

Low Preference for Shy Peers in China: Increasing Context Sensitivity from Preschool to Adolescence



Jincheng Wu¹, Yiwen Chen¹, Shuyi Zhai^{1*}
¹College of Education, Zhejiang University of Technology, CHINA

Contact: shuyizhai@zjut.edu.cn



Background:

- Shyness predicts peer rejection and internalizing problems in Western cultures (Rubin et al., 2009), but was historically linked to greater peer preference and competence in traditional China (Chen et al., 1995). In contemporary China, however, it is increasingly tied to adjustment difficulties (Liu et al., 2015).
- As social cognition matures, children's judgments of peers become more reasoned, increasingly weighing context and the target's characteristics rather than reacting to a single trait (Myslinska-Szarek & Warneken, 2025; Grueneisen et al., 2023).
- Children tend to favor peers similar to themselves, so attributes such as gender and one's own shyness can shape whom they prefer (Yang et al., 2021; Maccoby, & Jacklin, 1987).

Research Question:

The current study investigated how shy peers are perceived and responded to by peers across development. Specifically, we examined:

- Whether Chinese children's show low preferences towards peer shyness;
- Whether such preference could be influenced by social context, age, or self-shyness.

Methods:

Participants

- Preschoolers ($N = 102$, $M_{age} = 5.71$ years) and adolescents ($N = 123$, $M_{age} = 13.67$ years), recruited from public schools in Zhejiang Province, China.

Materials and Procedure

- Temperamental Shyness: Before experiments, parents of preschooler finished Children's Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Rothbart, 1996) shyness subscale; adolescent finished self-report Children's Shyness Questionnaire (CSQ; Crozier, 1995)
- Preschoolers were tested individually in a quiet room; adolescents were tested in groups with paper-based materials. Materials were adapted to be developmentally appropriate for each age group.
- Four hypothetical peers were introduced to each participant: a High-Shy Boy, a High-Shy Girl, a Low-Shy Boy, and a Low-Shy Girl.
- Participants then completed three tasks (see **Figure 1** for examples):
 - Friendship Choice Task** (Fig.1a): Participants chose the peer they would most like to befriend.
 - Seat Selection Task** (Fig.1b, adapted from Marinović et al., 2017): With each hypothetical peer seated on one side, participants chose one of four available seats.
 - Scenario-Based Partner Choice Task** (Fig.1c): Participants selected a collaborative partner across high- vs. low-social scenarios (6 scenarios for preschoolers, 8 for adolescents).

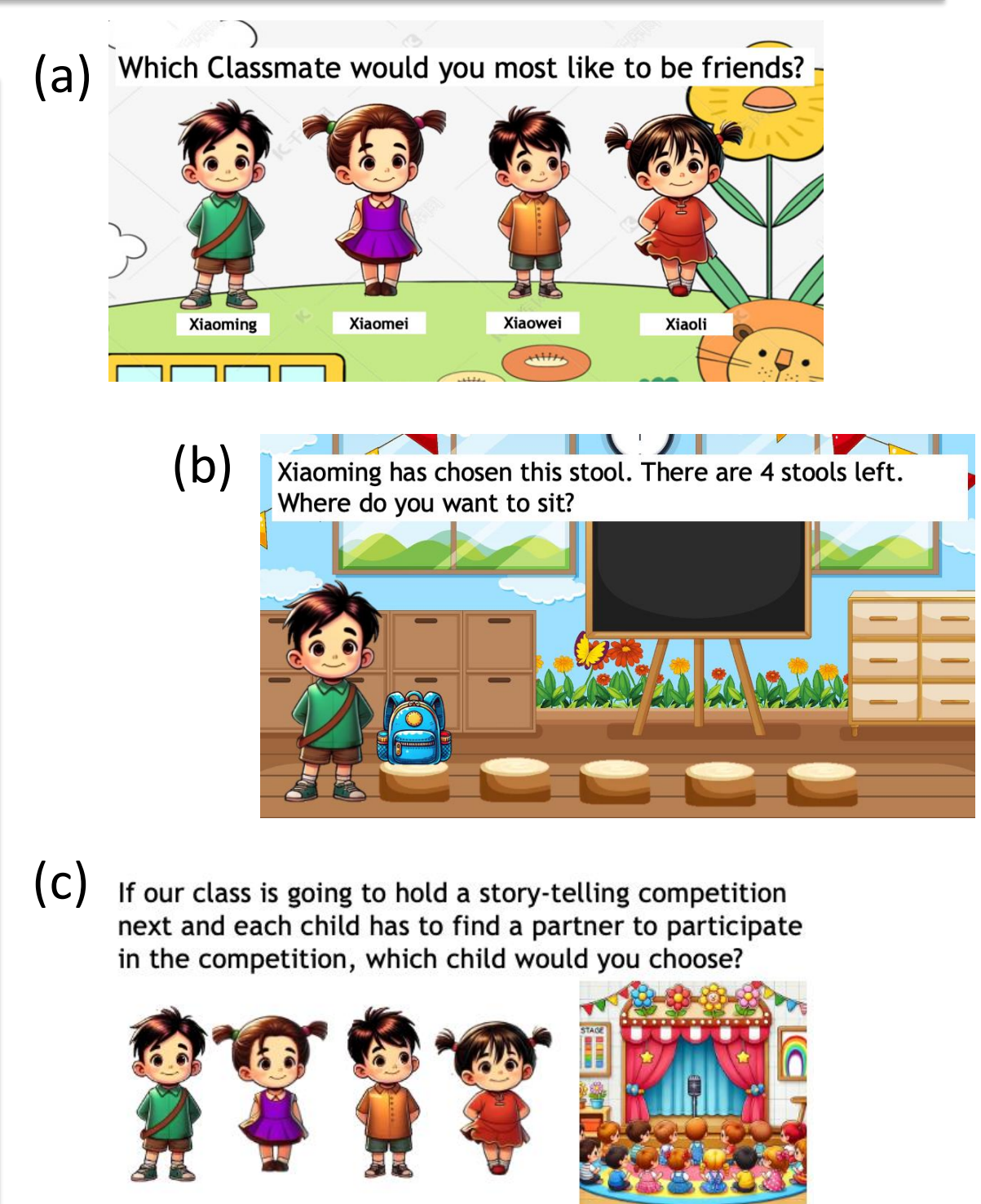


Figure 1. Examples of peer preference tasks

Table 1. Friendship choice and seat selection, by age group and peer type.

Task	High-Shy	Low-Shy
Friendship Choice <i>chosen as friend, % (n participants)</i>		
Preschoolers	19.6% (20)	80.4% (82)
Adolescents	21.1% (26)	78.9% (97)
Seat Selection <i>distance M (SD)</i>		
Preschoolers	2.01 (0.69)	1.76 (0.78)
Adolescents	2.16 (1.00)	2.05 (0.99)
Partner Selection <i>chosen as partner, % (n trials)</i>		
Preschoolers	27.3% (167)	72.7% (445)
Adolescents	29.2% (285)	70.8% (691)

Note. In Partner Selection, n represents number of trials (6 scenarios per preschooler, 8 per adolescent; 612 and 976 total trials respectively).

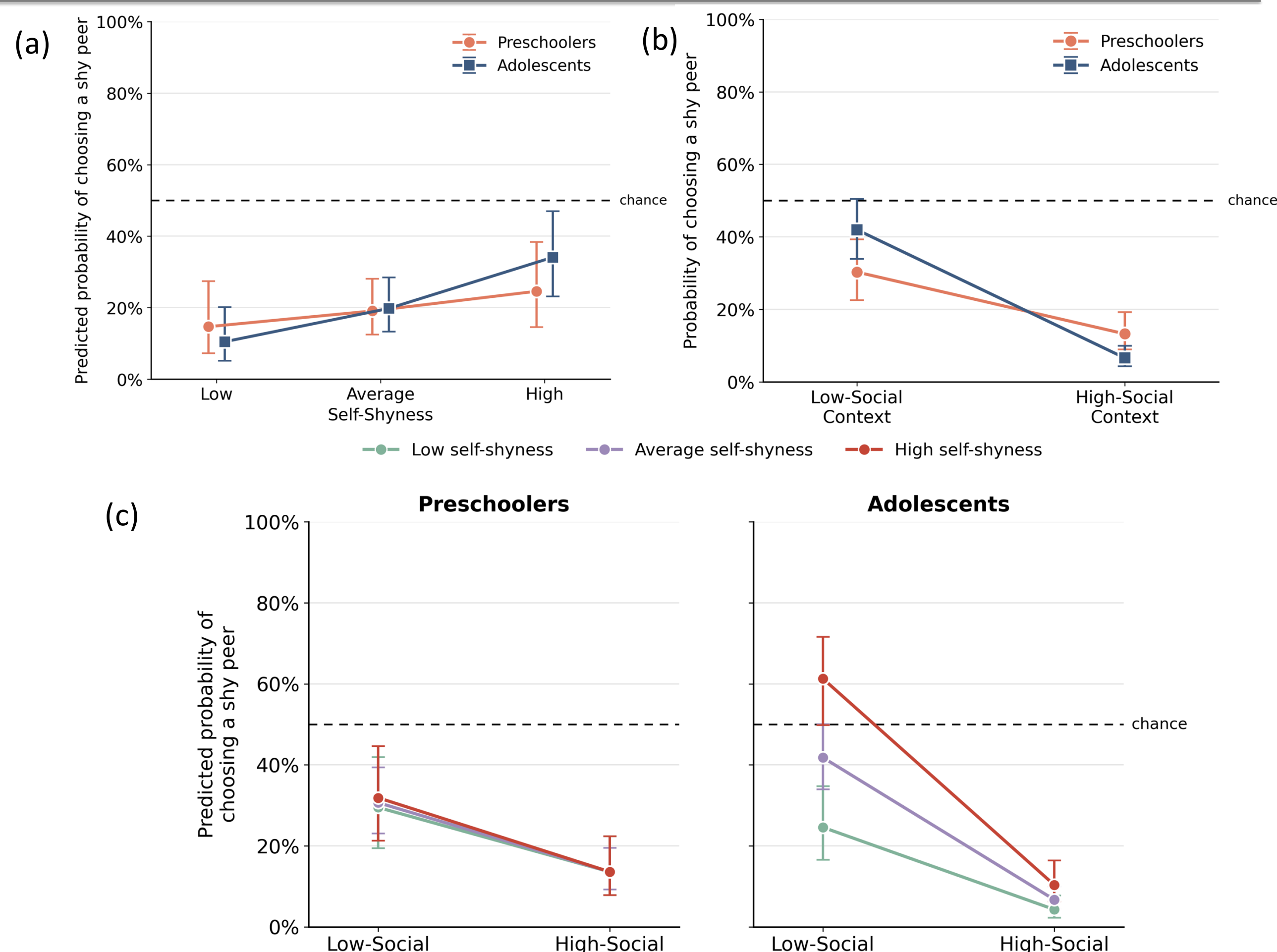


Figure 2. The effect of self-shyness and age on children's peer choice tasks

Result:

- Shy peers were less preferred in friendship (See descriptive statistics in **Table 1**, both $p < .001$) and partner choice tasks (both $p < .001$) across all ages.
- Preschoolers sat farther from shy peers ($t = 2.61$, $p = .010$), adolescents did not ($t = 1.01$, $p = .312$).
- Shyness significantly predicted shy peer friendship preference in adolescents ($p = .001$); the same trend in preschoolers was weaker and non-significant ($p = .22$). (**Figure. 2a**)
- Significant Age \times Context interaction ($z = -4.39$, $p < .001$): adolescents rejected shy peers far more in high-social (7%) than low-social (42%) settings; preschoolers differentiated less (13% vs. 30%). (**Figure. 2b**)
- Significant Age \times Self-Shyness interaction ($z = 2.55$, $p = .011$) showed that higher self-shyness predicted greater preference for shy peers among adolescents but not preschoolers. Among adolescents, this similarity preference was significant in both low-social context ($p < .001$) and high-social context ($p = .019$); preschoolers showed no association in either context ($ps > .77$). (**Figure. 2c**)

Conclusion:

- Chinese children's low preference for shy peers emerges early and persists across development but becomes **increasingly context-sensitive** with age.
- In adolescence, this low preference is **moderated by children's own shyness**, with shyer adolescents showing a stronger preference for shy peers.



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About the Research