VOLUME 14 • NUMBER 2 • DECEMBER 2004

Asia Pacific

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK AND DEVELOPMENT

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Published 2005 by Marshall Cavendish Academic

Marshall Cavendish Academic

An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International
(Singapore) Private Limited

A member of Times Publishing Limited

Times Centre, 1 New Industrial Road,

Singapore 536196

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ISSN: 0218-5385

ISBN: 981-210-428-3

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library Board (Singapore).

Printed by Times Graphics Pte Ltd, Singapore
on non-acidic paper

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What Really Matters: The Demographic Versus Relationship in Marital Satisfaction

APRIL CHIUNG-TAO SHEN

This study aims to examine the relative importance of demographics and relationship predictors of marital satisfaction among Taiwanese couples. Quantitative data was collected from a probability sample of 226 married couples from eight major cities in Taiwan. The hierarchical multiple regression analyses confirmed the hypothesis that subjective marital relationship evaluations are more powerful predictors of marital satisfaction than are the demographic characteristics among Taiwanese couples.

Introduction

Despite the rapid economic and social changes in most countries of the world, the value of marriage continues to remain high in most adults' life goals. This is even truer in many countries with traditional cultures, such as countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where marriage is a very important goal for adults (Quah, 1988). In Taiwan, marriage continues to be nearly universal (Thornton, & Lin, 1994). However, marital problems and dissolution in Taiwan have increased dramatically during the past 30 years, signalling increasingly dysfunctional marriages (ROC Ministry of the Interior, 2001). The serious impact and consequences of marital distress and dissolution spur studies on marital stability and satisfaction in western societies as well as in other cultures.

Prior to 1995, at least 115 longitudinal studies had been published regarding marital quality or stability (for a review of these studies, see Karney and Bradbury, 1995). A total of nearly 200 different variables were examined in these studies as determinants of marital satisfaction and stability. Karney and Bradbury (1995) conclude that a large proportion of the independent variables fall into the three inclusive categories of *adaptive processes*, *stressful events*, and *enduring vulnerabilities* (Karney, & Bradbury, 1995). Research in the adaptive processes area is guided by the behavioural or social learning model and it emphasises that the ways couples interact with each other will influence their satisfaction with the marriage. Studies concerning stressful events are rooted in crisis theory, which emphasises how

crises can affect family and marital relationship. Enduring vulnerabilities refer to the stable demographic, historical, personality, and experiential factors that individuals bring to their marriages. Bradbury (1995) suggests that variables related to these three categories might combine to produce variation in marital satisfaction and stability. Furthermore, adaptive processes that focus on spousal interaction might have the most direct effect on marital quality. A review of cross-sectional studies (author citation, 1999) confirms that the majority of variables studied are factors related to the relationship dynamics within the couple. Therefore, both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies suggest that subjective variables focusing on relationship dynamics are more powerful predictors of marital satisfaction than demographic variables.

While hundreds of studies exist concerning the quality of marriages, relatively few studies have focused on Asian countries. Based on the few Chinese-focused marital studies, the significant factors associated with marital satisfaction in this culture can be grouped into two categories: (1) objective variables—gender, number of years married (negative), and presence of children (negative); (2) subjective variables—subjective assessments of marriage components, couple closeness, communication (including non-verbal), self-disclosing and warm personality, time together, physical intimacy, emotional support, agreement on life aims and moral behaviour, as well as agreement in relating to in-laws and friends (for husbands only) (Hua, 1986; Ying, 1991; Juang, & Tucker, 1991; Abbott, & Meredith, 1994; Young, 1995; Shek, 1995; Lewinsohn, & Werner, 1997).

However, the above findings are somewhat contrary to the traditional beliefs of Chinese culture. Traditionally, the Chinese believe that a person's background (e.g., income, education, and occupation) has far more importance to a person's marital satisfaction than the marital relationship itself. Traditional marriage was arranged by parents and oriented toward "*men-tang-bu-tuei*" (bamboo door for bamboo door and wooden door for wooden door). In other words, mate selection should be based on similar family backgrounds economically, socially and educationally (Ying, 1991). Marriage primarily served to perpetuate the continuation of the husband's family line (Ho, 1987), and was profoundly involved in the exercise and manipulation of political power, in the creation and distribution of prestige, and in the structuring of gender relations (Watson, & Ebrey, 1991). The patriarchal Chinese culture places the wife in a lower status in the family structure and devalues the importance of intimacy in a marital relationship. Thus, the definition of a successful marriage in Chinese culture was based mainly on the mutual similarities between the families' status characteristics, rather than the quality of the marital relationship. While the tradition of arranged marriage is gradually disappearing among the Asian families and marrying for love is now becoming both the preference and practice of people in Taiwan (Thornton, & Lin, 1994), mate selection is still heavily influenced by some traditional beliefs.

Young people who are not married yet still tend to believe that a person's socio economic status is a more powerful predictor of marital satisfaction than a couple's relationship itself. For example, a recent domestic opinion poll (Decision Making Research, 2001) showed that young people (who were under 40 years old) would value the importance of objective variables (e.g., SES) in mate selection more than people who were above 40 years old.

Although in Chinese culture there is a general belief in demographic characterisations, their actual importance in predicting marital satisfaction has had little empirical investigation. Previous studies in various cultures found that demographic characteristics account for very little of the variance found in marital satisfaction (accounting for only 5–12 per cent of the variance) (Duke, Johnson, & Cannon, 1984), although sometimes they were statistically significant (e.g., Fowers, & Olson, 1989), and sometimes they were not (e.g., Campbell et al., 1976; Spanier, & Lewis, 1980; Ying, 1991; author citation, 1999). The experiences of some Western societies show that along with industrialisation and urbanisation, families evolve towards a conjugal model, which emphasises affection and intimacy between couples (Goode, 1963). Since the impact of economic growth and globalisation are especially strong in the countries of East Asia and Southeast Asia, the patterns and function of Asian family life are gradually being redefined, with significant impact on the marital relationship. Therefore, it is important to examine what constitute a successful and satisfying marriage in countries currently making a transition from the traditional to the modern. In addition, the relative importance of demographics versus relationship variables in the marital satisfaction of the Taiwanese is also in need of examination to help clarify the intermixed impact of Eastern and Western family values on marital relations.

Thus, the primary aim of this study is to examine what factors—either demographic or relationship variables—differentiate between satisfactory and unsatisfactory marriages. Therefore, this study tests the following hypothesis, which is based on the results of previous literature review: *subjective marital relationship evaluations are stronger predictors of marital satisfaction among Taiwanese couples than are the demographic characteristics, with the exception of gender.* The rationale underlying this hypothesis is that it is not the objective realities per se, but one's perception and evaluation of them that are most important in predicting satisfaction (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976).

Approximately 100 years of social science research has established that satisfaction in the relationship of marriage contributes significantly to psychological well-being, including a greater sense of social integration and protection from other life stressors (Newman, & Newman, 1999). In addition, research suggests that the physical and psychological well-being of adults may be enhanced by social interventions that promote the quality of their intimate relationships (Bowen, & Kilpatrick, 1995). Therefore, from the social intervention point of view, emotional

costs and marital breakdowns can be prevented or alleviated by providing couples with updated concepts of what makes a marriage fulfilling. Social work practitioners could use these research findings to aid their consultation and education with couples to prevent marital discord and hence, enrich the marriage.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 226 married couples (452 spouses) obtained from a proportionate stratified community sample in Taiwan. The sample was stratified by geographical location in eight major cities to increase representativeness of social class and of a broad range of attitudes. The data used in this paper was part of a larger study whose data were collected over a three-month period during the spring of 2001 in Taiwan (Author citation, in press).

In terms of the demographic characteristics of the participants, approximately half of the couples were more than 40 years old and had been married for at least 16 years. The vast majority of the couples (95.6 per cent) had at least one child (median = 2). A large percentage (69.0 per cent) of the participants lived with their spouses and children (nuclear family), while 31 per cent of the couples also lived with one of the spouse's parents or extended families (mostly living with the husband's parents, according to Chinese tradition). Two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of the couples responded that they had married for love, while the rest of the sample had married because of family and age pressure, pregnancy or matchmaker arrangements.

In terms of education, 76 per cent of the participants had at least finished high school. Participants' employment was distributed fairly evenly in public sector, private industry, business sector, and other occupations. More than one third of the female participants (37.2 per cent) were housewives. There were 14.6 per cent who stated no religious affiliation, 7.3 per cent who were Protestants or Catholics and 77 per cent who were Buddhists or Taoists.

Measure

This study employed an instrument called the "Multidimensional Marital Satisfaction Inventory" (MMSI) to assess marital relationship of Taiwanese couples. The MMSI is a 58-item multidimensional marital satisfaction inventory developed in 2001 by the author. The MMSI contains 12 scales, including Personality Issues, Couple Closeness, Couple Flexibility, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relationship, Children and Parenting, Family and Friends, Gender Role, Values, Social Desirability and Marriage Satisfaction scales. Each scale consists of five items, except for Social Desirability and Marriage Satisfaction, each of which has only four items.

Statistical analyses showed that the MMSI has high levels of reliability and validity (Author citation, in press). The internal consistency (alpha) of the total MMSI was .96. The median internal consistency (alpha) across scales of the MMSI was .79, ranging from a low of .62 (Gender Role) to a high of .83 (Couple Closeness). In terms of discriminant validity, all the MMSI scales were able to discriminate the most satisfied couples from the least satisfied couples. In sum, the alpha reliability tests and the discriminant analyses procedures indicated that the MMSI has high levels of internal consistency reliability and discriminant validity. These results suggest that this instrument provides internally consistent indexes of marital relations in the Taiwanese population.

Results

Defining Dependent Variables

The *couple* score of the Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale was selected as the dependent variable for the analyses. This study added together the husband's scores and the wife's scores on the Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale in order to examine dyadic relationship between Taiwanese spouses. The Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale consists of four items measuring the couple's global evaluation of their marriages (e.g., items such as "I feel very unhappy or depressed in my marriage," "I think about separation or divorce all the time"). For all the scale items, there are five response choices for the couple to choose from: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Another alternative for selecting the dependent variable was using the one-item global statement on marital satisfaction, as in many other studies (Fincham, & Bradbury, 1987). Overall, the majority (85 per cent) of individual spouses reported that they were "satisfied" to "very satisfied." This result was consistent with that of previous Taiwanese studies (Chu, 1991; ROC Executive Yuan, 1998; author citation, 1999). Despite the dramatic increase in divorce rate over the years in Taiwan, the percentage of reported marital satisfaction (approximately 85 per cent) is surprisingly stable, regardless of whether a 5-point, 7-point, or 10-point Likert scale is used. However, these overwhelming reports of high marital satisfaction on a single-item question might come from social desirability, which resulted in little variation as a variable. Therefore, this study did not select this item as the dependent variable for analyses.

Hypothesis Analyses

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the relative importance of objective demographic variables and subjective marital relationship

evaluation as predictors of marital satisfaction. Separate analyses were conducted using individual scores (husband and wife) and then using couple scores to predict marital satisfaction. For couples' analysis, the dependent variable was the couple scores of the Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale (mean = 32, SD = 4.7, ranging from 8 to 40). For individuals' analysis, the dependent variables were the *male* Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale scores (mean = 16.3, SD = 2.7, ranging from 8 to 20) and the *female* Marriage Satisfaction sub-scale scores (mean = 15.3, SD = 3, ranging from 6 to 20).

Demographic variables included in the regression analysis were as follows: age (husband's and wife's), years married, years knowing spouse before marriage, age at marriage, education (husband's and wife's), income (husband's and wife's), employment status (husband's and wife's), birth order (husband's and wife's), race (husband's and wife's), parents' marital status (husband's and wife's), number of children the couple has, family life cycle, and living arrangements (living with extended family, parents, or spouse and children only). Categorical variables were entered into the analyses as dummy variables. Relationship variables entered in the regression analysis were the MMSI scale scores and husband and wife's reason for marriage (coded as "married not for love" = 0; and "married for love" = 1).

Table 1 presents the hierarchical regression model entering all the demographic variables as a block at step 1, followed by the entry of the subjective variables as a second block at step 2 for predicting Marriage Satisfaction scale scores for couples. The multiple correlation of the demographic variables with couple satisfaction was .495 ($R^2 = .245$, $p < .000$), resulting in a significant model at step 1. When the individual scale scores were added to the model at step 2, R increased to .88 (change in $R^2 = .53$, $p < .000$), also resulting in a significant model. In other words, the subjective variables added significantly to the amount of variance accounted for in marital satisfaction beyond that explained by demographic variables. According to this procedure, Marriage Satisfaction scale scores were predicted significantly only by personality, couple closeness, family and friends, sexual relationship, wife's birth order, and living arrangements. Other variables were not significant at the 0.05 level.

Another analysis was conducted to confirm the above results by reversing the order of entering steps. This time, marital relationship ratings were entered as a block at step 1, followed by the demographics as a second block at step 2 to see if the demographics would add the predictive capacity to the scales significantly. The multiple correlations of marital relationship scores with the marriage satisfaction sub-scale scores was .85 ($R^2 = .73$, $p < .000$), resulting in a significant model at step 1. When the demographic variables were added to the model at step 2, R increased only to .89. In addition, R^2 increased by only .04 and the change in F was significant ($p = .03$). In other words, the demographics added only 4 per cent to the amount of variance accounted for in marital satisfaction over that explained by relationship variables.

TABLE 1 Significant predictors of *Couple Marital Satisfaction* based on multiple regression**Step 1: Objective Demographics**

$R = .495$; $R^2 = .245$; Adjusted R-square = .15; $F(23, 189) = 2.67$; $p = .000$

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Living with extended family	.19	.007**
Living with parents	.18	.010**
Male income	.22	.010**
Male age	.29	.031*
Family life cycle	-.28	.025*

Step 2: Subjective Marital Relationship Ratings

$R = .88$; $R^2 = .78$; Adjusted R-square = .73; R^2 change = .53;
 F change = 34.8; Significance of F change = .000; $F(35, 177) = 17.46$; $p = .000$

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Female birth order	-.08	.038*
Living with parents	.10	.013*
Personality	.27	.000***
Couple closeness	.27	.001***
Family & friends	.17	.001***
Sexual relationship	.12	.022*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Separate multiple regression analyses conducted on the level of individual spouses also showed similar results. For the individuals' analyses, the dependent variables were the male Marriage Satisfaction Scale scores for husbands and the female Marriage Satisfaction Scale scores for wives. The independent variables entered in the regression model for gender analyses were the same as in couple analyses. The multiple correlation of the demographic variables with husbands' satisfaction was .54 ($R^2 = .29$, $p < .000$), resulting in a significant model at step 1. When the subjective variables were added to the model at step 2, R increased to .84 ($R^2 = .71$, change in $R^2 = .43$, $p < .000$), also resulting in a significant model. For wives, the multiple correlation of the demographic variables with wives' satisfaction was .38 ($R^2 = .14$, $p = .12$), resulting in a non-significant model at step 1. When the individual scale scores were added to the model at step 2, R increased to .83 ($R^2 = .69$, change in $R^2 = .55$, $p < .000$), resulting in a significant model. The individual analyses showed that there are gender differences in how the couple views the importance of demographic variables in their marriage. Unlike the results of the couple and male

TABLE 2 Significant predictors of *Female Marital Satisfaction* based on multiple regression*Step 1: Objective Demographics*

R = .38; R² = .14; Adjusted R-square = .04; F (23, 193) = 1.38; p = .12

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Living with parents	.18	.010**

Step 2: Subjective Marital Relationship Ratings

R = .83; R² = .69; Adjusted R-square = .63; R² change = .55; F change = 26.7; p = .000

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Female birth order	-.13	.004**
Employment status	.13	.04*
Personality	.29	.000***
Family & friends	.21	.000***
Couple closeness	.23	.007**

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

analyses, the demographic variables were not statistically significant with wives' satisfaction. According to this procedure, male Marriage Satisfaction scale scores were predicted significantly by personality, sexual relationship, family and friends, couple closeness, male age, and whether the couple lives with parents. Female Marriage Satisfaction scale scores were predicted significantly by personality, families and friends, couple closeness, female birth order, and employment status. Other scales were not entered to the model by the criteria of probability-of-F-to-enter $\leq .05$. Table 2 summarises the significantly predictive scales for males, females, and couples. In conclusion, the MMSI scales assessing couple relationship were stronger predictors of marital satisfaction than were the demographic variables. Therefore, the hypothesis of this study is accepted.

Discussion

The hierarchical multiple regression procedure confirmed the hypothesis that subjective marital relationship evaluations are more important predictors of marital satisfaction than are the demographic variables among Taiwanese couples. The subjective variables assessing couple relationship accounted for 74 per cent of the variance of marital satisfaction. When demographic variables were added to the model, there was little increase (4 per cent) in the amount of variance accounted for. The results of the relative importance of subjective perception of marital

relationship and interaction versus the demographic variables are also consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Duke, Johnson, & Cannon, 1984; Fowers, & Olson, 1989; Ying, 1991; Bradbury, 1995). This result is contrary to the traditional beliefs of some people in Taiwan that a person's background (e.g., income, education, and occupation) has more significance to a person's marital satisfaction than the marital relationship. The subjective variables added double the amount of variance accounted for in marital satisfaction (R^2 change = 53 per cent versus 24.5 per cent) beyond that explained by demographic variables. Therefore, the present study found that the quality of marital interactions and relationships were more important to marital satisfaction than demographics. This may be an indication of Taiwanese marriages transiting from the institutional marriage toward the conjugal marriage, which emphasises affection and egalitarian relationship rather than traditional Chinese roles and functions (Lewinsohn, & Werner, 1997; author citation, in press).

TABLE 3 Significant predictors of *Husband Marital Satisfaction* based on multiple regression

Step 1: Objective Demographics

$R = .54$; $R^2 = .29$; Adjusted R -square = .20; $F(23, 191) = 3.34$; $p = .000$

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Living with extended family	.22	.001***
Male age	.41	.002**
Female age of marriage	-.26	.005**
Male income	.22	.007**
Male race	.16	.027*
Family life cycle	-.26	.032*

Step 2: Subjective Marital Relationship Ratings

$R = .84$; $R^2 = .71$; Adjusted R -square = .66; R^2 change = .42; F change = 22.2; $p = .000$

Variables	Stand. Beta	P value
Male age	.20	.022*
Living with parents	.10	.030*
Personality	.27	.000***
Sexual relationship	.27	.001***
Family & friends	.19	.004**
Couple closeness	.18	.022*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Nevertheless, the contributions of background variables to marital satisfaction were small but statistically significant. This indicates that traditional demographics, such as age, living arrangement, birth order, and employment status were associated with marital satisfaction. This result is consistent with Fowers and Olson's finding (1989). The demographic variables accounted for nearly 25 per cent of the variance in couples' marital satisfaction (the adjusted R^2 was .15), accounting for 14 per cent of the wives' and 29 per cent of the husbands' marital satisfaction, respectively. It appears that the husband values the importance of demographics in the marital relationship more than the wife does.

In terms of significant predictors, couples' marital satisfaction was predicted significantly by personality, couple closeness, family and friends, sexual relationship, wife's birth order, and living arrangements (Table 1). In other words, if the couple were satisfied with the spouse's personality, feel close to one another, were satisfied with their sexual relationship and their relationship with family and friends, then they were satisfied with their marriage. In addition, if the wife's birth order ranked elder and if the couple lives with their parents, they would tend to be satisfied with the marriage. In Chinese culture, the oldest daughter is assumed to be the primary caretaker of a household in addition to her mother (Ho, 1987). Therefore, the elder daughter might have a greater marriage orientation than other siblings, which results in higher marital satisfaction. Individual analyses for the husband and wife show similar results (Tables 2 and 3). For husbands, the husband's age was also predictive of marital satisfaction, showing that the husband becomes more satisfied with his marriage as he gets older. For wives, employment status was associated with marital satisfaction, with employed wives being more satisfied with the marriage than those who were not working outside the home. This result confirms Ray's findings (1988) that marital satisfaction was related to career satisfaction.

Implications for Practice

Marital practice has always been and continues to be an important and integral part of social work intervention with families (Kheshgi-Genovese, & Constable, 1995). The field of couple-focused practice has grown in both the number of its followers and its level of theoretical and practice sophistication in the U.S. Strategies for couple intervention may be classified as *relationship enrichment* (primary prevention), which focuses on further strengthening the capabilities of an already functional couple system, or *therapeutic interventions* (tertiary prevention), which focus on remedying unhealthy patterns of interaction in a dysfunctional couple system (Bowen, & Kilpatrick, 1995). Most social work practitioners encounter the critical marital problems in the context of offering therapeutic services for individuals or couples suffering from marital discord

and/or dissolution. However, there has been a tremendous growth in the U.S. in the number of relationship education and enrichment programmes that emphasise the prevention, rather than the treatment, of relationship problems (Denton, 1986). New marital practice specialties include premarital counselling, relationship education and enrichment programmes, sex therapy, and divorce therapy (Bowen, & Kilpatrick, 1995). Despite these new developments in the U.S., the social work practice with couples in Taiwan is still in its early developmental stage. The idea of premarital counselling, relationship enrichment programmes, or marital therapy is very new to most couples in Taiwan. Couples with marital difficulties tend to ask their relatives or friends for help instead of seeking professional help. Some of this reluctance to seek professional help might be that most Asians do not consider psychiatric dynamics and psychological theories to account for behavioural difficulties. Instead, social, moral, and organic explanations are used (Ho, 1987). Moreover, the fear of losing face and the strong belief in the dictum that personal/interpersonal problems or issues should be kept within the family and solved there, might keep couples from expressing marital difficulties to outsiders such as social work professionals.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study have important implications for social work practice with couples. The findings of the present study can better help Taiwanese couples gain understanding of what matters for marital satisfaction and how to make their relationships more fulfilling. The present study found that the way couples perceive the quality of their marriages is affected by demographic characteristics (e.g., male income and age) and the closeness of other social bonds (e.g., living with parents). But the strongest factor in influencing and determining marital satisfaction is the relationship between the spouses. A person's status characteristics may matter to marital satisfaction to some degree, especially for males. However, couples also need to know that marital relationship is particularly central to marital satisfaction and that relationships need to be nurtured. Marital interactions both reflect and shape the day-to-day functioning of a couple and are important factors for increasing marital satisfaction (Feeney, Noller, & Ward, 1997).

For intervention programmes, these findings on predictors of marital satisfaction can better structure education and enrichment programmes to provide couples with healthy patterns of interaction for understanding relational dynamics and the interpersonal skills needed to make their relationships more satisfying and fulfilling. Such programmes can incorporate the findings on predictors of marital satisfaction to focus on such issues as the following: personality, couple closeness, family and friends, or sexual relationship.

When working with couples, it is very important for social workers not to take sides. The findings of this study by no means imply that demographic and relationship factors are in conflict. Therefore, it is not suggested for social

workers to engage couples in further debate on the Western or Eastern family lifestyles or to influence the couple to adapt to a Western style of behaviour. Instead, it might be very helpful for social workers to examine whether discrepancies in family values and in defining a satisfying marriage are present between husband and wife, and whether the discrepancies have negative effects on the functioning of a marriage.

In conclusion, Asian marriages and families are undergoing rapid social change and cultural shifts. The Asian family is shaped not only by past traditions and current life experiences, but also by the ongoing political and economic events in the Asian countries and the Western societies. Within the context of social and cultural transition, this study demonstrates that subjective marital relationship factors are far more powerful predictors of marital satisfaction than are the demographic characteristics among Taiwanese couples. Although these findings of the present study may be least applicable to countries which still adhere to strong traditional values, the discussed results should be applicable and useful to most families in Asian countries in transition from traditional to modern.

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