**What Are the *Shengnv* Looking for in Online Heterosexual Dating and Courtship? A Content Analysis of Shanghainese Women’s Personal Profiles on Jiayuan.com**

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**Introduction**

Online dating is the romance-seeking process “in which individuals create profiles and initiate contact with others through an online service.”[[1]](#footnote-1) First appearing in the mid-1990s, online dating sites enable users to create personal profiles and find matches according to various criteria[[2]](#footnote-2) with the help of the computer-mediated communication (CMC). Some sites are categorized as the match-making type that help users search for the person with whom they may tie the knot[[3]](#footnote-3) using complicated algorithms for pairing.[[4]](#footnote-4) Some are dating sites where the relationship may not end up in marriage.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The personal profile includes basic demographic information, such as age, gender, physical attributes, hobbies and interests, as well as traits one seeks in a prospective dating partner.[[6]](#footnote-6) Users can decide whether or not to upload photos as part of the profile.

Longer bachelorhood, time constraints due to busy schedules and more geographical mobility contribute to the popularity of finding an online date. With the stigma related to online dating gradually dissipating,[[7]](#footnote-7) online dating has become the second most widely used way for seeking a partner, only after connecting through friends.[[8]](#footnote-8)

China’s unmarried population between 18 and 55 accounted for 14.5 percent of the total in 2011, among whom 85 million were women.[[9]](#footnote-9) With the issue of the new Marriage Law,[[10]](#footnote-10) arranged marriage was banned in 1950,[[11]](#footnote-11) which empowered Chinese women to freely choose their partners. After more than a decade of development since the first online dating site came into being in 1998 in China,[[12]](#footnote-12) 23.8 percent of survey respondents said online dating was a reliable way to get to know a potential date.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The present study focuses on how in Shanghai, China’s most populous city, a “special” social group – *shengnv* – presented themselves on a dating site, Jiayuan.com, in pursuit of a heterosexual relationship. It also explores the social implications of the self-presentation and mate-selection criteria in personal profiles as to how it challenges the stereotypical gender-roles of Chinese women.

***Shengnv* and Marriage Traditions in China**

In the West, well-educated and professionally successful women are considered to be independent and liberated.[[14]](#footnote-14) Their Chinese peers, however, are less fortunate and even stigmatized as leftovers. The word, *shengnv*, sometimes *shengnu*, or “leftover women,” refers to well-educated, economically successful urban single women in their late 20s and older.[[15]](#footnote-15) *Shengnv* became an official word listed by the Ministry of Education of China in 2007.[[16]](#footnote-16) In 2010, All-China Women’s Federation, with other organizations, conducted and released a survey on Chinese people’s attitude toward love and marriage. The results showed that more than 90 percent of the males thought women should get married before 27.[[17]](#footnote-17) Similar results were found in another survey conducted by Baihe.com,[[18]](#footnote-18) a dating Web site. Some 62.2 percent of male respondents and 64.8 percent females said the ideal age for women to get married was between 25 and 27.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another 28.4 percent of men said 20 to 24 was the ideal marriage age for women, while 22.7 percent of women said the age should be between 28 and 30.[[20]](#footnote-20) Women older than 25 were subdivided into four categories: 25 and above, must fight for a partner; 28 and above, must triumph; 31 to 35, advanced leftovers; and older than 35, ultimate leftovers.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Even though China is known for its skewed male and female ratio estimated to produce a surplus of 24 million men by 2020,[[22]](#footnote-22) except for some less educated males in rural China, it is still *shengnv* who are undergoing more challenges and pressures on the way to the altar. The reasons are complicated. China is a marriage-oriented society. Chinese marriage patterns are characterized by universality of marriage, early marriage, female hypergamy, marriage squeeze and marriage as the precursor to family formation.[[23]](#footnote-23)

As is the case with the older generation of American women, for whom marriage was a core life experience,[[24]](#footnote-24) 98 percent of Chinese women are married in the end.[[25]](#footnote-25) Marriage is considered the final destination for women since taking care of family and children are culturally considered women’s duties. Women were found to get more satisfaction than men from marriage.[[26]](#footnote-26) Therefore, if a woman remains single after 25, especially after 30, she is considered incomplete and abnormal.[[27]](#footnote-27)

China has the tradition of hypergamy, or “marry up”, for a woman to marry a man who is more economically well-off and better educated.[[28]](#footnote-28) Women gain financial security, status, and resources through marrying older men.[[29]](#footnote-29) Chinese men, on the other hand, tend to “marry down”.[[30]](#footnote-30) They tend to look for younger women as a future partner since males emphasize physical attractiveness and youth.[[31]](#footnote-31) Studies also show richer men get married later in life than do less well-to-do men.[[32]](#footnote-32) About 12 million unmarried men will compete with younger men for younger women.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the 2010 survey conducted by All-China Women’s Federation, 38.3 percent of the male participants hoped that the ideal occupation of their significant other could be teachers, followed by civil servants, doctors/nurses, and accountants.[[34]](#footnote-34) Such jobs usually bring women decent salaries, social status and relatively easy working conditions. More than half of the male participants said they did not care about their significant other’s job, which indicated that males hoped that women could spend more time taking care of the family.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Those well-educated and financially independent women thus are faced with the embarrassment of having few men who want to marry a more capable wife who is no longer “young,” at least in some Chinese sense. The survey conducted by Jiayuan.com, an online dating site, confirmed this paradox – the more education and salaries women have, the more difficult it is for them to find a husband.[[36]](#footnote-36) These well-educated urban professional women must downplay their high achievements since they do not want to pressure prospective dates.[[37]](#footnote-37)

As a result of their cosmopolitan lifestyle, some Chinese women living in big cities, such as Shanghai, date foreign men.[[38]](#footnote-38) These women’s international love stories become an important construct of their cosmopolitan identity.[[39]](#footnote-39) These Shanghainese women choose to marry *laowai*, or foreigners, also because Chinese have the stereotype that *laowai* are superior to Chinese and relatives and friends are less likely to gossip about the past of the foreign partner.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Theoretical Framework**

***Self-presentation***

Self-presentation is “an individual accentuates certain matters and conceals others.”[[41]](#footnote-41) It “refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others have of them.”[[42]](#footnote-42) In this sense, the personal profile on online dating sites is a self-presentation of the dater who posts it. Since prospective dates will use the self-presentation to decide whether or not to initiate a relationship,[[43]](#footnote-43) online personal profiles set the tone for future relationship development.

Earlier studies on personal advertisements in newspapers found gender stereotypes influenced how both women and men described themselves.[[44]](#footnote-44) Females are more likely to show instrumental or male-valued traits.[[45]](#footnote-45) They are more likely to display physical attractiveness such as thinness, and to seek professional status[[46]](#footnote-46) or financially secure older men.[[47]](#footnote-47)

These self-presentation traits women showed in personal advertisements are in accordance with social exchange theory, which posits that each party in a relationship tries to maximize its reward at minimal cost.[[48]](#footnote-48) Social exchange theory, originated from behavioral psychology,[[49]](#footnote-49) has been attested for examining marital and familial relationships.[[50]](#footnote-50) Walther found reduced cues and asynchronicity, two features of CMC, facilitated selective self-presentation.[[51]](#footnote-51) These, plus editability, enable online daters to select and edit what to present to their potential partners[[52]](#footnote-52) and manage their impression and the relationship.[[53]](#footnote-53)

***Mate-selection Factors***

Various factors affect how people choose prospective partners. Heterosexual women and men have different preferences concerning traits most desirable in prospective partners. Heterosexual women rated social status the most valued while heterosexual men most frequently cited attractiveness.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In studying Malaysian graduate students, Alavi, Alahdad and Shafeqfound found they not only cared about exterior traits, but also interior ones such as religion.[[55]](#footnote-55) Age is another factor in mate-selection. Hill found that among college students, males preferred prospective partner to be younger while females preferred older partners.[[56]](#footnote-56) Out of 18 factors, six were rated most important by both male and female participants: dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, pleasing disposition, mutual attraction, good health, and desire for home life and children.[[57]](#footnote-57) Women also cited ambition and industriousness; education and general intelligence; and good financial prospects, while men said women should take care of the family and be physically attractive.[[58]](#footnote-58) A cross-cultural study showed a similar trend that women tended to value financial capacity, ambition, industriousness and cues to resource acquisition in prospective partners more than did men.[[59]](#footnote-59) Physically attractive women had elevated standards for potential male partner’s characteristics, including good genetic indicators, good investment indicators, good parenting indicators, and good partner indicators.[[60]](#footnote-60) Schwarz and Hassebrauck said in their study of heterosexuals aged 18 to 64 that slightly older women were tolerable to men and much younger women were more acceptable.[[61]](#footnote-61) The trends for women are different: as women mature they tend to accept men younger than their own age.[[62]](#footnote-62) Slightly more than one-third of women said they could imagine marrying a man earning much less money than they did.[[63]](#footnote-63) In terms of education, many women said they could not imagine marrying a less-educated partner, and one not regularly employed.[[64]](#footnote-64) Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer and Kenrick agreed that men prefer physically more attractive mates, while women prefer mates who are more well-educated, self-confident, intelligent, dominant, well-off and respected.[[65]](#footnote-65) Henry, Helm and Cruz’s comparison of 18 desirable traits among college students in mate selection with the studies from 1939 to 2011 also agreed that women preferred of men who were ambitious, industrious and financially well off.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Chinese people’s mate selection criteria have been changing and inconsistent as a result of the great social changes. Traditional values, socialist reconstruction, utilitarianism and consumerism have exerted their influence to different generations of Chinese since the founding of the New China in 1949.[[67]](#footnote-67) Li’s study of 300 personal advertisements found Chinese men attached more importance to income and household registration,[[68]](#footnote-68) while Chinese women valued personality, height and educational level.[[69]](#footnote-69) Urban residents cared more about educational levels while rural Chinese favored marital status and income.[[70]](#footnote-70) More-educated Chinese emphasized knowledge, moral conduct, shared values and emotions that may help the couple to communicate better spiritually.[[71]](#footnote-71) Based on evolutionary psychological analyses, Tian found “good genes,” “good provider” and “good-father” to be factors Chinese female college students and professional women preferred in mate selection.[[72]](#footnote-72) These criteria help ensure male candidate can provide the physical good genes, good socio-economic status, and good personality traits the future generation needs.[[73]](#footnote-73) It is also confirmed that urban-rural differences, educational levels and household incomes, along with some other factors, affected Chinese female college students’ preference in mate selection.[[74]](#footnote-74) But, on the whole, Tian’s study concluded that modern Chinese female college students valued personal traits more than material criteria.[[75]](#footnote-75)

All of these findings show that to the more educated urban Chinese residents, are unconcerned whether or not their mate is well-educated. Rather, they care more about good spiritual communication with their partner. Rural residents, however, were more practical.

Shanghainese *shengnv* are on the whole economically successful and no longer young. Accordingly, what personal traits do they highlight in the exchange? Since their need for financial security is comparatively lower, what do they look for in the relationship?

Based on the literature, the following research questions (RQ) were posited:

RQ1: How do heterosexual never-married *shengnv* present themselves in online dating profiles?

RQ2: What kind of prospective partners do heterosexual never-married *shengnv* look for?

**Method**

***Dating Site Selection***

Baihe, Jianyuan, and Zhenai are the top three dating sites with high brand recognition rate and large number of users.[[76]](#footnote-76) Jiayuan.com, founded in 2003 and listed on the NASDAQ in May, 2011, was chosen for this study because it has more than 100 million registered users – more than that of other competitors.[[77]](#footnote-77) Jiayuan.com offers open access to most information of its users, making data collection and further analysis possible.

The researcher registered to have more access to other users’ personal profiles.[[78]](#footnote-78) But in the personal statement part, it was clearly stated that the registration was for academic study, not partner or relation-seeking. Thus the status was set as “I have found my partner.”

***Sample Selection***

Shanghai is the largest city in China with a total population of 23 million.[[79]](#footnote-79) Shanghai does not see a skewed female vs. male ratio though it is prevalent nationally in China. It was about 100:106 among Shanghai residents.[[80]](#footnote-80) In the study of two-sex marriage pattern in Shanghai, it was found that people in this city preferred to marry at an older age.[[81]](#footnote-81) Since their male counterparts hold a similar view, the likelihood for Shanghai females to find a good match remains moderate.[[82]](#footnote-82) However, since 1991, more males than females got married in Shanghai, which resulted in women from other areas in China being “imported” to Shanghai and threatening native Shanghai women’s marriage market.[[83]](#footnote-83) Females in Shanghai felt more satisfied with the status of being married than males.[[84]](#footnote-84) Males of 21 to 25 said they greatly preferred not to marry older female partners, although mature males did not find this to be of concern.[[85]](#footnote-85)

*Shengnv* often designates urban single women 27 and above. Those women “in the age range of 28-33 had more relevant and interesting relationship experience to share.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

In this study, “female,” “28-33,” “Shanghai,”[[87]](#footnote-87) “never-married,” “with photos” and “undergraduate and above,” were set as filters for “gender,” “age,” “location,” “marital status,” “with or without photos” and “educational level” to generate the samples in April, 2014. According to Jiayuan.com, users posting photos received 11 times more responses than those without photos. Since ethnicity and religion were not Chinese people’s top priority in mate selection,[[88]](#footnote-88) they were not included in this study. The fact that the vast majority of Chinese are Han and atheists (or agnostics or pantheists) is accountable for this.[[89]](#footnote-89) On each result page, there were 5x5 candidates. The personal profile of each candidate was searched and content analyzed until a desirable number was reached (*N* = 200). Each user’s personal profile was used as the unit of analysis.

***Coding Categories***

At Jiayuan.com, users register by providing information about their gender, date of birth, marital status, height, educational level, monthly income, email account or phone number for contact and an online nickname. Users can fill in more information about children, blood type, ethnicity, profession, housing, car and self tags. Love Monologue (*wode neixin dubai*) is a self-disclosure section where registered users can write 5 to 500 Chinese characters to show their understanding of love and their expectation of marriage. Each user can upload one face close-up and other photos at My Pics (*wode zhaopian)*. Users can substantiate their profiles with physical features, work and study, daily life, and hobbies at Detailed Information (*xiangxi ziliao*). Personality Show (*gexing zhanshi*) describes the user’s personal traits, opinions on love, dating, expectation of marriage, life after the wedding and features of ideal partners. My Criteria (*wode zeou yaoqiu*) are specific bars a prospective partner might meet. At Jiayuan Self-Tag (*wode jiayuan biaoqian*), users can self-choose some tags that best describe their personality. Physical Features (*waimao tixing*) about height, weight and face shape also are open for fill-in.

In the present study, each user’s Jiayuan ID and her Jiayuan nickname were recorded for future retrieval. Demographic information of all participants was collected, including age, height, educational level, income, car ownership, house ownership, professions, types of employers and language proficiency (e.g. Mandarin, English and Spanish).

The following were coded to answer the first research question: self-evaluation (e.g. cute and petite, mature and regal), and self-tags (e.g. beautiful, career-oriented, cute, rational, straightforward).

The Ideal Partner (*lixiang duixiang*) part was coded for answering the second research question. It included personalities of him (e.g. gentleman-like, humorous, romantic or stylish), most valued trait (e.g. responsible, humble, accommodating, honest), and what is most important (e.g. physical features, personality, financial capacity, education). The ideal age and height ranges, geographic location (e.g. in Shanghai, in Shanghai’s neighboring areas, abroad), education (e.g. 3-year college, undergraduate, graduate), and marital status (e.g. single, divorced) of the prospective partner in My Criteria were coded as well.

Love Monologue was analyzed to address both research questions. The coding procedures for Love Monologue were adapted from those used by Harrison and Saeed,[[90]](#footnote-90) Deaux and Hanna,[[91]](#footnote-91) Keostner and Wheeler,[[92]](#footnote-92) and Gonzales and Meyers.[[93]](#footnote-93) Three categories: attractiveness, financial security and sincerity, were used to code this subjective description in an offer/seek dichotomous manner. The details of these qualities were:

*Attractiveness*: petite, cute, slender, attractive, shapely, classy, sophisticated

*Financial security*: accomplished, well-established, professional, generous, prosperous, successful

*Sincerity*: committed, faithful, dependable, good morals, honest, trust-worthy, loyal

The researcher did most of the coding since it was objective. A graduate student who is a Chinese native was trained and then coded the Love Monologue section as a second coder. An acceptable intercoder reliability[[94]](#footnote-94) was reached for seeking attractiveness (Cronbach’s α = .93), offering attractiveness (Cronbach’s α = .89), seeking financial security (Cronbach’s α = .86), offering financial security (Cronbach’s α = .95), seeking sincerity (Cronbach’s α = .89) and offering sincerity (Cronbach’s α = .86). All coding results were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

**Findings**

***Demographic Information***

Since the age of the subjects were pre-set, there was no big age difference (*M* = 30.14, *SD* = 1.61) among all informants. Their average height was 163.7 cm[[95]](#footnote-95) though individual difference ranged from about 152 cm[[96]](#footnote-96) to 178 cm.[[97]](#footnote-97) Most (94 %) of the subjects posted fewer than six photos. The personal information filled by *shengnv* themselves affirmed the labels attached to them – more educated and more well-to-do. About two thirds had bachelor’s or dual degrees. The other one-third held graduate degrees (Table 1). About 81 percent of them had a monthly income of US$800 to US$3,200[[98]](#footnote-98) (see Table 2).The high income made them out-compete women in other areas considering the annual per capita disposable income[[99]](#footnote-99) of urban households in Shanghai was US$7,174[[100]](#footnote-100) in 2013, the highest among all provinces. The high income may be the result of being employed by companies and institutions with good welfare. Most of the informants worked for foreign enterprises (29%), private-owned enterprises (19.5%), public institutions (13%) and *Fortune* 500-enlisted companies (10%). The rest worked for listed companies (7%), state-owned enterprises (5.5%), and the government (2%). There were also a few running their own companies (5.5%) or unknown (8.5%). The subjects’ economic competence was also reflected by their car and property ownership and their professional distribution. Some 16.5 percent of the informants had a car and 15.5 percent had bought an apartment of their own. Those who have not bought a car accounted for 52.5 percent with the rest being unknown. As for housing, on a descending scale, these ladies chose “live with parents” (42.5 %), “have not purchased yet” (10.0 %), “rent on my own” (5.5 %), “will buy as needed” (3.5 %), “live in employer-offered housing” (2.5 %), “rent with others” (2 %) or “unknown” (17.5 %). As professional women, 52 percent of the subjects worked in finance/security/insurance, accounting/auditing, IT/computer, human resources, education/training and academic/research.

Table 1

Educational Level

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Degrees | Frequency | Percent |
| Bachelor’s | 129 | 64.5 |
| Master’s | 58 | 29.0 |
| Ph.D. | 11 | 5.5 |
| Dual Bachelor’s | 2 | 1.0 |

Since *shengnv* is a well-educated group, all subjects in this study showed good language competence as a result of Chinese university’s curriculum that prescribes a foreign language, usually English, as compulsory. About three fifths of the informants could speak English. Another 19 percent were good at English and another foreign language, such as Japanese or German. About 3 percent showed proficiency in a non-English foreign language. The rest were dismissive to this section and left it uncompleted.

Table 2

Monthly Income

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Monthly Income (US$) | Monthly Income (RMB￥) | Counts | Percent |
| <320 | <2,000 | 1 | 0.5 |
| 320-800 | 2,000-5,000 | 19 | 9.5 |
| 800-1,600 | 5,000-10,000 | 94 | 47 |
| 1,600-3,200 | 10,000-20,000 | 68 | 34 |
| >3,200 | >20,000 | 16 | 8 |
| Unknown |  | 2 | 1 |

***RQ1: How do heterosexual never-married shengnv self-present themselves in online dating profiles?***

In the self-tag section, registered Jiayuan users can choose at least one tag that best represents their personalities. Among users who completed this self-tag question (*n* = 182), the most frequently chosen tags were *shanliang*, or kind-hearted; *xiaoshun*, showing great filial piety; and *zhishuang*, or straight-forward (Table 3). Eighteen out of the 200 informants’ response to this question was unknown.

Table 3

Self-tags Used by Jiayuan Users

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Self-tag (in pinyin) | Self-tag (in English) | Number | Percent |
| *shan liang* | kind-hearted | 107 | 14.6 |
| *xiao shun nv* | a woman showing great filial piety | 96 | 13.1 |
| *zhi shuang* | straight-forward, frank | 76 | 10.4 |
| *qi zhi nv* | a woman with an aura of elegance | 62 | 8.5 |
| *xiu wai hui zhong* | elegant and intelligent | 61 | 8.4 |
| *ju jia nv* | a family-oriented woman | 44 | 6.0 |
| *gan xing nv* | a sensitive woman | 39 | 5.3 |
| *li xing nv* | a rational woman | 39 | 5.3 |
| *ai yun dong* | a fitness freak | 36 | 4.9 |
| *ai xiao dong wu* | a woman who loves small animals | 35 | 4.8 |
| *xiao zi nv* | a woman who pursues Western lifestyle, arts, taste and thinking | 31 | 4.2 |
| *xiao ke ai* | cute | 29 | 4.0 |
| *mei shi jia* | a gourmet | 22 | 3.0 |
| *zhai nv* | a woman who always stays at home and seldom goes out | 22 | 3.0 |
| *shi ye nv* | a career-oriented woman | 17 | 2.3 |
| *mei nv* | an attractive woman like a siren | 12 | 1.6 |
| *ye man nv you* | a sassy girlfriend | 3 | 0.4 |
| *zi you zhi ye[[101]](#footnote-101)* | freelance | 1 | 0.1 |

In another self-evaluation, in which users were asked to choose one four-character word to best describe their quality, 52 (26%) informants left it blank. Among the 148 who answered, about half chose to describe themselves as *mei qing mu xiu*, or having delicate facial features (22%); and *xiu wai hui zhong*, or with an elegant look and intelligent mind (16.5%). About 10 percent of the informants did not think they were middle-aged but described themselves as young and energetic, or *qing chun huo li*, as the Chinese would say. The others featured quietness and gracefulness, shortness and sweetness, mature attractiveness, bright eyes and regality and magnificence (Table 4).

Table 4

Self-evaluation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Self-evaluation | In English | Number | Percent |
| *mei qing mu xiu* | delicate | 44 | 22.0 |
| *xiu wai hui zhong* | elegant and intelligent | 33 | 16.5 |
| *qing chun huo bo* | young and robust | 18 | 9.0 |
| *dan ya ru ju* | quiet but graceful like chrysanthemum | 17 | 8.5 |
| *jiao xiao yi ren* | petite and cute | 16 | 8.0 |
| *cheng shu mei li* | maturely attractive | 11 | 5.5 |
| *ming mou shan lai* | with bright eyes | 8 | 4.0 |
| *yong rong hua gui* | regal and magnificent | 1 | 0.5 |
| Unknown |  | 52 | 26.0 |

***RQ2: What kind of prospective partners do heterosexual never-married shengnv look for?***

As for their prospective partner’s personality, informants valued “responsible” (32.5%) the most, according to 89 percent who answered. It was followed by “honest” (18.7%), “accommodating” (17%) and “considerate” (13.2%). Other less-cared personalities include “self-constraint” (5.3%), “patient” (4.3%), “full of hope” (3.9%), “modest” (1.8%), “satisfied” (1.2%), “friendly” (1.2%), “empathetic” (0.4%), “persevering” (0.2%) and “sympathetic”(0.2%).

In another similar question, the 175 informants who answered hoped their significant others could have a calm character and take good care of the family (*wen zhong gu jia*) (27.7%), optimistic and positive (*le guan ji ji*) (26.1%), humorous (*feng qu you mo*) (17.5%), wise and brilliant (*jing ming rui zhi*) (11.6%), and gentleman-like (*wen wen er ya*) (10.6%). But the informants did not seem to be in favor of qualities such as extroverted (1.8%), childlike (1.8%), careful and cautious (1.0%), romantic (1.0%), impulsive (0.4%) and stylish (0.4%).

The average minimal (*M* = 29.6, *SD* = 2.05) and maximum (*M* = 37.8, *SD* = 3.08) age of ideal prospective partners spanned eight years. The average minimal (*M* = 172.4[[102]](#footnote-102), *SD* = 3.61) and maximum (*M* = 186.5[[103]](#footnote-103), *SD* = 5.26) height span was 14 cm.

The informants, on the whole, cared about earlier romance of their prospective partner. They preferred to date men who remained single (66%). Only 28.5 percent did not care whether their prospective partner had or not tied the knot before.

Informants sought a similar educational background in their prospective partners. Three-quarters of the informants looked for candidates with at least a college education. About 10.5 percent was OK with a three-year college education though another 3 percent of women emphasized that their prospective partner, ideally, should have at least a master’s degree. To 11 percent of these women, the educational level of their future significant other seemed unimportant.

Most informants (87.5%) specified that the man should be working and living in Shanghai, followed by Shanghai and abroad (4%). Others chose Shanghai and its neighboring big cities or other cities in China.

Among the four elements most valued, personality (83%) was the most outstanding for the informants. They cared much less about their significant other’s financial ability (2.5%), education (2%) and physical features (1%). Another 11.5 percent did not respond.

The analysis of Love Monologue confirmed that financial security did not seem to be what *shengnv* desired. They also offered little financial security. However, physical and personality attractiveness and sincerity were more desirable (Table 5).

Table 5

What *Shengnv* Seek and Offer in Love Monologue

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Yes | No |
| Seek attractiveness | 51.5% | 48.5% |
| Offer attractiveness | 52.5% | 47.5% |
| Seek financial security | 14.5% | 85.5% |
| Offer financial security | 15% | 85% |
| Seek sincerity | 57% | 43% |
| Offer sincerity | 50.5% | 49.5% |

**Discussion**

*Shengnv* in the present study tended to emphasize their personality and intelligence rather than physical attractiveness when self-presenting at dating websites. Many of them chose “*qi zhi nv*”, “*xiu wai hui zhong*”, and “*mei qing mu xiu*” as their self-presentation. All of such tags emanate their elegance, brilliance and charm as a result of their education and knowledge. They preferred to choose chrysanthemum as their avatar, blooming in autumn while most other flowers come out in spring. It symbolizes the character of being unwilling to compete with others and persevering in Chinese culture. Therefore, chrysanthemum is different from the flamboyant peony, figuratively, “*yong rong hua gui*”, which was chosen by a fraction of informants.

As a group that has been exposed to higher education and working in foreign enterprises and *Fortune* 500-enlisted companies, *shengnv* presented a combination of traditional virtues of Chinese women and Western influence. Confucian virtues emphasized women’s compliance, modesty, and caring for the parents.[[104]](#footnote-104) Many informants in this study selected “kind-heartedness” and “filial piety” as their self-tags. Vicky, a participant, wrote in About Me, “Elegant enough to show around to guests and diligent enough to make tasty cuisines; demure as a maiden and agile as a rabbit; gentle and kind; caring and elegant.” Rachel said, “To better take care of my parents, men living outside of Shanghai will not be considered.” By the same token, informants sought filial piety in their prospective partners. Soul Coffee wrote, “I hope he can […] show filial piety to his parents. Those who are immature and disrespectful to parents, please stay away from me.” A Ning mentioned, “I hope he is filial to his parents, virtuous and aspiring.” Some *shengnv* in this study also looked forward to Western lifestyle and taste. They referred to themselves as “*xiao zi nv*”, translated from “petit bourgeoisie”, who are office workers for foreign companies with good English proficiency and education, consuming foreign products and enjoying Western art.[[105]](#footnote-105) So it is not surprising that four percent of the informants wished their prospective partner could be either in Shanghai or abroad. Xiaoxiong got her undergraduate education abroad and self-claimed as a Christian. Some key words she used to describe herself were Hong Kong-style milk tea/church/American TV dramas/European and American pop music. She said, “I don’t care about his location. But it would be better should he live and work in Shanghai/Zhejiang[[106]](#footnote-106)/Hong Kong/abroad.” This again confirmed Farrer’s observation that dating a foreigner was an outcome of their cosmopolitan lifestyle.[[107]](#footnote-107) The divergent preference of Shanghai *shengnv* shows Chinese values for women maintain persistent bearing on them. However, global mobility has also expanded the spectrum for their mate selection.

Their educational background and decent jobs enlarged *shengnv*’s horizons and empowered them financially. Maggie worked as a consultant, making more than 20,000 yuan[[108]](#footnote-108) a month. Her self-disclosure was representative. She said, “I spend most time on my work. (But my time is flexible.) After all, dedicating to my career gives me the sense of achievement. Before I settle down with a family of my own, I would love to devote myself to things with output. After all, having sufficient and disposable money is one of the cornerstones of the beautiful future […] I hope I can have some power of influence in my own field. Of course, I want to be financially free as soon as possible. I will never want to retire. Work is part of life.”

Therefore, *shengnv* pursued personality and sincerity more than financial security. Xiaoyou said, “I am not that much materialistic. Don’t care much about houses or cars. It will be good to make these come true with you. But most importantly, you should be a smart and aspiring man.” Ling, who studied and worked abroad before, emphasized, “I prefer independence in thoughts and finance. So I don’t want my emotional life to be bothered by materialistic standards. I look for a healthy, easy-going, down-to-earth, and accommodating guy who has the same values as me.”

Considering the extensive media coverage and presentation of extra-marital affairs, sense of responsibility and honesty were the most-sought disposition. Some personal profiles also showed the social pressure to *shengnv*. They even used this label for self-reference. Xyxy wrote, “Even though I’m already an aging *shengnv*, nothing can prevent me from showing my love to life. I won’t make do with a man easily […] If you are sincere to me, I will reward with sincerity, treating you and your family well.” Arrogant Dinosaur asked herself, “How come I become leftovers? But I am a leftover woman now.” Jiayuan’s investigation about *shengnv* showed that more than half of the women aged 28-33 acknowledged the identity as a leftover woman.[[109]](#footnote-109) Sixty-six percent of shengnv thought this word was neutral and their high education and income exacerbated the likelihood of becoming leftovers.[[110]](#footnote-110)

The pressing need to make themselves married urged these women to emphasize sincerity. Jingjing appealed, “I’m hoping my Mr. Right can show up as soon as possible so that I can complete this task before the end of this year.” XX emphasized, “The purpose for registering at Jiayuan is to seek my *yinyuan*.[[111]](#footnote-111) Please do not bother me if you are divorced, widowed, younger than 33, older than 40, just for fun, hitting on girls, or not for getting married.” Xiaoxiong said, “Hope GG[[112]](#footnote-112) is as sincere as me, dating for marriage.” Such attitudes to online courtship reflects a popular saying in China – falsely believed to be said by Mao – Dating that did not lead to the altar is hooliganism. But the soliloquies also disclose *shengnv*’s desperation for love when they no longer have impending professional or financial concerns and their serious attitude to dating and marriage. Chinese parents tend to urge their children to work hard during their school years, especially those high-achieving students. Unlike their American counterparts, who start dating as teenagers, people who study hard in China usually devote too much time to their school work. When they are out of college, their parents then press them to be married. When they reach the “leftover” age, the need to be married, from parents and society, becomes more intense.

Living and working in China’s largest city, these Shanghainese women showed unique preference to Shanghai native men. They either used “I’m a Shanghainese” as the opening remark of their profiles or specified that “Please do not bother if you are not a native of Shanghai.” Emily explained that she was hoping her future significant other could speak Shanghai dialect and be immersed into Shanghai culture. Yueming said, “I’m an obedient Shanghai girl […] For the sake of having the same lifestyle, I prefer guys born and brought up in Shanghai. If not, please do not bother me. Thanks.” The survey about love stories in four metropolises showed that 73.2 percent of Shanghainese hoped their significant other could be a native of Shanghai, too.[[113]](#footnote-113) In the present study, the percentage was even higher.

**Conclusion**

This study about the self-presentation and mate-selection criteria of leftover Shanghainese women shows that traditional Chinese culture still influences modern Chinese women. Shanghai, a global city and China’s largest metropolitan area, also affects the mate selection of these women. Good education, decent income and social pressures all encourage Shanghai *shengnv* to pursue sincerity disposition rather than financial security in online courtship.

Future research may explore differences in personal profiles of Chinese women of all ages at online dating sites since they were brought up in different historical eras in which China transformed from a socialist, planned-economy and Confucian society into a consumerism-dominated, economically robust powerhouse. The change of values brought by the social upheaval may affect Chinese women’s self-presentation and mate-selection criteria, and warrants more study. *Shengnv* accounts for only a small percentage of all Chinese women. Media coverage, especially by Western press, has drawn more attention to this social group. However, Chinese women who have migrated to urban areas to make a living should be studied as well. Their rigid and long work schedules, limited social capital in cities and less-competent digital literacy make the courtship of migrant women merit further research.

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