: (1) the women's perception of marriage, (2) the women's preference for a partner with regard to socioeconomic status, and (3) the women's preference for a partner with regard to family background, physical appearance, and age. The first author conducted the semi-structured interviews in the order of the set questions but asked the questions appropriately based on the situation and participants' responses. In addition, she asked new questions that emerged during the interviews. The first author also informed the women of their anonymity and confidentiality of the information they provide during the interviews. We recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants and sent the transcripts to the participants to confirm whether any information was distorted.

Table 1
China's Ten Major Social Classes

	Social Classes	Population (%)
Upper Class	State and society managers	2.1
	Company managers	1.6
	Private business owners	1
Middle Class	Professionals and technicians	4.6
	White-collar workers	7.2
	Self-employed individuals	7.1
Lower Class	Commercial service workers	11.2
	Industrial workers	17.5
	Agricultural workers	42.9
	Jobless individuals, unemployed individuals, and semi-unemployed individuals	4.8

We used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees and confidentiality. We analyzed the data using grounded theory, which aims to generate a set of concepts and linkages of concepts as "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser and Strauss 1999). Grounded theory is widely used to find the underlying social processes of social behaviors and events by moving beyond presumptions. For the analysis, the first author read the interview transcripts and conducted open coding to understand the repeatedly emerging themes. Then, the second author attempted to identify the key conceptual interests that shaped the different narratives on whom the middle-class and working-class women preferred as marriage partners. After discovering the theme of comparison between the two groups of women, our analysis advanced to develop systematic stories and analytical themes to understand why the women had differing orientations, considering the influence of family culture and other factors in China.

The participants included 18 middle-class and 12 working-class women. We tried to recruit approximately equal numbers of middle- and working-class women so that we can compare their behaviors on partner selection. Although some might think that this sample size is not enough to represent a group, we attempted to control other aspects, such as gender, age, and region,

to focus on the comparison of class background. Furthermore, our initial goal was to show a cultural mechanism of how the class habits of a woman's original family influence her preference for marital partners. Thus, the simple quantity of interview participants becomes less important for this research.

The age of the participants at the time of the study was as follows: 1 was 21 years old, 9 were 23 years old, 13 were 24 years old, 4 were 25 years old, and 3 were 26 years old. In terms of place of birth, 10 were from Linyi, 3 were from Jinan, 6 were from Qingdao, 4 were from Weifang, 2 were from Dongying, and 1 was from Heze, Yantai, Jining, Rizhao and Liaocheng each. For education level, 17 had a master's degree, and 13 were undergraduates. Among the middle-class women, 12 had a master's degree, and 6 were undergraduates, and among the working-class women, 4 had a master's degree, and 8 were undergraduates. The future career plans of the participants were diverse, including becoming a teacher (10), corporate employee (11), civil servant (3), veterinarian (5), and being self-employed (1). Among the middle-class women, future career plans included becoming a teacher (8), corporate employee (5), civil servant (2), veterinarian (2), and being self-employed (1). Among the working-class women, future career plans included becoming a teacher (2), corporate employee (6), veterinarian (3), and civil servant (1).

Regarding family background, the educational qualification of the participants' parents was diverse, including 21 college graduates, 6 high school graduates, 28 junior high school graduates, 3 primary school graduates, and 2 illiterates. Among the parents of the middle-class women, 17 were college graduates, 4 were high school graduates, and 15 were secondary school graduates. Among the parents of the working-class women, 4 were college graduates, 2 were high school graduates, 13 were junior high school graduates, 3 were primary school graduates, and 2 were illiterate. The average monthly income was 15,500 yuan (US$2,383.90)[1] for the parents of the middle-class women and 8,100 yuan (US$1,245.78) for those of the working-class women. In terms of family assets, the families of the middle-class women owned 1.83 houses and 1.22 cars, on average, and the families of the working-class women owned 1.5 houses (including nonurban real estate) and 0.5 cars, on average. Table 2 presents the detailed information of interview participants.

[1] This is the exchange rate of the Yuan to US dollars as of April 2022.

Table 2
Background of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Birthplace	Education	Hometown	Expected occupation	Parents' occupation (father/ mother)	Family assets (house/ car)
Middle-class women							
Wang Nan	25	Linyi	Master	Urban	University teacher	Department director/ teacher	2/2
Wu Xiao	25	Jinan	Master	Urban	Staff/ librarian/ researcher	Department director/ housewife	3/1
Zhao Li	24	Qingdao	Master	Urban	University teacher/ researcher	Private business owner/ accountant	3/1
Wen Dan	23	Dongying	Bachelor	Urban	Clerk	Teacher/ staff	1/0
Li Qian	24	Heze	Bachelor	Urban	Vet	Teacher/ police officer	1/0
Shu Jen	26	Qingdao	Master	Urban	Clerk	Staff/teacher	1/1
Jia Jia	24	Linyi	Master	Urban	High school teacher	Staff/staff	3/2
Zhou Meng	25	Linyi	Master	Urban	University teacher	Staff/staff	3/2
Yi Fan	24	Jinan	Master	Urban	High school teacher	Staff/ self-employed	1/1
Ai Que	26	Qingdao	Master	Urban	Civil servant	Civil servant/ cashier	1/1
Jia Hui	24	Linyi	Master	Urban	Clerk	Self-employed/ staff	1/2
Shi Yi	23	Weifang	Bachelor	Urban	High school teacher	Self-employed/ self-employed	1/1
Xiao Jun	25	Weifang	Master	Urban	Civil servant	Self-employed/ self-employed	1/1
Sun Cheng	24	Linyi	Master	Urban	University teacher	Self-employed/ self-employed	4/1
Zhao Xin	24	Linyi	Master	Urban	Clerk	Self-employed/ self-employed	3/3
Xiao Yu	23	Jining	Bachelor	Urban	Self-employed	Tour guide/ staff	2/1
Meng Yao	23	Linyi	Master	Urban	University teacher	Self-employed/ self-employed	1/2

Song Ke	23	Qingdao	Bachelor	Urban	Vet	Staff/ pharmacist	1/1
Working-class women							
Li Min	23	Dongying	Bachelor	Urban	Librarian	Driver/cashier	1/1
Lan Yun	23	Jinan	Bachelor	Urban	Clerk	Worker/staff	3/1
Yu Xin	24	Linyi	Master	Rural	Civil servant	Worker/ farmer	1/0
Zhang Jing	24	Weifang	Bachelor	Urban	Clerk	Worker/ housewife	1/0
Peng Fei	21	Linyi	Master	Rural	Accounting	Farmer/ farmer	1/0
Qian Yu	26	Linyi	Master	Rural	Clerk	Farmer/ farmer	3/2
Ai Hua	24	Weifang	Bachelor	Urban	High school teacher	Veterinarian/ housewife	1/1
Wang Sha	24	Yantai	Master	Rural	Vet	Farmer/ farmer	1/0
Li Wen	23	Rizhao	Bachelor	Rural	Clerk	Farmer/ farmer	1/1
Li Lei	24	Qingdao	Bachelor	Rural	Vet	Farmer/ farmer	1/1
Zheng Shuang	23	Qingdao	Bachelor	Urban	Teacher/vet	Unemployed/ nanny	2/0
Shi Yu	24	Liaocheng	Bachelor	Urban	Vet	Worker/ housewife	2/0

Results

Two Groups' Similar but Different Expectations on Marital Partner's Income, Personal Status, and Education

The two groups of women had somewhat similar expectations of their marital partner in terms of income and personal assets. In terms of income, women in both classes showed similar preferences, where both groups preferred a partner who earned more than or as much as they earn (72.7% in the middle class; 75% in the working class). However, middle-class women were likely to prefer a partner who earned much more than they do, in comparison to the working class. One middle-class woman, Shi Yi (23), expressed a preference for an income level "about the same as me, or higher than me," saying that she could "accept 2 to 3.5 times higher at most. The higher is better because I think there is a gap between men's and women's [earning] ability." Another said, "He just needs to earn about the same

amount as much as I earn. If the difference is particularly big… maybe a little higher than me. If the male's income is lower than mine, I'm afraid he'll have an inferiority complex, which would make the relationship difficult" (Yu Xin, working class, 24).

As Shi Yi said, middle-class women require a man's income level similar to or higher than what they earn to maintain their current standard of living. The reason is that their income level is limited in the labor market.

> To keep up with the family's expenses, his monthly income must be at least 10,000 yuan or more. Based on the spending level of people in our neighborhood, it has to be above the middle. He has to earn more than me because clerical work [her own future envisioned career] doesn't pay much anyway. (Jia Hui, middle class, 24)

Therefore, middle-class women expected a higher level of financial capability from their partners. In addition to maintaining their daily living habits, middle-class women prefer to use their surplus income to satisfy their personal consumption desires. This pursuit of personal needs is also reflected in middle-class women's demand for a partner having personal assets. Middle-class women expect their future partner to have a house and a car (44%), which meant that their partner should have assets similar to theirs so that their own interests will not be jeopardized. This can be seen in the response of Jia Jia (middle class, 24).

> He has to have both [a house and a car], right? We all have financial pressure, so I hope we can be more *men dang hu dui*, so that the financial burden is relatively less. Think about it, if you have ten dollars and he does not, you have to share five dollars with him, and then you will not be able to buy your favorite things. If [his asset level] is too different from your own, it will affect your own quality of life, and when you can't guarantee your own quality of life, then how can you be immersed in a relationship? (Jia Jia middle class, 24)

Similar to middle-class women, the working-class women's requirements for a man's income level were also aimed at maintaining their current standard of living (66.7%). Although the two groups shared some similar narratives about what they expected from marital partners, their reasons for such choices differed. Working-class women expressed distinct opinions from their middle-class counterparts, defining the basic standard of living as

simple needs for survival, including the consumption of food, clothing, and shelter. As Li Wen (working class, 23) said, "As long as I can maintain a basic living, it is okay if the income is not high. Food, clothing, and shelter are the basic requirements of life, and traveling and savings are not." Thus, the reasons working-class women expect a similar income level from a man were different from those of middle-class women.

Unlike middle-class women, working-class women preferred to use their surplus income to subsidize their original family. For example, Peng Fei (working class, 21) said that high income can "reduce the burden of the family." Their focus on the needs of their original family was also reflected in the types of personal assets that working-class women expected their partners to possess. The working-class women also expected their future partner to have a house and car (75%), but such needs were not motivated by self-interest. For instance, Lan yun (working class, 23) said, "Men still need to have a house. My mother's requirements for my partner in simple terms is to have a car and a house. And if not, there will be economic pressure in educating children in the future." Considering that many of the working-class women did not own a house or a car, they reported that it was personally acceptable for their partner to not own a house or a car. However, owing to the mandatory requirements of their parents and the future needs of their children and family, they mentioned that it would be ideal for their partner to possess such assets.

More significant differences exist between the two groups in terms of education. The middle-class women preferred a partner with an education level similar to or slightly higher than theirs (66.6%), whereas 33% of the working-class women preferred a partner with an education level similar to theirs. For example, Xiao Jun (middle class, 25) said, "I don't think more education is better, but it is okay if his education is the same as mine." Middle-class women had such preferences because they believed that a strong link exists between education level and cultural resources (ideas, opinions, values, etc.). Wang Nan (middle class, 25) said, "The similar level of education of both partners implies that they have similar values and symbolizes the possibility of smoother communication." Similarly, Jia Hui (middle class, 24) shared the following:

> I have had experiences with people with less education, and there were communication problems as we had different ideas and values. If we have different thoughts and plans for the future, I do not think I can accept it. Suppose we deal with a small matter in the future. For example, when

> dealing with relationships, it would be difficult to negotiate if we have different opinions. It's not that I can't compromise, but if I can't understand his ideas at all, it's unacceptable. I think the possibility of such problems with people with less than a college degree would be high.

According to Wang Nan and Jia Hui, a similar education level between couples implies that they share similar values, and such a similar education level will ensure smooth communication and joint decision-making. Slightly similar to but largely different from the middle-class women, 33.3% of the working-class women preferred a partner with an education level similar to theirs, but they preferred a partner with an education level lower than theirs. Shi Yu (working class, 24) said, "I think there are some professions where a high education is not enough to succeed. So, it is not important to say that education is not important, but it is acceptable if he has other advantages [than education]." The working-class women valued the economic value of education more than its cultural value but considered an academic degree a limited contributor to income. They were likely to consider actual ability, such as practical and interpersonal skills, more important, and thus, they did not necessarily require a partner with a high academic degree.

Different Contexts of Two Groups' Expectations: Operation of the Original Family's Parenting and Lifestyle

As individuals' preferences are intrinsic and socialized as the influence of class habits (Bourdieu 1987), individual preferences tend to have deep social roots, especially through family lineage and culture. During the interviews, we found that the women's preferences were influenced by their family's parenting style, which differed by class background. The middle-class women preferred a partner with an education level similar to or slightly higher than theirs, which stemmed from their expectations of finding a partner with similar values to ensure easy communication and mutual understanding. The quest for a potential partner was strongly associated with how the middle-class women were raised by their parents. For example, Zhao Li (middle class, 24) mentioned the following:

> My father would ask me about my opinion and the reason why I think that way. After that, he would talk about his ideas. If [the] final decision needs to be improved, we will improve it based on both sides' opinions. I can't stand the idea of men being in charge, and I think shared decision leads to the

most rational plan.

In such a way, the middle-class parenting style, emphasizing two-way communication between parents and children, encouraging and respecting children's autonomous judgement, and reaching a consensus through negotiation, may influence the middle-class women's ideas about their potential partner. The middle-class women, who grew up with a family culture cherishing mutual communication and negotiation, may look for a partner with a similar education level and values to maintain this parenting model and family relationship.

Meanwhile, the working-class women's preference may also be rooted in the family culture and parenting style with which they are familiar. In response to a question about whether they would persist in marrying the person they chose if their parents were against it, Qian Yu (working class, 26) said, "Don't make mistakes, you should get permission from your parents first. If my parents think it's okay, then it's okay, and if they don't say yes, then it's not okay. […] While growing up, we had rules in my family, and I had to do whatever my mom said." This statement suggested the binding nature of family norms in the working class, where parents have absolute authority over their children's decision to choose a partner. However, such norms are not necessarily enforced in a coercive manner. For example, Ai Hua (working class, 24) said:

> I'm going to listen to them. There are two reasons. First, I think I attach more importance to filial piety and their opinions, and I don't want to upset them. Moreover, their ability to judge people is more accurate than mine. Therefore, I think that if I don't listen to my parents, things won't turn out well, and if I don't get their support, I won't be happy.

Ai Hua viewed her parents' fulfillment of their right to participate and make decisions positively because she trusted their judgment and felt that she was fulfilling her responsibilities as a child. However, whether passively or actively accepted, the working-class women's responses suggest a working-class parenting style that emphasizes the authority of elders and the obedience of children, which restrict individuals' voluntary and autonomous decisions and make them consider the needs of their original family and choose a partner who matches their family's preference.

Owing to limited resources, working-class parents are inclined to devote their energy to keeping their children safe and reinforcing discipline, thereby

controlling their children's behavior to a certain extent (Lareau 2011). Compared with middle-class families, who focus on inner thinking and voluntary choices, working-class families are more likely to emphasize the authority of elders and obedience of children (Lareau 2011). Thus, the working-class women preferred a partner who will match their family's needs. Therefore, the middle-class women's aspiration for an educationally homogeneous marriage and working-class women's quest for a partner who matches their family's preference are fundamentally rooted in the habitus of their family, which diverges based on class background.

Besides parenting style, the two groups' different expectations on lifestyle, intersecting with individualist and collectivist values, also shaped their partner preference. The middle-class women expressed a desire to live a high-quality life while meeting their objective survival needs. For example, Sun Cheng (middle class, 24) shared the following:

> If there is a big difference between our income levels, we may have similar standards for consumption. For example, if I want to decorate my house nicely but he thinks that the cheapest decoration is enough, then the house will look shabby, and I would not like it. What about buying clothes? What if he says that a five-dollar dress is enough without considering the quality and design of the clothes? Most importantly, in that case, both of us may have difficulty tolerating each other owing to different expectations on the quality of life.

In contrast, the demands of the working-class women were based on meeting basic living standards. Li Wen (working class, 23) expressed, "As long as I can maintain a basic living, it is okay if the income is not high. Food, clothing, and shelter are the basic requirements of life, and traveling and savings are not."

In addition to their consumption styles, the responses of these two groups reflect their different attitudes towards their original families. In the narratives of the working-class women, there was a close material and emotional connection between themselves and their original families. On the material side, they often emphasized the input of their parents in raising them and expressed the expectation of trying to repay them.

> Nowadays many parents are not public employees, so they don't have a pension. They have given you their life savings, bought you a car, bought you a house, and when parents get old, they have a lot of problems, and you

> have to give them some money every month. (Li Lei working class, 24)

Li Lei's response reflects the interdependence between parents and children in terms of material resources, with Li Lei's parents paying all their savings to buy assets for their daughter, while she takes on the cost of her parents' retirement. Sometimes children give back to more than just their parents, for example, Wang Sha(working class, 24) mentioned, "If we earn more, both parents will enjoy benefits. If I had free money in the future, I would give it to my family. I have a younger sister who is 10 years younger than me. So, if I can afford it, I should support my family." Wang Sha hopes to give back to her parents while also sharing the responsibility of being a provider on their behalf, and these hopes make up her expectations of her partner's income.

The interdependence between working-class family members is not only material, but also emotional. Concern for her parents influenced Wang Sha's (working class, 24) preference for a local partner who would make it easy for her to take care of her parents:

> First of all, I hope to find someone close to home, so I feel I can take care of them [my own parents]. Because doing a lot of hard work in the countryside just leaves a lot of scars. My mom also wants me to find a husband closer to home, as she is worried that she won't be able to see me even if she wants to.

As such, working-class women and their original families are emotionally connected, and their preferences are more or less linked to maintaining this close relationship.

However, it is worth noting that working-class women's such preferences could not be interpreted as a mere concern for parents' feelings, but rather as a reflection of working class extended family values. Zheng Shuang (working class, 23) shared, "Marriage between two people is the union of two families. So I have to take care of my husband's parents in the future, and my husband has to take care of my parents. If both parents ignore each other, it will be difficult to be filial in the future." As Zheng said, in the working class's opinion, marriage is a union of two families and the failure of both parents to get along not only hurts their own parents' feelings, but is also a result of the violation of extended family values. As Qian Yu (working class, 26) said, "Both parents should get along, otherwise it will have a huge impact on my feelings."

The attitudes of middle-class women towards their original families are very different from those of the working class. In terms of material resources,

it is clear that middle-class women also rely heavily on their parents' resources, with most middle-class women mentioning houses and/or cars which their parents have bought for them. However, unlike the working class, this material dependence is not a two-way exchange, with almost all middle-class women stating that their parents do not need their own material support, leading them to reject a partner who needs to support their parents materially. (Compared to 72.72% of the working class, only 44% of the middle class are willing to support parents materially.) Thus, unlike the working-class, whose preferences in terms of their partner's income and assets tend to reflect their expectations of how they want to support their original family, middle-class women's preferences show their own consumption needs and personal desires. For example, Zhou Meng (middle class, 25) said, "If possible, I want to spend my money on myself, and his money can be spent on the family. We don't need to support our parents financially."

Also, in terms of emotions, it was notable that the women developed more independent relationships with parents' feelings. When asked whether they would stick to marrying the person of their choice if their parents objected, the majority (50%) of middle-class women said they would stick to their decision. Sun Cheng (middle class, 24) explained, "I would stick to it. I think it's a personal emotion for myself [to choose a partner]. Because eventually you will leave your parents' home and go to another new home." In her view, her own feelings, not those of her parents, are what matters, and marriage is not a union of two families, but a separation from the original family. As a result, the middle class holds relatively separate nuclear family values compared to the extended family values of the working class. This is also reflected in middle-class women's preference for the education of their spouse's parents. For example, Li Qian (middle class, 24) said:

> There is no requirement for parents' education, but they have to be sensible, which means not to interfere a lot. If the children get married and start a family, we are independent and our family is an independent family, and they should not think of becoming the master of our family.

Different Contexts of Two Groups' Expectations: Importance of Ability in the Guanxi Culture

The middle-class women valued the cultural value of education more than its economic value, whereas the working-class women held a negative view of

the economic value of education.

> I think ability is more important than education. For example, now there are two people, one graduated from a good school and one graduated from an ordinary school. Suppose they both go to the same company and the one with higher education knows only the knowledge from textbooks and has no practical skills, then he would be inferior to the other. However, even though the other one is less educated, if he has good interpersonal skills, then he would do better. You know, ability is more beneficial to work. (Wang Sha, working class, 26)

Another woman, Li Lei (working class, 24), said, "In any case, I don't have high requirements for education. Although it is believed that education has an impact from the first career, it does not help much as you get older. The future development depends on your ability." This notion is similar to responses from Wang Sha and Li lei, so it is clear that education and ability are two different concepts in China. Education refers to the theoretical knowledge and academic degree obtained by an individual, but ability refers to practical skills needed in the workplace, such as ability to apply theoretical knowledge to actual circumstances and ability to handle interpersonal relationships in complex situations. The participants did not necessarily compound high education and competence, meaning that highly educated individuals are highly competitive. The working-class women believed that only one's competence had a significant impact on promotions and success in the workplace. Therefore, they believed that education was not an absolute indicator of economic income.

This discrepancy between education and actual ability may be the result of the Chinese social environment, including the university education system. As Wang Sha said, "The one who is highly educated only knows what is in the textbook and has no practical skills." Her answer reflects the reality that Chinese universities' focus on theoretical education led to students' inability to apply their acquired knowledge to the workplace, which can seriously hinder the effectiveness of education in job attainment. In 2006, 52.14% of 4.18 million graduates considered "insufficient social experience" as the main reason for unemployment, and 59% considered the current curricula for university students unreasonable (Research Group of Chinese College Students' Employment Situation in 2015).

The increasing level of education among young people in China may also contribute to this discrepancy. Zhang Jing (working class, 24) said,

"Nowadays college degrees are not worth much. In the city, you may not be able to hire a migrant worker for 3,000 yuan, but you can definitely hire a college student." Going on, she said, "I think a degree is just a piece of paper. It doesn't matter how many books he read in those years. If you have the ability, it doesn't matter if you don't have a degree." As she observed, the low effect of education on income contribution is mainly due to the structural factors in the industry. Although China's overall level of education is relatively low compared with that of South Korea, the unique labor-intensive industry structure requires employees who can offer cheap labor more than advanced intellectuals (Zhou 2021). As highly educated college graduates do not meet the needs of the Chinese labor market, the effectiveness of education is questioned in China, thereby prompting the social environment to emphasize one's ability more than one's education.

G*uanxi* culture also contributes to the culture of cherishing ability more than education, as *guanxi* replaced education to a certain extent in guaranteeing one's career achievements and income.

> I do not really like to use *guanxi*, but I have to say that it is quite serious. Considering my personal experience, there were a few students in my class who had a good relationship with the guidance counselor, and they gave him gifts and treated him to meals, so after the school year began, positions like class president and league secretary were given to them. […] After graduation, I learned that there are some faculty positions in the school are also given to students with good relationships with guidance counselor or professors, and those positions are impossible to compete for, because there is no open recruitment. They are all determined internally. This is the reality of China. When you have *guanxi*, you get things. (Qian Yu, working class, 26)

Although China's *guanxi* culture fully reflects the utility of social networks and human capital (Bian and Zhang 2013), it hinders the mechanism of education for job attainment and its contribution to formal competition. According to some of the working-class women, one's ability, including interpersonal skills, is more helpful than education for a promotion.

As a result, China's unique social environment and culture valuing *guanxi* led to the declining importance of education as human capital to income, whereas ability, such as practical and interpersonal skills, somehow replaced education as a key determinant of income. In this context, Chinese women, especially working-class women, perceived ability as an important

indicator of a man's value as a partner, and placed little importance on a man's education level. While previous studies in Korea and Western Europe showed that education is a potential indicator of future earnings as human capital and thus an important indicator of women's partner selection (DiMaggio and Johr 1985; Seo 2009; Skopek, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2011), the Chinese college students' responses showed a different understanding of men's education in China compared with Korea and Western Europe.

Conclusion

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with middle-class and working-class women, this study investigates young women's partner selection preference in China. This study reveals that the women's partner selection preference is profoundly influenced by structural and cultural factors, showing a strong tendency toward homogeneous marriages. This tendency is considerably related to expectations of maintaining class habits and values rather than direct economic pursuit. The findings suggest that in terms of income and personal assets, women in both classes showed similar preferences where both preferred a partner who earned more than or as much as they do. However, the reasons for such preference can differ. In terms of education level, middle-class women prefer a partner with an education level similar to or slightly higher than their own, whereas working-class women prefer a partner with an education level similar to theirs but are more accepting of a partner with a lower education level.

The different preferences of the two groups of women can be explained by two factors: the mechanism of family culture and lifestyle, and the significance of *guanxi* culture in China. First, differences in class habits can lead to different partner selection preferences between the two classes. On the one hand, differences in class parenting styles shape the different preferences of the two classes. Middle-class families are likely to have interactions characterized by mutual communication, understanding, and negotiation. To maintain such family interaction patterns, the middle-class women prefer a partner with a similar education level, which implies that the couple has similar values and mutual understanding. By contrast, working-class families preserve the parenting style that emphasizes parents' authority and children's obedience, thereby making the working-class women seek a partner who is acceptable to their parents. Based on the two-way material and emotional dependence of children and parents, working-class women's

expectations of their partner's income are essentially a desire to support their own families. Middle-class women, on the other hand, are less materially and emotionally dependent on their parents, which leads them to expect to rely on their partner's income and to spend their own income on their personal desires without regard for supporting their parents' needs. Although women of both classes prefer men with similar or higher incomes and assets, these economic resources mean different things to them.

Second, *guanxi* culture contributes to the culture of cherishing ability more than education, which can explain the working-class women's preference for potential partners. As *guanxi* replaced education to a certain extent in guaranteeing one's career achievements and income, the working-class women question the effectiveness of education as human capital and alternatively consider ability as an indicator of men's competence, replacing academic degree. In contrast to existing research, some groups of women in China place a relatively low value on men's education level. In this way, women's partner selection behavior cannot be reduced to personal preference and choice but must be considered with the intersection of the class structure and social environment. In addition, the research results provide an explanation for why China's pattern of homogeneous marriage development differs from that of the West by showing a consistent upward trend in achieved status and attributed status homogeneous marriages. Although differences exist in the preference of the two classes of women regarding their partner's education, occupation, income, and personal assets, such preferences are essentially expectations of maintaining their class habits and following their class values. Preference for achieved status is inseparably related to preference for ascribed status, which means that partner preference for achieved status is ultimately based on the pursuit of class homogeneity, especially the homogeneous pursuit of class habitus and values.

More broadly, the two groups' different preferences for partners, considering their original families, recall an ongoing controversy in existing research on family relationships in China. Some studies argue that the impact of individualism on families is not obvious and that contemporary adult children still maintain close relationships with their parents in terms of daily care, financial support, and emotional comfort (Liu 2011; Qi 2021). Other studies assert that individualism has indeed eroded Chinese familism, with both children and parents displaying more individualistic attitudes and behaviors (Lin 2019; Yan 2006). Through our analysis of middle-class and working-class women' attitudes towards their original families, we found that both tight and independent family relationships co-exist in Chinese society,

with a varying degree by individuals' class backgrounds. The middle- and working-class women have developed different cultural ideologies of family-oriented and individual-oriented value systems, which have led to different preferences in their partner selection.

This research has several limitations. The first set of limitations lies in the participants. The working-class participants are students from upper- and middle-ranking schools and thus could not represent all working-class women, thereby raising the issue of generalizability. As we can see in the table that describes the different economic background of the female university students, the two groups, middle class and working class, are distinct despite some similarities attending the same university. Although some might think that it is difficult to generalize the working-class women in urban areas, our main goal is to look at the cultural mechanisms of how the different family background affects one's preference for partner selection.

Furthermore, our samples originate from urban areas (Shandong Province), so they do not represent other middle- or working-class people in rural areas. Thus, the findings of this study only capture some patterns in urban areas. We acknowledge that a clear difference in class background may also exist among people living in rural areas. In addition, intersecting with the varying infrastructure of cities and the countryside, comparing how middle- and working-class individuals in urban and rural areas develop their preference for partner selection would be interesting. This can be an interesting topic for future research. Given that young people in China have a great degree of variations in their level of education, residential status, household structure, and socioeconomic background, the findings of this research cannot generalize the young people's orientations for marriage but our study aims to show a snapshot of young women's preference in urban areas.

Second, the changing trends of marriage and fertility in China needs to be considered more carefully for future research on partner selection. Although the current study examined young women's preference for marital partners, assuming one's desires for marriage, such an assumption may be changing. The average age of the first marriage has been rising, and young people's preference for non-marriage is also increasing in China. The average age of the first marriage has been increasing significantly for men and women in China, from 23.57 and 22.02 years in 1990 to 25.86 and 23.89 years in 2010, respectively (Jiang 2013). The proportion of unmarried people in this age group has also risen dramatically, from 4.29% in 1990 to 21.62% in 2010 for women aged 25-29 (Zhao 2017). This is a new trend regarding

family formation in China, which deserves more careful examination in the future.

Furthermore, this study does not investigate whether partner selection preference changes as women enter the workplace. According to the participants' responses, the women in both classes expect to have middle-class occupations. Therefore, their desire for class mobility or maintenance may have an impact on partner selection preferences. However, a rise in the objective class will not necessarily result in a shift in people's subjective values and behavioral patterns. For instance, Friedman (2016, p. 129) suggested that emotional loyalties to the class can entangle subjects in affinities of the past. Thus, class habits are likely to lead people to seek partners from the same class. We are currently unable to test this potential mechanism empirically, but future studies need to move in this direction, along with systematic and comprehensive data collection. Although this study has integrated the operation of *men dang du hui* and *guanxi* as the backbone of Chinese culture, lacking in this study is to develop a more comprehensive and complex intersections of various factors that explain the uniqueness of Chinese society, differing from the Western society. Future scholarly endeavors are needed to theorize Asian women and men's dating and family formation with a deeper and nuanced understanding of its rapid transition to modern society and a continuous fluctuation in an era of increasing inequality.

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