

THE ST INTERVIEW

Money talks when S'pore women say 'I love you'

Survey finding may be a reason for low birth rate, as materialistic people value family less



BY THERESA TAN

BLAME the material girl for Singapore's baby woes.

Cupid and the stork had no luck last year, with the number of marriages and babies born dipping to yet another record low.

New research by Singapore Management University (SMU) psychology professor Norman Li could shed some light on Singapore's ever-shrinking birth rate. His study, published earlier this year, shows that Singaporean women are "significantly" more materialistic than their American peers.

When it comes to looking for a potential spouse, the top criterion for Singaporean women is a man's social status. Next on the list is kindness, followed by a lively personality. In contrast, American women value kindness the most, followed by looks, then a man's social standing.

Prof Li did not ask his subjects for their reasons but said he is not surprised by the finding. "Maybe Singaporean women are just being realistic. Here, you need a lot of money to survive and afford an affluent lifestyle. Maybe they are just being practical," he said.

He and his associates surveyed about 400 psychology students aged between 19 and 21, studying at the SMU and the Northern Illinois University near Chicago in the United States, on their attitudes towards marriage, children and preferences when it comes to choosing a partner.

The study found no major differences when it comes to men: Both American and Singaporean men went for looks first. The second most important trait in a spouse for men was kindness and the third was a lively personality.

"Men are wired to go for looks," he explained, adding that a woman's physical attractiveness is a visual cue for fertility. Features such as "soft skin, full-looking lips and colourful cheeks" are not just attractive, but also associated with youth, which indicates a woman's fertility. That is why men tend to go for younger women, he explained.

Prof Li, a 45-year-old American-born Chinese, knows this first-hand. His American wife, Ruth, is 21 years his junior. Mrs Li, now a housewife, was his student when he was lecturing at the University of Texas at Austin before he came to Singapore in 2008. They have a two-year-old son, Jasper.

His research also showed that the pursuit of material success is at odds with the desire to settle down and have babies. "Lots of past research have shown that

the more materialistic you are, the less you place value on having friends and family," he said.

It's a simple trade-off, he added. We have only so much time and energy, and chasing one goal means giving up another ideal.

Another possible factor has to do with one's source for fulfilment, whether it is strong family ties or material success. He said: "If you have good relationships, you may not need to value material things because you already feel good."

However, he noted that research has not determined which comes first: "Do people pursue material goals and then abandon friends and family, or is it because they are no good at having friends and family and so they make up for it by grabbing onto material things?"

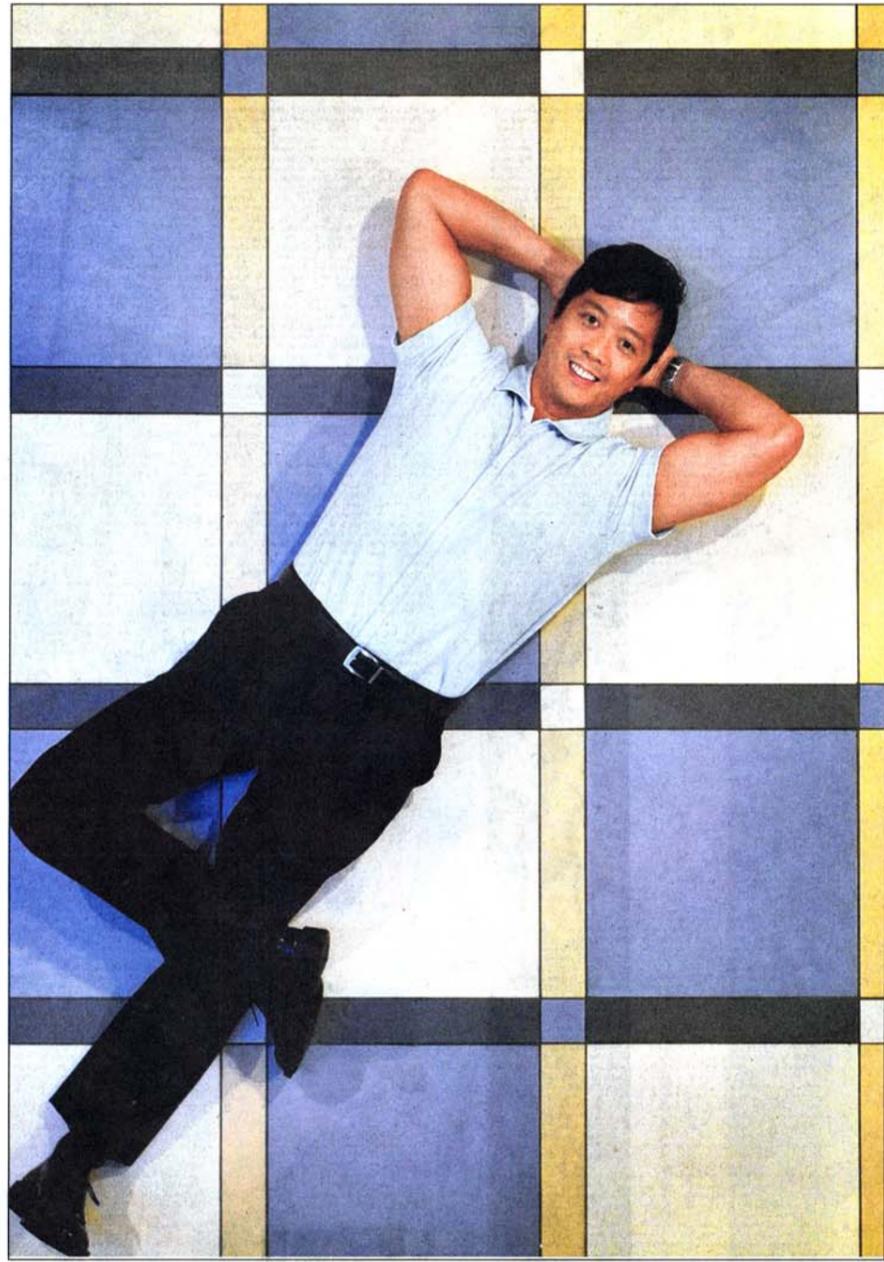
He said he decided to study Singapore's baby woes from a psychological perspective after learning that it was an utmost national concern. By and large, he noted, wealthier countries tend to have lower birth rates. Yet "significant differences" still occur among countries which enjoy similar levels of economic development, he said.

That is why he decided to compare Singapore and the US. Singapore ranks ninth out of 229 countries, while the US takes the 10th place, in terms of per capita gross domestic product, according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook.

Yet the US' total fertility rate (TFR) at 2.05 in 2009 was almost double Singapore's rate of 1.22. Last year, Singapore's TFR, which measures the average number of children a woman will bear in her lifetime, sank to a historic low of 1.16.

Only 37,967 babies were born last year, the lowest number since 2005 when Singapore saw 37,492 births, despite the surge in the number of new citizens and permanent residents in recent years. And only 24,363 couples tied the knot last year - the lowest since 2007, when 23,966 couples wed.

In a Family Research Network forum presentation on singlehood at the National University of Singapore last month, Prof Li pointed out that Singaporeans - both men and women - are "significant-



Prof Norman Li (above) found the top criterion for Singaporean women is a man's social status, while US women value kindness. This is based on a survey of about 400 psychology students aged between 19 and 21, studying at the SMU and the Northern Illinois University in the United States. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Making a career of studying love and lust

ASSOCIATE Professor Norman Li, 45, is a psychology professor at the Singapore Management University.

His research explores the science of attraction, and love and lust in people, among other things.

One of his earlier findings was that women with higher levels of a key sex hormone, oestradiol, rated themselves as more attractive and are more willing to cheat on their partners.

The only child was born in New Haven, Connecticut, to Chinese parents, who moved from China to the United States for their post-graduate studies.

His father is a retired professor who taught Chinese history and literature at Yale University, and his mother is a systems analyst.

The younger Li earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Northwestern University and a master's degree in finance from the University of Michigan.

After eight years in the finance sector, he lost interest and quit his investment consultant job to study social psychology.

He holds a master's degree and a PhD in social psychology from Arizona State University.

Before coming to Singapore in 2008, he lectured at the University of Texas at Austin, where he met his American wife, Ruth, now 24 and a housewife. They have a son, Jasper, who is two.

ly" less satisfied with life than Americans.

Americans scored an average of five, while Singaporeans came in at 4.38 in his study. The closer the score is to seven, the more satisfied with life the respondents are. Singaporean women were also found to be "significantly" more materialistic than American women. They polled an average of 3.98, compared to the American women's score of 3.74. The closer the score is to five, the more materialistic one is deemed to be.

While the study did not ask respondents for the reasons behind their answers, Prof Li feels that the relentless rat race and high cost of living are possible reasons Singaporeans are less happy with life and are more inclined to go after money and success.

While it is expensive to live in major US cities such as New York or Los Angeles, there are plenty of places in the US to

"live comfortably" for a lot less money than in Singapore. "It's not that hard to buy a house and car in the US," he said.

Besides, with the globalised economy and outsourcing, Singaporeans are vulnerable to losing their jobs to a foreigner any time. "People can't really relax. Can you really get to the point where you feel comfortable? People just don't get to that point any more," he noted.

Also, Singaporeans, like other Asians, tend to worry more about life than Westerners, who are "more relaxed" and more comfortable with facing the unknown.

"I think you have to work really hard and succeed before you can relax here," he said. "On average, people in the West are able to enjoy life as they go along. They are not going to kill themselves to succeed."

So what is the bottom line?

He pronounced: "Materialism is a double-edged sword." While materialistic val-

ues spur the economy to greater heights, they dampen people's desire for family and children.

His research shows that people who are less satisfied with life and value material success more are less likely to view marriage and procreation "favourably". For career-minded women, having children - or more children for that matter - is a drain on their time and resources.

With more women taking on high-flying jobs and their expectations of their partners rising as their own earning power soars, he reckoned getting the dismal birth rate up will be "very, very difficult" unless a shift in values away from materialism towards more pro-family values occurs.

But beyond saying that more monetary incentives are unlikely to spur the stork to visit more often, he refused to delve further into pro-natal incentives that will work, insisting that is not his area.

His research mainly explores "what do people really look for in mates" and the science of attraction, love and lust in people, he maintained.

So has knowing all about women's psyche helped in his own pursuit of happiness? Prof Li is the first to admit he has had "mixed success" and made "lots of mistakes" in his love life, despite his vast research on the topic. His first marriage, to a former postgraduate course mate, broke down after four years due to "different values".

"There's a difference between knowing what you should do and doing it. Doing it is not always easy," he said. "I'm reasonably confident that I can tell when someone is interested in me. I can generally interest someone who might be interested in me but I could use more work in the relationship maintenance department."

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Why men go for looks and women go for money

■ Do you think women here are too choosy?

I think they are. The more educated you are, the more you earn, the more you want your partner to earn. It might just be an economic reality. Can you really just fall in love with someone and just marry them, regardless of what they make? To have a family here, you need more (money).

■ Why do men go for looks first?

Up front, men want someone who is at least minimally physically attractive to them but they don't need to have the most beautiful person. Because once men

obtain the minimal level of physical attraction, they value other traits.

From an evolutionary perspective, physical attractiveness is an indication of fertility. Over thousands of generations, a woman who is not physically attractive at all was probably too old to reproduce. So men may have evolved a way to detect whether a mate is fertile...

What men consider attractive are visual cues of youth and sexual maturity. So soft skin, soft hair, full-looking lips, colourful cheeks, larger eyes versus smaller eyes are features of young, sexually mature women. As people age, those features start disappearing.

■ How can a guy tell if a girl is interested in him?

If a girl laughs at your jokes, she's probably interested. I propose that humour evolved as a way to indicate interest. It's not so much that what you say is extremely funny, but if someone is interested in you, they will think you are funny no matter what you say...

Whenever a woman laughs at my jokes and tells me I'm funny, if I ask her out, she will pretty much always go out with me. When you like someone, implicitly you want to communicate that you like them, so you are more apt to laugh at what they say.