



Does Conjugal Disparity Affect Marital Relations?

A Comparative Study of Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong

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abstract: Using corresponding couple data from Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong, the main goal of this article is (1) to explore the conjugal consistency or disparity in marital values and in perceptions of marital relations among three Chinese societies; (2) to compare the relative importance of conjugal disparity vs personal factors in the explanation of marital relations reported; (3) to delineate the effect of demographic pairing in contrast with the effect of value discrepancy of couples in the perceptions of marital relations. Findings indicate that despite the high consistency percentage of perceptions of marital relations on the aggregate level, there exists a substantial amount of inconsistency among Chinese conjugal pairs. Taiwan couples are relatively more consistent than their counterparts, and Shanghai couples have the lowest estimated consistency value. Marital value is examined by conjugal priority and gender-role values. The cross-society comparison shows that Shanghai couples have more westernized values in both indices, Taiwan couples reveal the most traditional pattern of conjugal priority, while Hong Kong couples have more traditional gender-role values, particularly relating to the mother's role. Taiwan couples also enjoy higher consistency measures. To answer whether conjugal disparity affects perceptions of marital relations – especially whether disparity in the background or in values makes a significant difference, the results generally support the expected negative relation, but vary depending on the context examined. Both personal and pairing factors are important in the account of subjective perceptions of marital relations. With regard to conjugal disparity, it is found that discrepancy in demographic background seems to be more significant than value disparity. In fact, the expected relation between value disparity and unsatisfying marital relations only receives support among Taiwanese wives. The article concludes the importance of the conjugal unit in the study of marital relations. Future studies are suggested to include both objective and subjective indicators of conjugal disparity. Specification of different patterns in each Chinese society is encouraged.

keywords: Chinese families ♦ conjugal consistency ♦ conjugal disparity ♦ dyadic unit marital relations ♦ marital values

The Background

Family relations are a product of family process. Parent–child relations, conjugal relations and intergenerational relations are all composed of two or more family members. Studies targeted on one single individual are thus being questioned in terms of their validity as well as configuration (Card, 1978; Thomson and Walker, 1982; Fisher et al., 1985; Yi, 1991; Teachman et al., 1995). Since conjugal disparity has been documented as a family characteristic (Ochs and Binik, 1999; Pimentel, 2000; Chien and Yi, 2004), despite the empirical difficulty of gathering couple data, the investigation of both spouses' responses has become a recent trend.

It is generally agreed that among various family issues, topics pertaining to the relationship-based phenomenon are especially suitable for the conjugal unit of analyses. Any disagreement revealed between spouses implies an unspoken story and should be regarded as meaningful (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969). Previous studies in the West support this view. Recent empirical evidence in the East also indicates the importance of conjugal disparity. The latest findings from Taiwan point out that although couples tend to have high consensus on objective family characteristics (e.g. age or education), consistency on the attitudinal dimension (e.g. gender-role attitudes) is relatively low (Chien and Yi, 2004). It is interesting to analyse how discrepant conjugal perspectives may affect marital quality.

This article examines conjugal disparity among married couples and its possible effect on the perceptions of marital relations. Samples are from three Chinese societies: Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Most comparative studies have emphasized a certain homogeneity among Chinese societies due to a similar cultural heritage, so similar family values shared by Chinese are thus assumed (Yi, 2001). However, different political systems have prevailed for the last five decades and may result in significant sociocultural responses in the family. It is therefore important to explore patterns of marital relations and marital values among Chinese families in different societies. In addition, to compare the relative importance of personal vs conjugal disparity in the account of marital relations allows us to document the potential contribution of using conjugal data in family studies. Comparisons between different Chinese societies are expected to show specific contextual effects.

Chinese Marital Relations

Perhaps the most noteworthy characteristics of the Chinese family system is the dominance of the parent–child axis over the conjugal axis (Hsu, 1949; Yang, 1997). Recent research in mainland China, Hong Kong and

Taiwan indicates the continuing importance of parent-child relations in the contemporary Chinese family (Yi, 1994, 1998; Xu and Ye, 1999b). Nevertheless, a changing trend divergent from the traditional pattern is also documented. Take Taiwan for example. The well-being of the family is clearly held above that of the individual; but within the overwhelming endorsement of the family priority, the parent-child vs conjugal importance is roughly equivalent (Yi, 1998). This interesting finding implies a western influence in the marital relations of contemporary Chinese families.

Studies of Chinese marital relations are mostly from the counselling perspective. There has been relatively little academic research published on the subject (Yi and Lu, 1996; Shek, 1996a, 1996b; Xu, 1997). Although each Chinese society may have its preferred indicators of marital quality, and measurement variation does exist between different studies, reports on marital relations have actually been quite systematic and have shown strong positive evaluation. Xu reports the subjective marital happiness scores of 800 Shanghai couples with an average husband's score of 5.77 and wife's score of 5.65 (Xu, 1997). A study of 400 married people in Hong Kong shows high marital satisfaction (24 percent very satisfied, 44 percent satisfied, 24 percent neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 7.6 percent either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied) (Xu, 1997). Similar results are found in Taiwan. Using the Taiwan Social Change Survey, Wu and Yi analyse 1667 married subjects and find that as high as 92 percent of married individuals give a positive evaluation of their own marriage (Wu and Yi, 2003).

Regarding factors accounting for good marital quality or marital relations, studies from various Chinese societies reveal substantial commonalities. If we focus on reports after the 1990s, sex-role attitudes, premarital bonds, years of marriage or family life cycle, as well as conjugal homogeneity are all consistently significant in explaining marital satisfaction (Yi, 1991; Xu, 1997; Chou, 2001). It is evident that the findings are similar to the western pattern. Nevertheless, it is also clear that different factors have been considered in studying Chinese couples' marital adjustment. Specifically, traditional family values and conventional marital practice play important roles in the process.

Previous studies show that financial support of elderly parents is found to be negatively associated with marital relations among Shanghai couples (Xu, 1997). In other words, the cultural tradition exercised in the Chinese family system tends to produce a negative effect on the marital quality of the younger generation. Reports from Taiwan provide more sophisticated findings. Besides differences in personal background and conjugal relations, factors other than the couple (such as other relatives' attitudes) are examined (Tsai and Hu, 2001). Relative to marital homogeneity or mating types, traditional family values such as having a stable

family life and the children's educational achievement are found to be more important in explaining marital satisfaction (Yi and Hsung, 1994). Marital quality appears to be a product of factors beyond the couples themselves. A recent survey indicates that social support from relatives as well as community interaction are shown to affect marital satisfaction significantly (Wu and Yi, 2003). External systems, especially kin and community, are important factors in the account of marital quality.

The aforementioned findings actually reinforce the fact that the typical Chinese marriage is *not* confined by personal considerations only. Family values, especially regarding parent-child and kin, are repeatedly shown to be significant in the subjective evaluation of marital relations among Chinese couples. Among a few relevant studies, values pertaining to marital roles are found to be changing in Taiwan (Tsai and Yi, 1997). Similar evaluations of marital priority are shown to increase marital satisfaction (Chou, 2001). However, previous studies have focused on values that individuals hold. No effort has been made to investigate the possible consequence of conjugal disparity. It is therefore important to investigate how family values, particularly value consistency or disparity between spouses, affect conjugal relations.

A Brief Review of Marital Relations

Significant Factors Affecting Marital Relations

Perhaps the most studied subject of marital relations is marital satisfaction or marital quality. One can easily observe that marital satisfaction and marital adjustment are often used interchangeably to reflect marital quality. Marital satisfaction is usually regarded as a subjective evaluation of conjugal relations. Marital adjustment may be viewed as the overall evaluation of marital relations or of marital quality (Glenn, 1990; Yi, 1991). This article aims at couples' relationships as the dependent variable. It is not restricted to one single definition and uses marital relations to represent relevant aspects of the quality of the marital relationship between spouses.

Most studies attempt to find the significant factors that explain variation in marital satisfaction. Since marital satisfaction involves both individual and social psychological responses, micro and macro contexts need to be considered in the research framework. As expected, the majority focuses on micro explanation. Significant factors accounting for marital relations may be categorized into three groups: personal characteristics (Fower and Olson, 1993; Mauno and Kinnunen, 1999), conjugal pairing (Booth et al., 1995; Crawford et al., 2002; Myers and Booth, 1999; Schneewind and Gerhard, 2002; van Yperen and Buunk, 1990) and family situations.

Conjugal pairing factors usually examine the compatibility between spouses (e.g. age, religion, education) as well as relationship properties generated from conjugal interactions (e.g. power, conflict, fairness) (Johnson and Booth, 1998; Gottman and Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995; Kurdek, 1995). Most studies support the conclusion that compatible couples have better relationships (Ruvolo and Veroff, 1997). On the other hand, perception of poor interaction, such as unfairness in the distribution of household work or poor communication style, lowers marital satisfaction (Grote and Clark, 2001; Krokoff, 1990).

With regard to the family situation, the basic argument is that the subjective evaluation of marital quality fluctuates according to the development of family life stage and family events (Moss et al., 1986; Crohan, 1996; Ahmad and Najam, 1998). The U-curve theory of marital quality along various family life stages is a clear example. Another important factor explaining marital relations is children or the number of children. This has been shown to potentially contribute to both family stability and possible conflict (Waite et al., 1985; Hackel and Ruble, 1992; Ruble et al., 1988).

The most noteworthy recent development in marital satisfaction research is perhaps the potential influence of personal values or attitudes, especially the effect of gender-role attitudes (Bradbury et al., 1995). It has been documented that egalitarian or modern gender-role attitudes of the husband contribute to higher marital satisfaction (Amato and Booth, 1995; Lye and Biblarz, 1993; Gove et al., 1990). However, inconsistent findings have been reported regarding females' gender-role attitudes. One persuasive argument states that females with modern gender attitudes are more likely to feel dissatisfied towards the division of labour at home, thus tending to less marital satisfaction (Amato and Rogers, 1999). It is interesting to examine the relative importance of the husband's vs wife's gender-role attitude in a Chinese context.

It is evident that within the micro context, conjugal interactive factors are relatively underanalysed. Among the few conjugal pairing studies, most focus on conjugal similarity in terms of demographic background, instead of in values or in role comparability. Since conjugal similarity seems to produce lower conflict and better marital relations (Spanier, 1976), it is meaningful to explore further the potential contribution of conjugal pairing in the value aspect for this subject.

With regard to the macro context, an obvious shortcoming is the lack of social explanations for marital relations beyond the marriage itself. The lower levels of marital satisfaction revealed by younger cohorts may be attributed to female status change at the societal level (Holahan, 1984; Burgess, 1998). The pattern cannot be explained by personal traits. Moreover, disparity in sociocultural background and its possible negative

effect on marital quality are emphasized. Research on intercultural marriages points out that even with similar religious beliefs and marital values, these couples (especially wives) still report less satisfying marital relations than those with the same cultural background (Fu et al., 2003). The subjective perception of marriage is clearly a product of conjugal interaction as well as of the greater sociocultural structure surrounding it.

Therefore, to understand the Chinese marital relationship, which is embedded within the context of traditional values, it is imperative to examine its dynamics taking both micro and macro factors into consideration. Furthermore, comparison of three Chinese societies that share a similar family culture, but vary in political system, can enhance our understanding of the generalizability of the conjugal pair as a unit of study in the contemporary Chinese family.

Marital Values and Marital Relations: Possible Conjugal Disparity Effect?

Marital values encompass a wide range of concepts. Among them, gender-role attitudes perhaps receive the most attention. Gender-role attitudes generally denote one's values towards gendered division of labour and have been shown to have changed rapidly over recent decades, with females having more modern or egalitarian gender-role attitudes than males (Mason et al., 1976; Thornton, 1990; Yi, 1991, 1997). As stated before, studies usually focus on how gender-role values influence the perceived quality of one's marriage. However, less effort is made to investigate how value differences between spouses affect their marital relations. It is true that similar values are important in attracting a potential spouse (Caspi and Herbener, 1993; Yamaguchi and Kandel, 1997) as well as in producing better marital relations (Sternberg and Hojjat, 1997; Deal et al., 1992). But much less is known in terms of how value disparity between a couple may affect their perception of marital quality.

A previous study of 1778 Chinese couples in Beijing found that gender value disparity affects couples' marital relations (Pimentel, 2000). Specifically, wives with more modern gender-role values than husbands report lower marital intimacy, while their husbands also reveal less marital harmony (Pimentel, 2000). Glenn (1990) provides supportive evidence with regard to conjugal similarity. It is shown that for couples both having traditional gender-role values, since there is consensus regarding the role performance at home, less negotiation is needed, less conflict occurs and consequently, higher marital satisfaction is reported.

Another concept to be examined is conjugal priorities. For a patriarchal society like Taiwan, it has been documented that two axes of the marital concept operate at the same time (Yi, 1998). Specifically, (1) the importance of family dominates over that of the individual, a characteristic not

surprising in a collective society; and (2) the horizontal conjugal priority vs the vertical parent-child priority appeared to be equivalent, an emerging trend deviating from the traditional family value system (Hsu, 1949). It will be interesting to delineate possible conjugal disparity regarding the conjugal vs parent-child priority among contemporary Chinese couples.

Compared with demographic variables, marital values are studied far less in terms of possible effects on marital relations, and conjugal disparity regarding marital values even less so. It is therefore important to find out more about the possible influence of specific conjugal value disparity on marital relations. This is exactly the purpose of the following analysis.

Data and Variables

Data

Data are taken from the Economic Development and Females' Family Status in Chinese Societies study. Three corresponding datasets are used, with 516, 500 and 139 conjugal pairs from Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong respectively. The baseline study was conducted in Taiwan in 1995. A similar research framework was applied to create replicate surveys in Shanghai (1999) and Hong Kong (2002). The three surveys share similar sampling methods, with stratified random sampling of married couples aged 20-64 from the national household registry. Husbands and wives are interviewed separately in each study with the same questionnaires.

Variables

Marital Relations. This dependent variable is presumed to reflect conjugal relations in general. A direct question regarding satisfaction towards overall marital life is used for the Shanghai sample. Indicators derived from the marital adjustment process are used for the Taiwan sample (satisfaction with major family decision-making patterns) and for the Hong Kong sample (satisfaction with conflict management patterns over major family decisions). Due to the high concentration of positive responses, consistent with previous reports (Glenn, 1990; Xu and Ye, 1999a; Wu and Yi, 2003), answers are grouped into 'very satisfied', 'satisfied' and 'dissatisfied' categories. For Hong Kong, because of the empirical difficulty in conducting face-to-face interviews, a smaller sample size was achieved and is distinguished into 'satisfied' vs 'dissatisfied' only.

Marital Values: Construction of the Index. Two components of marital values are focused on: conjugal priority and gender-role values. Conjugal priority comprises two items: 'In a family, husband-wife relations are more important than parent-child relations' and 'In a family, one should put the needs of the spouse first, the needs of children second.' Scores of

five ordinal responses for each item are added. A higher score indicates agreement with spousal priority or a non-traditional marital value. The reliability measure shows that the Taiwan sample has high results (wife .62, husband .72), Shanghai follows (.43 and .41) and Hong Kong is quite low (.20 and .19).

Gender-role values are constructed by similar questions asked in three surveys. Items pertaining to traditional gender division at home as well as to the conflict between family and work roles are fundamental constituents. Typical items include: 'The husband's responsibility is to earn money, while the wife's responsibility is to take care of the family'; 'Most of the important decisions at home should be made by men'; 'If the family income is enough, a wife should not take outside employment'; 'A preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother is employed'; 'If there is conflict between work and family, females should give up work'. For the Taiwan study, two more items are added: 'Within a household, some work is men's and some work is women's; they shouldn't interfere with each other's work' and 'Whether a married woman should work depends on her parents-in-law or her husband's decision'. Adding five ordinal answers, higher scores indicate more modern gender-role values. The reliability is between .58 and .75 (Taiwan: .64 and .61; Shanghai: .58 and .59; Hong Kong: .75 and .74).

For our purpose, two levels of measurement are used for marital values. Besides the *individual value* mentioned above, we also construct the *conjugal value disparity*, to denote different gender-role values expressed between spouses. Answers are first categorized into 'agree', 'disagree' and 'no opinion'. If a husband replies with the same answer as his wife or if one spouse indicates 'agree' while the other says 'no opinion' (no conflict occurs), a score of 0 is assigned. The ultimate score ranges from 0 to 6, with higher scores meaning greater disparity between spouses.

Other Variables. Since this article focuses on conjugal pair data, conjugal differences in age (wife older, same age, younger), in education (three categories), in rural/urban background and in ethnic background (same or different) are analysed. In addition, mating patterns (introduced by others vs self-determined) have been proposed to be an important factor in subsequent marital relations (Yi and Hsung, 1994), and are included in order to explore possible effects on a couple's evaluation of their marital relations.

Samples

Age and education of both members of the couple as well as conjugal differences in age, in education, in rural/urban and in ethnic background are listed in Table 1. Mating patterns and wife's work status are also presented.

Table 1 Demographic Background of Samples: Individual and Conjugal Pairs

	Taiwan	Shanghai	Hong Kong
Individual			
Wife's age	44.0	44.8	45.6
Husband's age	47.7	47.3	50.2
Wife's educational yrs.	8.0	9.3	8.7
Husband's edu. yrs.	9.6	10.4	8.9
Wife's work			
Housewife	42.6	29.4	56.8
Employed	57.4	70.6	43.2
Conjugal pairs			
Age pairing			
Wife > husband	6.4	13.0	10.1
Wife = husband	9.9	14.8	8.6
Wife < husband	83.7	72.2	81.3
Educational pairing			
Wife > husband	12.8	17.2	12.9
Wife = husband	39.5	45.4	51.8
Wife < husband	47.7	37.4	35.3
Ethnic pairing			
Same	76.2	84.0	69.8 ^a
Different	23.8	16.0	30.2
Rural/urban pairing			
Same	58.7	85.4	61.9
Different	41.3	14.6	38.1
Mating patterns			
Self-determined	31.6	30.8	50.4
Introduced by others	68.4	69.2	49.6

^a Indicated by dialect used.

As can be seen, wives in the three samples average around age 45, husbands tend to be older, with the Hong Kong samples being older and having a wider age gap (4.6 years). Wife's education ranks as follows: for Shanghai (9.3 years), Hong Kong (8.7 years) and Taiwan (8.0 years); while husband's Shanghai (10.4 years), Taiwan (9.6 years) and Hong Kong (8.9 years). Interestingly, the mating gradient is more prominent for age comparison in that husbands tend to be older than wives (from 72 percent to 84 percent). Educational homogamy is evident among Hong Kong (52 percent) and Shanghai (45 percent) couples, but less so for Taiwan couples (39.5 percent). Instead, Taiwan samples reveal a greater mating gradient phenomenon in education (48 percent vs 37 percent for Shanghai and 35 percent and Hong Kong). Ethnic background tends towards similar (from 70 percent to 84 percent), with Shanghai couples having the highest

homogamy. Rural/urban background varies from 85 percent to 62 percent and 59 percent (Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taiwan respectively) in terms of similarity. For mating patterns, both Taiwan and Shanghai couples report a higher percentage of being introduced (69 percent) while Hong Kong couples split even. As expected, 71 percent of Shanghai wives are employed, vs 57 percent and 43 percent of their counterparts in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Results

Marital Relations

Table 2 shows that most Chinese couples, consistent with reports from the West, feel positively towards their marital relations (an average of 91+ percent for Taiwan and Shanghai couples and 70 percent for Hong Kong couples). In general, husbands tend to have higher evaluation than wives. Shanghai couples report the highest satisfaction levels among all. Taiwan couples are relatively more reserved, in that fewer than 20 percent of couples reveal 'very satisfied', compared to 36 percent and 30 percent of their counterparts in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Table 2 *Marital Relations of Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong Couples*

Area	Indicator of marital relations	Wife	Husband
Taiwan	Satisfaction with major decision-making patterns		
	Very satisfied	19.2	19.2
	Satisfied	69.5	74.4
	Dissatisfied	10.3	6.4
Shanghai	Very dissatisfied	1.0	0.0
	Marital satisfaction		
	Very satisfied	29.0	35.6
	Satisfied	63.0	62.0
Hong Kong	Dissatisfied	4.8	0.8
	Very dissatisfied	1.2	0.4
	Hard to say	2.0	1.2
	Satisfaction with conflict management		
	Very satisfied	23.2	29.9
	Satisfied	40.6	45.5
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	29.7	19.4	
Dissatisfied	5.1	4.5	
Very dissatisfied	1.4	0.7	

Conjugal Consistency on Marital Relations

Although similar response patterns between spouses at the aggregate level are indicated, it is interesting to investigate whether consistency of perception actually exists among individual pairs. In order to derive a direct comparison of the consistency vs disparity between husband and wife, a consistency measurement with a kappa statistical method is used (Cohen, 1960). This is because the traditional correlation method can only reflect the covariance rather than consistency (Thomson and Walker, 1982; Fisher et al., 1985). Previous efforts have tried to calculate the percentage of couples who have consistent answers out of all conjugal pairs (Yi et al., 1992, 1995). But the results may be due to the uneven marginal distribution. Hence, Cohen's kappa is considered an improvement because it accounts for the real proportion of conjugal consistency after removing the chance effect (Cohen, 1960).

In other words, a kappa score allows researchers to compare the relative consistency between spouses with a more quantified measurement. The formula is:

$$\kappa = (O_a - E_a) / (N - E_a)$$

where O_a is the number of observed conjugal pairs with consistent answers, E_a is the expected value of consistent pairs from marginal distribution and N the number of all conjugal pairs.

It should be noted that the kappa value has two shortcomings. It may happen that a high consistency percentage does not result in a high kappa value, thus introducing a certain degree of confusion in the interpretation. Second, the kappa value only indicates the consistency, not the direction of couples' reports (Ochs and Binik, 1999). For the latter problem, other relevant variables will be incorporated in the following analysis in order to derive clearer comparisons among consistent vs disparate couples.

Table 3 lists two types of consistency measures. The conventional calculation of counting the percentage of conjugal consistency regarding same responses towards marital relations allows us to compare the overall response pattern among couples. Two different indicators are constructed: one distinguishes couples into basic types of 'satisfied' vs 'dissatisfied'; the other further differentiates the satisfied group into 'very satisfied' vs 'satisfied'.¹ The results allow us to compare different patterns generated from the direction of evaluation vs from the strength of evaluation. Specifically, when the relative strength of answers is taken into account, Taiwan couples have higher consistency patterns in that 71.5 percent of couples report the same answers. Hong Kong couples closely follow with 69.3 percent consistent evaluation. Shanghai couples turn out to have the lowest consistency pattern with 62.9 percent reporting the same answers.

Table 3 *The Conjugal Consistency of Marital Relations among Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong Couples*

	Taiwan	Shanghai	Hong Kong
Satisfied with marital relations (2 types) (%)	89.4	92.1	71.6
Satisfied with marital relations (3 types) (%)	71.5	62.9	69.3
Kappa value of marital satisfaction	.354	.278	.336

Results of the kappa value point out an identical pattern in terms of the relative ranking of the three societies. Taiwan couples have the highest consistency measure, followed by Hong Kong couples and lastly, by Shanghai couples. But the range of scores from .354 to .278 indicates that all three samples actually fall into the lower consistency category, according to Landis and Koch (1977). In other words, the result from the kappa consistency measure does not support a similar response pattern among our samples. This implies that although the conventional percentage of answers may appear relatively consistent, Chinese couples actually hold quite different evaluations of their marital relations when examined by individual pairs.

Marital Values: Conjugal Priority and Gender-Role Values

From the wives' reports (Table 4), it appears that conjugal priority has not become the dominant value among Chinese samples, in that a substantial proportion disagrees with placing the spousal relationship above the parent-child relation, and the majority disagrees with putting spousal needs ahead of children's. Conjugal priority is regarded as a western concept, and Taiwanese wives reveal more traditional values than their counterparts because more than half do not endorse the concept of conjugal priority.

The results on gender-role values indicate that among wives, Shanghai women express the most non-traditional values, in that only 13–35 percent endorse the traditional gender division of labour at home (Table 4). In contrast with Taiwan and Hong Kong, the gap is actually quite substantial. Hong Kong wives, on the other hand, exhibit the most traditional gender values as indicated by the relatively higher percentage of support, especially regarding the maternal role (e.g. 62 percent agree that preschool children will suffer if mothers are employed). However, in terms of conjugal power, it is the Taiwanese wife who expresses the most traditional values towards the male role (e.g. 49.4 percent indicate that most important family decisions should be made by men).

Table 4 *Wife's Marital Values among Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong Samples: Conjugal Priority and Gender-Role Values (agree %)*

	Taiwan	Shanghai	Hong Kong
Conjugal priority			
The spousal relation is more important than parent-child relations in a family	43.4	66.0	53.7
Spousal needs should be placed above children's needs in a family	26.6	34.4	32.6
Gender-role values			
Husband's responsibility is to make money and wife's is to take care of the family	51.6	34.6	53.2
Preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother is employed	51.0	16.0	62.4
Most important decisions at home should be made by men	49.4	35.0	28.8
If the family economy is adequate, the wife should not take outside employment	32.0	–	36.6
If there is a conflict between work and family, women should give up work	–	12.8	53.0
Family life will be adversely affected if wife works full-time	–	51.2	58.3
Some work at home is men's, some is women's and they should not interfere with each other	26.6	–	–
Whether a woman should work after marriage depends on her parents-in-law or her husband	37.8	–	–

As to the husbands' reports (Table 5), similar patterns are found. Taiwanese husbands are less likely than Shanghai and Hong Kong samples to support the conjugal priority value. Although husbands are more likely than wives to indicate a favourable attitude towards conjugal priority in the family, the vertical parent-child relationship evidently remains the major family value, especially for Taiwan couples. Shanghai husbands, similar to their wives, tend to favour less the traditional gender division of labour at home (21–37 percent on the relevant items). Hong Kong husbands, also resembling their wives, reveal a greater concern towards the possible effects of a wife's employment on children and on the family. They indicate a generally traditional value regarding a wife's maternal role. As for Taiwan husbands, again identical with the wives

Table 5 *Husband's Marital Values among Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong Samples: Conjugal Priority and Gender-Role Values (agree %)*

	Taiwan	Shanghai	Hong Kong
Conjugal priority			
The spousal relation is more important than parent-child relations in a family	49.0	67.5	68.8
Spousal needs should be placed above children's needs in a family	34.1	47.0	43.4
Gender-role values			
Husband's responsibility is to make money and wife's is to take care of the family	54.5	33.3	64.7
Preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother is employed	56.8	20.8	60.4
Most important decisions at home should be made by men	47.3	37.6	30.4
If the family economy is adequate, the wife should not take outside employment	45.5	–	49.6
If there is a conflict between work and family, women should give up work	–	26.5	44.5
Family life will be adversely affected if wife works full-time	–	56.2	56.1
Some work at home is men's, some is women's and they should not interfere with each other	33.1	–	–
Whether a woman should work after marriage depends on her parents-in-law or her husband	19.2	–	–

sample, the traditional value towards marital power can be observed in the fact that near half (47 percent) endorse the male priority.

In other words, comparing the three societies, the husband samples demonstrate similar patterns to the wives samples with regard to marital values. To sum up findings shown in Tables 4 and 5 on marital values:

1. Conjugal priority and egalitarian gender-role division at home are not yet the dominant pattern among Chinese couples.
2. Between husband and wife samples, consistent among the three societies, husbands tend to report relatively favourable attitudes towards conjugal priority. But at the same time, husbands are more likely to endorse gender-based division of labour.

3. The cross-society comparison indicates that Shanghai and Hong Kong couples have more similar values of conjugal priority, while Taiwan and Hong Kong couples are more similar in gender-role values.

Overall, Shanghai couples have the most non-traditional or western marital values in both indices. Taiwan couples reveal the most traditional values on conjugal priority and Hong Kong couples on gender-role values.

Conjugal Consistency on Marital Values

Since this article aims to explore whether conjugal disparity has significant effects on marital relations, and value discrepancy is assumed to play a particularly important role, conjugal disparity vs consistency of marital values is examined first. Table 6 lists both the consistency percentage and the kappa value of conjugal priority and the gender-role values for our conjugal pairs.

As can be seen, the consistency percentage shows above average to highly consistent answers between spouses in both indices (ranging from just below 50 percent to 78 percent). Specifically, on the conjugal priority index, Hong Kong couples reveal a higher consistency proportion, followed by Taiwan and lastly, by Shanghai couples. For the gender-role index, the pattern is less clear. However, if we look at three common items, again Hong Kong couples appear to have a relatively higher consistency percentage than Shanghai and Taiwan couples.

Regarding kappa values, Table 6 presents some interesting findings. On the conjugal priority index, Taiwan couples reach medium consistency, while a lack of consistency is observed for both Shanghai and Hong Kong couples. This implies that in terms of the priority between spouse and children, Taiwan couples actually hold more consistent values. The priorities of Shanghai couples, and especially Hong Kong couples, are varied, and no meaningful consistency measure can be assigned. The results on gender-role values are lower but indicate similar patterns. Taiwan couples again reach relatively higher consistency, in that scores of .21–.35 are shown. In contrast, Shanghai couples are concentrated on the lower end of the consistency measure, while Hong Kong couples actually fall between a lack of consistency and lower consistency.

It is clear that the conventional consistency percentage measure can lead to an overestimation of couples' consistency. The more accurate measure by the kappa value shows that Taiwan couples again have a higher consistency in marital values as well as in marital relations.

Factors Affecting Marital Relations: Personal vs Conjugal

Table 7 reports Taiwan findings. As can be seen from the wives sample, both personal and conjugal pairing factors contribute to the variance. For

Table 6 *The Conjugal Consistency of Marital Values among Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong Couples*

	Taiwan		Shanghai		Hong Kong	
	%	κ	%	κ	%	κ
Conjugal priority						
The spousal relation is more important than parent-child relations in a family	68.2	.435	60.6	.192	75.5	.120
Spousal needs should be placed above children's needs in a family	66.9	.417	48.9	.204	78.4	.143
Gender-role values						
Husband's responsibility is to make money and wife's is to take care of the family	66.5	.350	63.6	.220	69.8	.280
Preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother is employed	63.4	.341	71.9	.225	71.2	.275
Most important decisions at home should be made by men	58.9	.212	63.8	.232	70.5	.153
If the family economy is adequate, the wife should not take outside employment	62.0	.287	-	-	66.9	.117
If there is a conflict between work and family, women should give up work	-	-	67.5	.144	66.2	.117
Family life will be adversely affected if wife works full-time	-	-	63.0	.289	72.7	.267
Some work at home is men's, some is women's and they should not interfere with each other	67.1	.268	-	-	-	-
Whether a woman should work after marriage depends on her parents-in-law or her husband	75.6	.342	-	-	-	-

Table 7 *Factors Affecting Marital Relations among Taiwan Couples*

	Very satisfied/ dissatisfied		Satisfied/ dissatisfied	
	Wife β	Husband β	Wife β	Husband β
Individual				
Education	-.064	.019	-.103**	-.043
Age	-.019	.027	-.022	.009
Wife's work (formal employment)				
Not employed	.489	.781	.509	.364
Informal employment	.327	-.526	-.287	-.954*
Marital values				
Conjugal priority	.102**	.051	.109**	.032
Gender-role values	.021	-.210***	-.032	-.176***
Conjugal pair (wife < husband)				
Age pairing				
Wife > husband	-.685	-.681	.458	-.536
Wife = husband	.148	.117	.743	-.361
Educational pairing (wife < husband)				
Wife > husband	-.102	-.354	-.266	-.384
Wife = husband	.360	-.256	.613*	-.460
Ethnic pairing (same)				
Different	-.480	-.824*	-.550*	-.618***
Rural/urban pairing (same)				
Different	.783**	2.089	.333	1.346*
Marital value pairing				
Conjugal priority	-.385	-.454	-.161	-.215
Gender-role values	-.200	-.109	-.179*	-.124
Mating patterns (self-determined)				
Introduced by others	-.049	.810	.004	.830
Family factor				
Number of children	.100	-.080	.064	-.199
Constant	2.139	-.542	2.995**	3.390*
-2LL	788.913	681.713	788.913	681.713
Pseudo R ²	.102	.107	.102	.107
Samples	516	516	516	516

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

the 'very satisfied' vs 'dissatisfied' comparison, wives who endorse the value of conjugal priority and who grew up in a different background from their husbands' are more likely to report satisfaction with marital relations. For the 'satisfied' vs 'dissatisfied' group, a more modern

conjugal priority concept again leads to wives' positive reports. In addition, the greater the difference of gender-role values between spouses, the more likely is the report of dissatisfying relations. Different ethnic background between spouses also results in a negative report. In terms of education, it is interesting to note that wives with a higher education tend to report dissatisfying relations, but equal education between spouses (in contrast with the husband having a higher education) contributes to the report of satisfaction. It appears that both a wife's own marital values as well as the value disparity between a couple contribute to the expected effect on marital relations.

The results for Taiwan husbands (Table 7) echoes the wives sample in that both personal and conjugal factors are significant. But husbands with more egalitarian gender-role values are likely to report dissatisfying relations. If a wife has informal employment (compared with formal employment), the husband is more likely to reveal negative marital relations too. For pairing concerns, disparity in ethnic background has a significant effect on dissatisfying relations. But different rural/urban background between spouses again produces a positive effect. Whether this is due to a particular combination between the husband's and wife's background requires further analysis. It should be noted that marital values produce opposing effects on Taiwanese couples' marital relations, with wives benefiting from having non-traditional values.

Regarding Shanghai couples, the wives sample (Table 8) reveals the clear importance of personal factors more than pairing factors. Consistent with the hypotheses, a wife with more education tends to report satisfying marital relations, and a wife with no employment (in contrast with the employed group) is likely to indicate negative relations with the husband. However, contrary to the expectation, more modern gender-role values of wives produce dissatisfying relations. For the pairing factors, if a traditional mating pattern (i.e. introduced by others) exists between spouses, a dissatisfying relationship is more likely to be reported. Interestingly, the increase in the number of children leads to a positive evaluation of their marital relations among Shanghai wives. Under the dominant one-child policy, more than one child apparently brings a positive effect to marital relations for wives. As to the husbands sample (Table 8), the endorsement of conjugal priority has a significant negative effect on marital relations. The traditional mating pattern significantly leads to a negative report, just as in the wife sample. Age homogamy (compared with husbands being older) contributes to satisfying relations. Unexpectedly, having modern marital values (i.e. egalitarian gender-role value for wives and conjugal priority for husbands) results in negative evaluations of marital relations among Shanghai couples, while value disparity between couples does not reach statistical significance.

Table 8 *Factors Affecting Marital Relations among Shanghai Couples*

	Very satisfied/ dissatisfied		Satisfied/ dissatisfied
	Wife β	Husband β	Wife β
Individual			
Education	.157**	.051	.118**
Age	-.019	-.003	-.009
Wife's work (employed)			-.743*
Not employed	-.886**	-.159	.049
Marital values			-.088*
Conjugal priority	.131	-.106**	
Gender-role values	-.171***	.060	
Conjugal pair (wife < husband)			
Age pairing			
Wife > husband	.615	.284	.238
Wife = husband	.182	.613*	.059
Educational pairing (wife < husband)			
Wife > husband	-.428	.507	.126
Wife = husband	.344	.303	-.242
Ethnic pairing (same)			
Different	.239	-.223	.152
Rural/urban pairing (same)			
Different	-.914	-.114	-.759
Marital value pairing			
Conjugal priority	-.391	-.145	-.380
Gender-role values	-.032	-.018	-.156
Mating patterns (self-determined)			
Introduced by others	-1.170**	-.609***	-.553
Family factor			
Number of children	.680*	-.010	.613*
Constant	3.345	-1.224	2.621
-2LL	802.232	615.279	802.232
Pseudo R ² (predicted % correct)	.095	65.7%	.095
Samples	500	500	500

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

The findings for Hong Kong couples exhibit different patterns. For the wives sample (Table 9), none of the explanatory factors reach statistical significance, although the model is significant. For the husbands sample, both personal and pairing factors are important. Consistent with the

Table 9 Factors Affecting Marital Relations among Hong Kong Couples

	Very satisfied/ dissatisfied	
	Wife β	Husband β
Individual		
Education	.059	.089*
Age	-.002	.006
Wife's work (employed)		
Not employed	-.234	-.435
Marital values		
Conjugal priority	-.038	-.292*
Gender-role values	.027	.046
Conjugal pair (wife < husband)		
Age pairing		
Wife > husband	-.330	-1.098
Wife = husband	-.385	-1.655**
Education pairing (wife < husband)		
Wife > husband	-.778	-.473
Wife = husband	-.189	.213
Ethnic pairing (same)		
Different	.664	-1.005*
Rural/urban pairing (same)		
Different	-.429	.385
Marital value pairing		
Conjugal priority	.129	.342
Gender-role values	.078	-.172
Mating patterns (by self)		
Introduced by others	.396	.515
Constant	-.271	1.917
-2LL	170.151	131.314
Predicted percent correct	63.2%	75.4%
Samples	139	139

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

expectation, a husband with more education is more likely to provide a positive answer towards marital relations, and disparity in ethnic background results in a 'dissatisfied' report. On the other hand, a husband who agrees with the conjugal priority value tends to report negative evaluations of his marital relations. Age homogamy, in contrast with husbands being older, is also associated with negative relations. In other words, for Hong Kong couples, the model explains the husband's sample

better. But having non-traditional marital values does not contribute to one's marital relations.

Conclusion

One of the most controversial issues in family studies is the unit of analysis. Conjugal pairs often report different answers towards attitudinal or value questions, and it is thus considered necessary to include both spouses in studying family relations and family processes (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969; Pimentel, 2000; Chien and Yi, 2004). Since conjugal pair data are particularly suitable for relationship-oriented subjects, marital relations are selected as the focus of study. Specifically, this article examines marital relations by comparing personal vs conjugal pair factors in the account of respondents' subjective evaluation.

Data are taken from a series of studies conducted in Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Corresponding datasets with couples' information allow us to compare personal factors of husband or wife alone in contrast with a possible conjugal disparity effect. Besides various demographic variables in personal and in conjugal pairs, marital values are also examined at the personal and conjugal disparity levels.

Findings indicate that Chinese couples are characterized by a positive subjective evaluation of marital relations. Husbands tend to report greater satisfaction than wives, just as everywhere in the world. Although couples reveal high consistency on the aggregate level, further analyses using conjugal pair data indicate that a substantial amount of inconsistency existed between our samples. Taiwan couples are more consistent than their counterparts. This implies that when individual conjugal pairs are concerned, Taiwan couples actually report more consistent answers on marital relations.

Marital values are examined in the context of traditional conjugal values in Chinese family culture. The two indices used are conjugal priority and gender-role values. Results of marital values point out that husbands in general endorse the more modern value of conjugal priority, but favour the more traditional gender-role concept at the same time. The cross-society comparison shows that Shanghai couples have the more modern values in both indices. Taiwan couples reveal the most traditional pattern of conjugal priority, in that fewer respondents support the spousal priority over that of the children. Hong Kong couples, instead, appear to have more traditional gender-role values, especially relating to the mother's role. The conjugal disparity/consistency measure of marital values shows that Taiwan couples again have a higher consistency score in both indices. It is clear that value disparity exists among Chinese couples. Although most couples have consistent answers towards half of all items asked

(unreported analyses), it is also clear that discrepancy of values may not naturally result in consensus between couples.

To answer whether conjugal disparity affects marital relations – especially whether disparity in one's background or in values makes a significant difference – the results generally support the hypotheses, but vary depending on the context examined. Specifically, the marital relationship of Chinese couples results from both personal and pairing factors. Objective demographic background, in contrast with subjective marital values expressed, appears to be equally important at the individual level, but is more salient at the pairing level. To focus on the values, perhaps the most important finding is that the marital values that respondents revealed are significant for all our samples in the account of marital relations. But conjugal priority vs gender-role concept has different effects among different samples. To be specific, except for Taiwanese wives, non-traditional marital values contribute to negative perceived marital relations. The endorsement of a gender egalitarian value or of spousal priority may widen the gap between the ideal and reality, thus leading to a negative report. This is similar to western findings (Amato and Rogers, 1999). The expected relation between value disparity and poorer marital relations between couples only receives support among Taiwanese wives.

In short, this article utilizes conjugal pair data among three Chinese societies and explores the possible effect of conjugal disparity on the marital relations reported. Since attitudes towards gender roles reflect both traditional family values and conventional family practice, it is thus a suitable indicator to compare the possible disparity existent between couples. Our findings document the importance of taking into account conjugal disparity factors in the study of marital relations. Also, different factors are significant for the Taiwan, Shanghai and Hong Kong samples, indicating that each Chinese society has its unique context that facilitates certain factors to produce important effects. Further specification in this respect is encouraged.

Note

1. Due to the different construction of response categories, Hong Kong samples are categorized into three types ('satisfied', 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied') and four types (i.e. separating the satisfied group into 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied') in the analysis.

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