Selection of favourite idols and models among Chinese young people: A comparative study in Hong Kong and Nanjing

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This paper examines the conceptual differences between an idol and a model among a sample of young people in China. A questionnaire was specifically designed to measure young people's criteria for idol worship and model learning using three pairs of contrasting constructs: idealism versus realism, romanticism versus rationalism, absolutism versus relativism. The questionnaire also asks each respondent to nominate up to three favourite idols and models in life. A total of 826 high school students and university students in Hong Kong and Nanjing completed the questionnaire. The results provide convergent support for the hypothesised conceptual differences between an idol and a model. Idealism, romanticism, and absolutism were more important in idol selection whereas realism, rationalism, and relativism were more important in model selection. Hong Kong young people selected significantly more idealism-romanticism-absolutism oriented celebrities whereas Nanjing young people selected significantly more realism-rationalism-relativism oriented celebrities.

Idol worship has become increasingly common among young people around the world. An idol is typically someone whose talents, achievements, status, or physical appearances are specially recognised and appreciated by his or her fans. Psychologically, idol worship is an unreciprocated or unarticulated attachment to a significant person characterised by frequent occurrence of fantasies in which the personal attributes of the idol are overly enhanced or idealised (Fromm, 1967). Adolescent idol worship has been referred to as the secondary attachment which teenagers form towards favourite celebrity figures (Davidson, 1983; Erikson, 1968). Defined as the fantasised relationships which adolescents project to distant figures, such as pop music and movie celebrities (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990), secondary attachment may best be understood as a means of affective transition from the nurturant, parental attachments of childhood to the more intimate, romantic attachments of adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1922/1951). As such, it may facilitate the adolescent’s self-development by permitting exploration and experimentation at a safe location removed from immediate consequences.

Adolescent idol worship may be accounted for by individual theory in which fulfilment of a developmental need for identification and intimacy is essential for positive self-development during adolescence (Blos, 1967; Josselson, 1991). Specifically, adolescents usually start with a state of diffusion or foreclosure in their search for an identity and need to undergo a process of exploration, without adopting any doctrine and identity prematurely (Marcia, 1980). Under such circumstances, identification with some adult or peer idols enables adolescents to seek information of values and to prepare them for the adult role (Erikson, 1964, 1968).

Important as idol worship is to adolescent identity formation, however, psychological studies in this field have been sporadic, unsystematic, and largely without empirical foundation. Of these few studies conducted in the US, Emanuel (1990) found that, in terms of income, prestige, and the attention and admiration of young people, movie stars ranked highest. Many adolescents have cited pop musicians, such as heavy metal singers as their “absolute heroes” and have reported fantasising becoming such celebrity figures themselves (Jeffrey, 1991). Adams-Price and Greene (1990) asked sixty 5th, 8th, and 11th graders to describe a favourite celebrity and the kind of relationship they would like to have with them. They identified two major types of secondary attachment: romantic attachment (a wish to be the celebrity’s romantic partner), and identification attachment (a wish to be like or become the celebrity). Males tended to describe identification attachment to a favourite male celebrity in terms of instrumentality (e.g., strength, aggressiveness), whereas females tended to describe romantic attachment to a favourite male celebrity in terms of expressivity (e.g., warmth, nurturance). Adams-Price and Greene (1990) argued that the attributes given to celebrities by adolescents, including the type of attachment fantasised, “reflect the emergent concerns that adolescents have about their own sexuality and identity” (p. 337). Another recent study has shown that among a sample of British students aged from kindergarten to 12th grade, 53.8% of celebrities identified by the adolescents in the sample as heroes were those related to entertainment, particularly pop stars, and sport stars (White & O’Brien, 1999). These findings reflect the popularity of romantic and idealistic figures among young people. However, identification with political, military, commercial, or academic heroes seem to increase with age. Unlike pop stars, these
people generally embody realistic and rationalistic attributes. Alternatively, there could be a developmental trend in adolescent idol worship toward realistic and rationalistic attributes over idealistic and romantic attributes but until now, no empirical findings have adequately confirmed its existence.

Studies on idol worship in Chinese societies are equally rare, sporadic and were mostly conducted in Hong Kong. For instance, So and Chan (1992) surveyed 2000 Hong Kong secondary school students and discovered that close to 70% reported having at least one idol. This was more true for female and lower grade students than for male and higher grade students. With regard to their selection of favourite idols, pop singers, and movie stars dominated the list. Wong and Ma (1997) reported that listening to pop music was a major form of entertainment for young people in Hong Kong and that pop stars outranked other professionals in being idolised. Chan, Cheung, Lee, Leung, and Liu (1998) reported that adolescents who relied on idols as a way of forming moral judgement were likely to commit delinquent behaviour, favour less positive moral values and lack problem-solving confidence. More recently, Cheung and Yue (1999) reported that in idol worship, young people in Hong Kong showed significantly higher valuation of superficial, illusory romance, and that they were significantly more likely to idolise pop singers than their counterparts in Nanjing.

Overall, these empirical findings demonstrate that idol worship during adolescence tends to result in identification with or romantic attachment to idol figures for intimacy and identity formation. Attachment to an idol could compensate for the youngster’s individuation from parental figures and create a sense of remote intimacy. Nevertheless, this remote intimacy may become overly idealised and romanticised, such that adolescents frequently fantasise having a romantic or even sexual relationship with their favourite idols (Adams-Price & Greene 1990; Green & Adams-Price 1990, Yeung, 1995). In such a way, an idol is likely to be conceived as highly idealistic, romantic, and outstanding to his/her fans.

Associated with idol worship is the concept of model learning and its effects on adolescent self development. A model is typically someone whose behaviours, verbalisations, and expressions are considered worthy of subsequent observational learning by others, and model learning generally refers to the behavioural changes that are derived from such observational learning (Berger, 1977; Field, 1981). Learning by this method is said to be important to the acquisition of new skills, beliefs, and novel behaviours (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978; Bandura, 1986). Of the theories that have been generated to account for model learning behaviours, two theories seem to be dominant. One is psychoanalytic theory, which argues that identification with appropriate parental figures is crucial to a child’s self-development (Freud, 1925). The other is social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), which emphasises the importance of imitation and role modelling in helping people acquire appropriate social skills.

With regard to psychoanalytic theory, a child imitates and subsequently endorses the perceived attitudes and values of parents, while at the same time maintains his/her distinctive identity from that of parents. Pleiss and Feldhusen (1995) have argued that models may also serve as a secure base necessary for the maintenance and growth of an individual’s ego development. In the absence of such a secure base, an individual may worry, panic, and tend to show an immature ego development. Research generally shows that modelling effects are enhanced when a child identifies with the character he/she is observing (Hamilton & Darling, 1996).

In the case of social learning theory, the process of imitation involves four steps (attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation processes) which, taken together, enable people to learn by modelling their behaviours after those of others. Such vicarious learning also enables people to regulate their own behaviours simply by watching others being rewarding or punished for engaging in certain behaviours.

Model learning has also been shown to be particularly effective in teaching new skills or behaviours to students (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1987). For example, Schunk and Hanson (1985) found that low-achieving students who doubted their ability to learn, often benefited from being allowed to identify with a model who, though similarly low-achieving, persevered and eventually mastered the material in question. In addition, modelling themselves on a celebrity figure could be instrumental in adolescent identity formation in that it can help adolescents to develop aspirations for the future. In this sense, Bandura (1971) equated identification with imitation, but other theorists argue that identification is more concerned with the child’s personality than is imitation (Feshbach & Weiner, 1986).

Due to the commercialisation of pop music, Hong Kong, proportionally by population, may have housed more pop singers and movie stars than any other city in the world (e.g., Chan et al., 1998; Leung, 1999). These pop and movie stars are cherished by its young people for being young, wealthy, beautiful (handsome), carefree, and hedonistic (Cheung & Yue, 1999). In China, however, young people have been used to idolising public models promoted by the government, such as political heroes, war martyrs, model workers, self-sacrificing people, and accomplished scholars. A common characteristic of these people is a zealous commitment to fulfilling one’s duties to society, even to the point of sacrificing one’s own life. As such, identification with their heroic or altruistic behaviours has been encouraged and publicly promoted by the government among young people.

One particular example is that of Lei Feng, a young soldier who demonstrated a strongly altruistic personality and died whilst on active service. For all of the dedicated and unselfish acts he had committed, Lei Feng was promoted, for several decades in China, as an idol to millions of young Chinese to identify with. 2 Contrary to a pop star, Lei Feng is humble, plain, and mundane, and represents a simplicity in lifestyles and a dedication to serving others.

With China’s increased openness to the outside world since the late 1970s, Chinese young people have increasingly been exposed to pop stars from the West, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Nevertheless, young people in China are reported to have continued idolising political figures, public models, and accomplished scholars as before, and Lei Feng was still

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1 Lei Feng (1940–62), was a driver for an army unit in Northeastern China. He had reportedly done many “good things” for people around him, be they friends or strangers to him, before he died in active service. He was thus promoted as a model soldier and citizen for new China. He was most quoted for saying that “a person’s life is only limited, so he should use his limited time to serve the people unlimitedly”. 2 To help promote Lei Feng as a public model in socialist China, all the top leaders of China wrote dedications for him. What Mao Ze Dong wrote was “to learn from Lei Feng”. The slogan used to be painted at every school in China.
frequently nominated as a top idol for young people (Oriental Express, 1998). This may be attributed partly to the great success of governmental promotion of Lei Feng for decades and partly to a lack, as yet, of commercialisation of pop music in China.

Summing up, what the foregoing perspectives generally point to is a human developmental need to identify with some significant people in life, be they well-known or unknown, remote or proximal, promoted or self-chosen, so as to inspire oneself in some specified areas or situations. Compared with an idol, a model appears to be more instrumental, practical, realistic to the model observers and more vicarious. After all, perceived model-observer similarity is critical to model learning (Schunk, 1987), whereas remote intimacy seems to be the key factor in idol worship.

However, it remains to be determined as to what social or personality characteristics are generally attributed to an idol as compared to a model. Questions such as in what ways an idol differs from a model, to what extent such differences may affect an adolescent’s selection of favourite idols and models in life, and what specific roles an idol or a model play in an adolescent’s search for intimacy and identity remain largely unaddressed. The empirical findings which have been generated so far are, by and large, speculative and inadequate. Additionally, it remains to be determined how the selection of idols and models by young people living in China differs in comparison to those living in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Questions concerning the effect of age, gender, education, and place on adolescent idol worship and model learning need to be more adequately addressed.

This study, therefore, attempts to clarify the social or personality attributes of an idol and a model as perceived by adolescents in Chinese societies. It also attempts to reveal effects of gender, education, and place on the selection of favourite idols and models among Chinese young people living in Hong Kong and some mainland cities. To help construct the present study, three hypotheses were formed based on the foregoing review.

**Hypothesis 1.** An idol is generally conceived by young people as being idealistic, full of talents, extraordinary, romantic, passionate, and irresistible. In contrast, a model is generally conceived by young people as being realistic, similar, mundane, practical, successful, and worthy of imitation. In other words, the criteria for selecting an idol appear to be oriented in idealism, romanticism, and absolutism, whereas the criteria for selecting a model appear to be oriented in realism, rationalism, and relativism.

**Hypothesis 2.** The younger and less educated people are, the more likely they are to idolise idealism-romanticism-absolutism oriented people than those who are rationalism-realism-relativism oriented; conversely, the older and more educated people are, the more likely they are to idolise rationalism-realism-relativism oriented people (i.e., age and education would have an effect on how young people idolise significant people in their lives).

**Hypothesis 3.** When choosing a favourite idol, young people in Hong Kong are likely to choose more idealism-romanticism-absolutism oriented people than young people in mainland China; in choosing a favourite model young people in mainland China are likely to choose more rationalism-realism-relativism oriented people than young people in Hong Kong. For operational convenience, an idealism-romanticism-absolutism (IRA) idol/model is conceived as someone who is most likely to be young, energetic, wealthy, beautiful/handsome, and work in entertainment or sports industries, whereas a realism-rationalism-relativism (RRR) idol/model is conceived as someone who is most likely to be undistinguished for their youth, appearances or wealth, but for their outstanding success in any walk of life.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample for the present study comprised 826 high school and university students from Hong Kong and Nanjing, including 167 high school students and 110 university students from Hong Kong, and 224 high school students and 325 university students from Nanjing. The high school students in Hong Kong were sampled from three local secondary schools, consisting of 66.7% males and 33.3% females, with a mean age of 15.74 years (SD = 0.83). The university students in Hong Kong were sampled from two local universities, consisting of 27.8% males and 72.2% females, with a mean age of 20.66 (SD = 0.97). The high school students in Nanjing were sampled from one local secondary school, consisting of 46.5% males and 53.5% females with a mean age of 15.97 years old (SD = 0.73). The university students in Nanjing were sampled from one local university, consisting of 67.3% males and 32.7% females, with a mean age of 19.21 (SD = .95).

**Measures**

A questionnaire was specifically designed to measure respondents’ criteria for choosing favourite idols and models in life. Six sets of rating items were developed to measure idol worship and model-learning behaviours by idealism versus realism, romanticism versus rationalism, absolutism versus relativism. In each of these attribute sets, there were four separate, thematically similar rating items previously screened from a larger pool of items. For example, the attribute set of idealism includes very talented, attractive-looking, powerful, and extraordinary in manner. The attribute set for realism, on the other hand, includes prosaic, simple in life, ordinary-looking, and similar to ordinary people.

A repeated-measure approach was used for data collection in that all sets of items were used twice, once for measuring idol worship and once for measuring model learning. The response format is a 5-point Likert scale from 5 representing most agreement to 1, least agreement. To avoid any bias due to the order of items, rating items were randomly interspersed across different sections within the questionnaire. To counterbalance any bias in rating, two separate versions of the questionnaire (forms A and B) were developed, and the sequence of the rating items for idol worship and model learning were reversed. In addition, each respondent was asked to name up to three of their most favourite idol and model celebrities, respectively. To ensure the success of the main study, a pilot study involving 50 university students was conducted and, based on its outcome, revisions were made to both the content and format of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was printed in Chinese and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.
Procedure

For data collection in Hong Kong, university students attending the two authors' classes were given the questionnaires to complete in class. High school students of two teachers who attended the post-graduate diploma courses in psychology with the first author were also given the questionnaires to complete in class. For data collection in Nanjing, four classes of students attending a local university and five classes of students attending a local high school completed the questionnaires in class. The sampling in Nanjing was so arranged that it would match with the Hong Kong sample as closely as possible in terms of age, grade, and academic prestige of the schools selected.

To examine the differential criteria for idol worship and model learning, repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance is used in the presence of such covariates as, place (Hong Kong, Nanjing), education (university, high school), gender (male, female), and the order of the rating scale for idol worship relative to that for model learning. Treating ratings for idols and models as repeated measures, this analysis examined variation in the ratings due to four sources, place, gender, education, and order of rating (i.e., rating for idols first or rating for models first). The analysis essentially divided the test into two parts: (1) testing for variation in ratings for both idols and models in general; and (2) testing for variation in differentials in ratings between idols and models. In addition to the tests, the analysis estimated means for the ratings by adjusting for uneven (unbalanced) distributions of place, gender, education, and order of rating. These uneven distributions implied that the sources of variation were not independent. Therefore, a multivariate analytic technique was necessary to eliminate bias due to the uneven distribution.

Results

Repeated-measures analysis of variance provided the test of Hypothesis 1 concerning variation in ratings for the idol and model and the test of Hypotheses 2 and 3 concerning variation in ratings among educational levels, and between the two regions. It also estimated means for different educational levels, place, and gender by taking into consideration their uneven distributions in the sample.

Conceptual differences between an idol and a model

Hypothesis 1 concerning differentials in the importance of criteria for choosing idols and models received fair support from the tests. Accordingly, differentials in ratings of students in general were significant for romanticism, rationalism, idealism, and realism in the expected direction as can be seen in Table 1.

Specifically, students regarded romanticism and idealism as more important when choosing idols (mean = 35.9 and 48.7, see Table 3) than when choosing a model (30.1 and 44.4). On the other hand, when choosing a model, more emphasis was placed on rationalism and realism than when choosing an idol (means = 57.0 and 31.5). Although not showing significant differences, absolutism appeared to be more important for students' choice of idols than models (mean = 30.1 vs. 28.6), and relativism appeared slightly more important for choosing models than idols (mean = 56.6 vs. 55.1). All the pattern of differentials in importance ratings were in line with Hypothesis 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romanticism</td>
<td>25.0*</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationalism</td>
<td>54.8*</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>9.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealism</td>
<td>18.5*</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>31.2*</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutism</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.9*</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 (2-tailed).

The analysis also examined whether these differentials held for students of different education levels, genders, and places. Results showed that there were only three significant variations in the differentials due to these background characteristics. The two differentials that involved significant gender differences were those concerning importance ratings for rationalism and realism. For both boys and girls, rationalism and realism were more important for choosing models (adjusted means = 65.9, 64.2, 37.1, 34.3, see Table 3) than for choosing idols (adjusted means = 60.0, 55.7, 35.1, 28.9). These differences were also consistent with Hypothesis 1. Another significant difference is the differential in the importance of absolutism between students in Hong Kong and Nanjing. Although Nanjing students held absolutism to be more important for choosing idols than models (adjusted mean = 27.3 vs. 25.6), those in Hong Kong favoured absolutism more for choosing models than idols (adjusted mean = 38.6 vs. 34.6). Hence, the former pattern of differentials in the importance of absolutism was consistent with Hypothesis 1. For the other criteria, patterns consistent with Hypothesis 1 held among students of different educational levels, genders, and place.

Effects of place, education, gender, and order of ranking on idol worship and model learning

The repeated-measures analysis of variance tested variation in ratings in general and differentials in ratings between idols and models due to the sources of the place, gender, education, and order of rating. Concerning tests of variation in ratings in general, results showed that the place (Hong Kong vs. Nanjing) contributed to significant variation in ratings of all six criteria as shown in Table 1. In addition, education (high school vs university) led to significant variation in all ratings, except those for rationalism. Gender was a significant source of variation for romanticism, realism, and absolutism. In contrast, variation due to the order of rating was only minor. However, it was still significantly responsible for variation in ratings for rationalism and realism.

When the estimated means were adjusted for uneven distribution of place, gender, education, and order of rating, the significant differences noted above became transparent. With regard to significant variation due to education, the results revealed that high school students put more emphasis on romanticism, idealism, realism, absolutism, and relativism than did university students. These results all support Hypothesis 2. Regarding significant variation due to place, as can be seen in Table 2, the results indicated that students in Hong Kong put more emphasis on all the six criteria for choosing both idols and models than did students in Nanjing. These results lend support to Hypothesis 3. As regards
significant variation due to gender, results showed that boys put more emphasis on romanticism, realism, and absolutism than did girls.

In the tests for differentials in ratings between idols and models, results revealed that the differentials were significant in ratings for romanticism, rationalism, idealism, and realism as can be seen in Table 3. In addition to the overall differentials, gender was a significant source of variation in differentials in rating for rationalism and realism. That is, these differentials were significantly different for boys and girls. Place (Hong Kong vs. Nanjing) also contributed significant variation in rating differentials for absolutism.

With reference to the adjusted means, the three significant differences noted earlier became clear. As regards the significant gender differences, results showed that the relative importance of rationalism and realism as criteria for choosing models as compared with idols was more salient among girls (64.2 vs. 55.7) than boys (65.9 vs. 60.0). Concerning significant variations in the differential due to place, results revealed that, whereas students in Hong Kong emphasised absolutism more when choosing models (38.6) than idols (34.6), their counterparts in Nanjing emphasised it slightly more when choosing idols (27.3) than models (25.6).

Taken together, the present findings indicate that education, place, and gender had some significant effects on how young people chose their idols and models in life, thus providing convergent support to Hypotheses 1 and 2. In general, the older and more educated people are in either Hong Kong or Nanjing, the less likely they are to choose idols who are oriented in idealism, romanticism, and absolutism. Young people in Hong Kong seem to demonstrate a greater preference for the six criteria than did their counterparts in Nanjing.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Referent</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Nanjing</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>University</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romanticism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationalism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>46.0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
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<td>35.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<td>28.9</td>
<td>36.4</td>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>37.1</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>28.6</td>
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<td>34.5</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td>Idol</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>56.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>55.7</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*p < .05 (2-tailed).

### Selection of favourite idols and models by young people in Hong Kong and Nanjing

Table 4 displays the frequency counts for students’ selection of favourite idol and model celebrities in Hong Kong and Nanjing respectively.

For the selection of favourite idols, young people in Hong Kong selected significantly more idealism-romanticism-absolutism (IRA) celebrities and significantly less realism-rationalism-relativism (RRR) celebrities than did young people in Nanjing. Close to 75% of the favourite idols selected by Hong Kong university students and 86% of the favourite idols selected by Hong Kong high school students were IRA celebrities. In contrast, only 61% of the favourite idols selected by Nanjing high school students and 22% of the favourite idols selected by Nanjing university students were IRA celebrities. The most striking finding is that Hong Kong university students selected 3.5 times more IRA celebrities than Nanjing university students.

For selection of favourite models, over 96% of the favourite models selected by Nanjing university students and 91% of the favourite models selected by Nanjing high school students were RRR celebrities. In contrast, 82% of the favourite models selected by Hong Kong university students and 61% of the favourite models selected by Hong Kong high school students were IRA celebrities. Equally intriguing to note is that nearly 30% of the favourite models selected by Nanjing university students and nearly 20% of the favourite models selected by Nanjing high school students were public models. This shows that public model figures, however ordinary and common they may appear, still attract young people’s admiration. All these findings offer strong support to Hypothesis 3, indicating that IRA celebrities were much more popular as idols for young people in Hong Kong and than those in Nanjing.

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Table 4 comprises a three-step procedure: (1) recording onto a list all names that were nominated by students as their favourite idol/model figures; (2) singling out from the list all the Chinese and foreign celebrities through a blind review process by the two authors as well as two research assistants working for this study; (3) putting together all the names of celebrities to form a final list.
Table 4
Comparison of frequency counts for favourite idols and models selected by university and high school students in Hong Kong and Nanjing

| Celebrities | Favourite idols | | | | | Favourite models | | |
|-------------|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | University Students | | High School Students | | | University Students | | High School Students | |
| | Hong Kong | Nanjing | Hong Kong | Nanjing | Hong Kong | Nanjing | Hong Kong | Nanjing | Hong Kong | Nanjing |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| A. Idealism-Romanticism-Absolutism Oriented | | | | | | | | | | |
| Music singers | 72 | 44.2 | 38 | 9.6 | 187 | 59.2 | 67 | 21.9 | 9 | 7.6 | 1 | 0.3 | 29 | 17.6 | 11 | 3.2 |
| Movie actors | 30 | 18.4 | 25 | 6.3 | 54 | 17.1 | 47 | 15.4 | 8 | 6.8 | 4 | 1.0 | 20 | 12.1 | 4 | 1.2 |
| Athletes | 20 | 12.3 | 25 | 6.3 | 30 | 9.5 | 72 | 23.5 | 4 | 3.4 | 12 | 3.1 | 16 | 9.7 | 16 | 4.7 |
| Total | 122 | 74.8 | 88 | 22.3 | 271 | 85.8 | 186 | 60.8 | 21 | 17.8 | 17 | 4.4 | 65 | 39.4 | 31 | 9.1 |
| B. Realism-Rationalism-Relativism Oriented | | | | | | | | | | |
| Politicians/statesmen | 25 | 15.3 | 180 | 45.6 | 26 | 8.2 | 70 | 22.9 | 57 | 48.3 | 140 | 36.2 | 51 | 30.9 | 156 | 45.7 |
| Writers/poets | 5 | 3.1 | 10 | 2.5 | 2 | 0.6 | 12 | 3.9 | 8 | 6.8 | 17 | 4.4 | 11 | 6.7 | 25 | 7.3 |
| Businessmen | 2 | 1.2 | 4 | 1.0 | 3 | 0.9 | 5 | 1.6 | 4 | 3.4 | 2 | 0.5 | 8 | 4.8 | 4 | 1.2 |
| Scientists/inventors | 1 | 0.6 | 77 | 19.5 | 5 | 1.6 | 19 | 6.2 | 8 | 6.8 | 83 | 21.4 | 3 | 1.8 | 38 | 11.1 |
| Public model figures | 2 | 1.2 | 5 | 1.3 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1.6 | 11 | 9.3 | 111 | 28.7 | 13 | 7.9 | 68 | 19.9 |
| Famous generals | 0 | 0.0 | 16 | 4.0 | 4 | 1.3 | 4 | 1.3 | 3 | 2.5 | 20 | 5.3 | 3 | 1.8 | 10 | 2.9 |
| Philosophers/educators | 2 | 1.2 | 5 | 1.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3.4 | 4 | 1.0 | 5 | 3.0 | 3 | 0.9 |
| Artists/painters | 2 | 1.2 | 2 | 0.5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Musicians | 2 | 1.2 | 8 | 2.0 | 5 | 1.6 | 5 | 1.6 | 2 | 1.7 | 3 | 0.8 | 5 | 3.0 | 4 | 1.2 |
| Total | 41 | 25.2 | 307 | 77.7 | 45 | 14.2 | 120 | 39.2 | 106 | 82.2 | 370 | 95.6 | 100 | 60.6 | 310 | 90.9 |

*The celebrities listed in the table were jointly identified by the two authors of the paper as well as two of their research assistants.

*Total number of frequency counts for various kinds of celebrities.

*Many singers in Hong Kong are also movie stars. In such cases, they are defined by what they are better known. No celebrity is counted twice in the present coding. The same is also true for coding of other celebrities of conflicting roles.

*Public model figures in Hong Kong typically include religious people like Mother Theresa, in China they include people like Lei Feng.
Education showed an apparent effect on young people's selection of IRA celebrities over RRR celebrities. In general, the more educated the young people, the less likely they were to choose IRA celebrities over RRR celebrities. The education effect is more remarkable for young people in Nanjing than those in Hong Kong. This finding offers good support to Hypothesis 2, as well.

Discussion

The present findings show that for Chinese young people, idealism, romanticism, and absolutism were more important for selecting idols; whereas realism, rationalism, and relativism were more important for selecting models. The differential selection pattern is more evident for young people in Hong Kong than those in Nanjing. Of these differences, rationalism and relativism were significantly more important for choosing models over idols, especially in the female group. High school students, relative to university students, regarded realism significantly more descriptive of models than idols. By implications of these findings, it is conceptually important to distinguish, in as explicit terms as possible, how an idol differs from a model in examining how young people admire significant people in their lives. Cherishing an idol could have quite different motivational implications and consequences over cherishing a model. In fact, it has been argued that in idol worship, the attributed characteristics of idol figures are likely to be overly enhanced or idealised (e.g., Fromm, 1967), whereas in model learning, perceived similarity between model and observer largely determines the outcome expectations (e.g., Schunk, 1987). The present findings substantiate such an argument and further reveal a significant education effect on how young people differentiate an idol from a model. This will not only help us understand the manners in which young people cherish significant people in their lives, but also enable us to emphasise the excitement and confusion the adolescent may experience in searching for meaningful idols or models for their identity formation. The salient selection of various celebrities demonstrate that many Chinese young people are eager to identify with distinctive people or social groups as their inspiring role models. In such cases, it may be argued that the young people are searching for a social identity, not just an individual identity (Wang, 1994).

Specifically, it has also been shown that young people in Hong Kong, in comparison to young people in Nanjing, cherished IRA celebrities more than RRR celebrities. This difference in selection might be attributed to the significant social differences in youth culture in Hong Kong and China. In Hong Kong, young people have been shown to be driven strongly by a consumerist need in their choice of idol (Chan et al. 1998) and to be highly influenced by superficial and illusory romance (Cheung & Yue, 1999). From this, it is no surprise that young people in Hong Kong would identify so much with the commercial or hedonic successes of their idols and that their selection of idols is market-driven and media-determined (Leung, 1999). Given these features, it may be argued that the adolescent idol worship culture in Hong Kong is primarily a “three stars worship” culture (worshipping pop stars, movie stars, and sports stars), essential to which is a genuine admiration for the glamour, youthfulness, wealth, and uniqueness that the “three stars” typically represent in their private or public lives (Yue, 1999).

In Nanjing, young people have traditionally been pushed to identify with various idols periodically promoted by the government. Central to this promotion is cultivation of some desirable moral or personality characteristics such as honesty, modesty, persistence, self-sacrificing, self-determination, and dedication to society. These characteristics would constitute the “inner beauty” of a person by the moral education standards in China. In fact, with the consistent governmental promotion of people with simple lifestyles, humble backgrounds, but dedicated service to community interests, as role models for young people to identify with, there has not been a clear distinction between an idol and a model for many years in China (Xue, 1997). The two roles have been perfectly unified for advocating role models that embody the moral perfection of people living in socialist China. Thus, it is quite natural that young people in Nanjing overwhelmingly preferred RRR celebrities to IRA celebrities as it is the “inner beauty” that the young people have been educated to search for. Equally natural is that people like Lei Feng, after over three decades of promotion, could still be a popular idol for Chinese young people nowadays. Given the increasing relaxation of many of the socialist cultural values in Chinese societies now, Lei Feng’s persistence in idol worship signals a yearning for appreciation of “inner beauty” characters that are not typically present in the “three stars worship” culture. Therefore, it may be argued the adolescent idol worship culture in China is primarily a “model worship” culture (worshipping role models in various walks of life), essential to which is an enhanced identification for the moral and personality attributes that are characteristic of these role models’ successes (Yue, 1999). Alternatively, the “model worship” culture is highly value-loaded and has been distinctive of the social and political milieu of the Chinese society.

The effect of education on differential selection of IRA and RRR celebrities, however, needs to be cautiously interpreted and more studies are needed before any solid claims can be made. It may be a function of empowerment of learning or knowledge on one’s self-valuation, or it may simply be a function of growth effect. After all, as adolescents become older, they become increasingly self-reliant and capable of inspiring themselves instead of being inspired by others (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). More studies are needed to further examine the somewhat confusing gender differences on the Chinese young people’s selection of favourite idols and models reported in the present study. It is intriguing to note that males, instead of females, cared more for romanticism and absolutism in idol worship.

The present study also leaves several methodological concerns that need to be further addressed. For example, the question of how long and to what extent the transitional role idol worship has an effect on identity development needs more examination. In addition, the extent to which the idolisation of celebrities by adolescents may reflect their own conflicts in forming a positive identity is also an important direction for further study. More research is also needed to examine how adolescent idol worship and model learning relate to self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and other personality attributes (Cheung & Yue, 1999; Yue, 1999).

Some limitations in the present study stem from the fact that the study only sampled young people from Nanjing, which is far from being representative of the diverse populations in mainland China. Further studies should select samples from more and differing regions. In particular, it would be
interesting to examine how young people living in rural areas of China select their favourite idols as compared with those living in urban areas. Further research will also benefit from including people within a wider age-span, a wider variety of educational background, and include occupational characteristics. This would help to validate the generalisability of the criteria for adolescent idol worship and model learning, used in this and some other cross-cultural studies on idol worship (e.g., Gash & Conway, 1997).

Finally, it may be argued that the questions arising from the present study are even more important than those originally addressed. In particular, issues concerning the consequences of idol worship and model learning in adolescence, and clarification of the correlation within and between the perceived social or personality attributes that characterise idol worship and model learning, still remain to be investigated.

References


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