

Cohabitation and Marriage in China: Past and Present

Li Ma, Catholic University of Louvain; Stockholm University
Ester Rizzi, Catholic University of Louvain

Introduction

There is a large body of literature on marriage patterns and trends in China, especially for the economic reform periods after 1978. Some studies show that marriage in China has been concentrated in a relatively narrow age range and has remained nearly universal (Frejka et al. 2010), whereas more recent studies provide contradictory findings, arguing that the previous universal marriage has gradually fallen into decay in the economic reform era of China; instead, a later and more selective marriage has emerged, with higher chances of marriage entry for men with better economic prospects (Mu and Xie 2014, Yu and Xie 2015a). Meanwhile, marriage delay is becoming increasingly pronounced among both men and women (Yeung and Hu 2013). Prolonged education and economic development have been pinpointed as the main driving forces behind the marriage development (Yu and Xie 2015a).

In contrast to the magnitude of studies on marriage, little research has addressed cohabitation in China, owing to the absence of available data. A forthcoming study of Yu and Xie (2015b) makes a breakthrough by providing the first national estimates of the prevalence and determinants of cohabitation in China. An increase in cohabitation is observed across birth cohorts for both women and men. Individuals living in urban areas, with higher educational attainment, and higher-status family background take the lead in this non-traditional family practice, implying that cohabitation is more acceptable by those with greater knowledge of Western societies.

However, existing research more often concentrates on the economic reform period after 1978 and addresses cohabitation or marriage exclusively. There is a dearth of literature on a more extensive timeline of cohabitation and marriage trends, and the link between these two important outcomes. This study will tend to this knowledge gap. We will provide a more comprehensive view of cohabitation and marriage in China by spanning the observation period over seven decades (from 1940 to 2012). 1949-1950¹, 1971², 1978-1980³, 1992⁴, 2001⁵ will act as the critical junctures, representing important regime and socio-economic changes in Contemporary China. Our research question is: do family formation trends developed in concert with these critical junctures? Our first hypothesis is that the seven decades, which we have identified as associated with specific marriage laws and socio-economic contexts, profoundly affect trends of family formation. In our second hypothesis, we assume that the influence of periods of observation varies according to the socio-economic status of women and men.

Theoretical framework

Entering into marriage is an important life-course transition. Marriage has been approved of in societies across the world as the preferred acceptable form of union formation. Throughout history it has been intimately linked to fertility (Bethmann and Kvasnicka 2011). Establishing a family requires the means for the necessities of life. Therefore, the state of the economy is a prerequisite, as it affects couple's capability to establish home (Thornton et al. 2007). During the pre-economic reform period in China (that is, before 1978), the social and economic inequality existed between the rural and urban areas, with urbanites enjoying more social advantage; but the difference between individuals within each division was quite moderate (Hao et al. 2014). At that time, marriage was universal; individuals often stayed with parents until entering marriage (Yu and Xie 2015b). However, along

¹ 1949: Establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC); 1950: the launch of the first *Marriage Law*, regulating the lowest age of marriage - 20 for men and 18 for women

² 1971: "later, longer, and fewer" family policy as the state population control policy

³ 1978: Commencement of economic reform; 1979: one-child policy; 1980: the launch of the second *Marriage Law*, reiterating the legal age of marriage

⁴ 1992: South Tour Speech of Deng Xiaoping in 1992 and comprehensive urban reform.

⁵ 2001: Amendment to *Marriage Law*, with wording change from "illegal cohabitation" to "non-marital cohabitation"

with the economic reform beginning in 1978 grew the gap increasingly not just between the rural and the urban, but also between social actors within each division. The economic reform yields opportunities, challenges and uncertainties. Literature has shown that the shift to market economy and expansion of higher education have affects many aspects of life, including attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles (Yu and Xie 2015a, Yu and Xie 2015b). Increase in ages at marriage becomes pronounced. People tend to be economically independent before getting married (Mu and Xie 2014, Yu and Xie 2015a). Meanwhile, marriage becomes more like a selective process favoring men with better economic prospects (Yu and Xie 2015a).

In the Western world, unmarried cohabitation has arisen as part of the marriage process or even an alternative to marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1989, Bumpass 1990, Bumpass et al. 1991). Some couples enter cohabitation without commitments to marriage but with the intention of using the cohabitation period to evaluate the relationship before becoming engaged (Bumpass et al. 1991). For many others, the decision to live together probably follows the explicit decision to get married (Thornton et al. 2007). Cohabitation has become a modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Research shows that the low marriage rate in recent decades in the US might be due to the increasing fraction of cohabitation without marriage, which is substantial enough to offset a significant fraction of the decline in marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). In China, cohabitation is an innovative family behavior. Its prevalence is especially pronounced among the highly educated younger cohorts (Yu and Xie 2015b).

Data and methods

Data used for analyses come from China Family Panel Studies (CFPS waves 2010 and 2012). CFPS is an almost nationwide, comprehensive, longitudinal social survey intended to serve research needs on a variety of subjects in contemporary China. The longitudinal nature of the data provides us intriguing opportunity to observe cohabitation and marriage transitions of different social actors.

We applied a three-stage analysis process. First, we applied event-history analyses to estimate individual's transition to first marriage. Our observation starts at the month when a respondent turns 15 and ends at the month of first marriage. If no event occurs, we censor our observation at the interview time or age 49, whichever comes first. At this step, cohabitation is involved as an essential explanatory variable. We anticipate seeing an amplifying effect of cohabitation to marriage entry. At the second stage, we estimate the role of cohabitation duration in first marriage formation. We would like to look into the timing of marriage entry after a period of cohabitation. Lastly, we estimate the competing risks between "direct marriage" and "marriage precluded by cohabitation" with two separate hazard regression models. Within each model, we estimate one transition while censoring for the occurrence of the other. We aim to identify when cohabitation as a prelude to marriage started gaining prevalence from four dimensions: among women and men in rural and urban China, respectively. Time since age 15 is the basic time factor. Calendar period and cohabitation are the main explanatory variables. Other covariates include time-varying factors such as education, and employment status, and background characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, childhood *hukou* status, parents' education, and parents' political status.

To better capture how cohabitation and marriage trends varied in tandem with the history of China's marriage policy and economic development, we code calendar periods into seven decades, with each representing a specific period of socio-economic and institutional changes (see footnotes 1-5). Altogether, 42356 respondents entered our observation, and 77% entered into first marriage during our observation period. 70% of cohabitations occurred in the 2000s.

Stage 1 results: First marriage

First, we estimated the hazard ratios of first marriage for women (Model 1), men (Model 2) and all respondents (Model 3), respectively⁶. Figure 1 presents the interactive effect of calendar periods and gender on first marriage in China based on the full model for all respondents (Model 3) with other covariates standardized. It exhibits a remarkable marriage decline for both women and men. During the first four decades, a clear and significant marriage rate reduction was observed for both women and men. The decline was especially strong for women during the transition from the 1940s to the 1950s and from the 1960s to the 1970s. For men, the decline processed in a smooth manner. We argue that the launch of the first *Marriage Law* in 1950, which for the first time in history regulated the legal marriage age, together with the governmental encouragement of late marriage during the 1960s-1970s as an opening step of the later population control policy contributed to this continuous marriage decline for four decades. A remarkable marriage trend reversal emerged in the 1980s, largely boosted by the adjustment of the *Marriage Law* in 1980, which guaranteed individuals' marriage right at the legal age instead of forcing a late marriage. Nonetheless, the reversal did not last long. From the 1990s, a marriage decline resumed and sustained until the end of our observation time. On the whole, the marriage rates of men were lower than those of women during our entire observation period.

Figure 1: Relative risks of first marriage for women and men by calendar periods, China (1940-2012) (reference category: women, 1980-89)

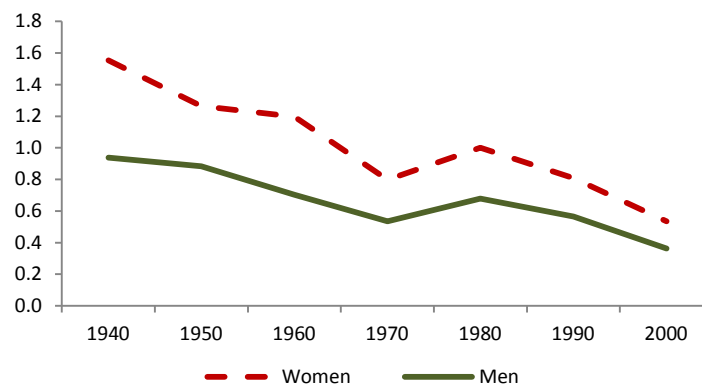
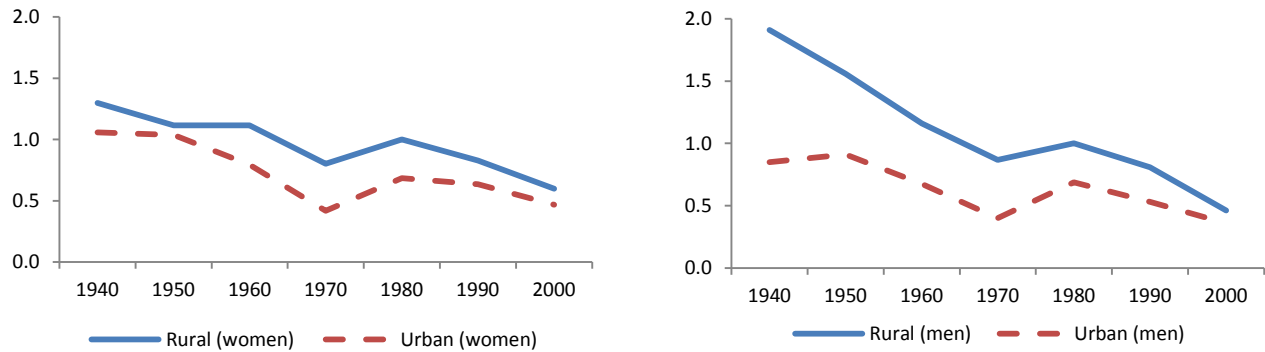


Figure 2 displays the interactive effect of *hukou* status and calendar periods on first marriage for women (based on Model 1) and men (based on Model 2), respectively. We can see that though rural women had relatively higher likelihood of first marriage than urban women, the difference was small during most of our observation periods except in the 1970s, when “later, longer and fewer” policy was strictly implemented. It seems that the governmental enforcement was more effective in urban areas than in rural areas. It is probably because the supervision and surveillance of policy implementation was stronger in urban areas, where an offence to the law may lead to being laid off by the work unit. The first marriage entry of men in rural and urban areas shows a different picture. First, the marriage trends for both rural and urban men swing along with marriage policy changes in the 1960s-1970s and the 1980s. The decline to nadir and the reversal could be seen in both parties. Second, the marriage trend for urban men has been relatively stable, in comparison to the conspicuous marriage decline of rural men. The two trends processed towards convergence at the end of our observation. Traditional hypergamy norm still persists in China today (Yu and Xie 2015a). The differential in attractiveness and economic prospects between rural and urban men as a marriage partner partially explains the trend developments.

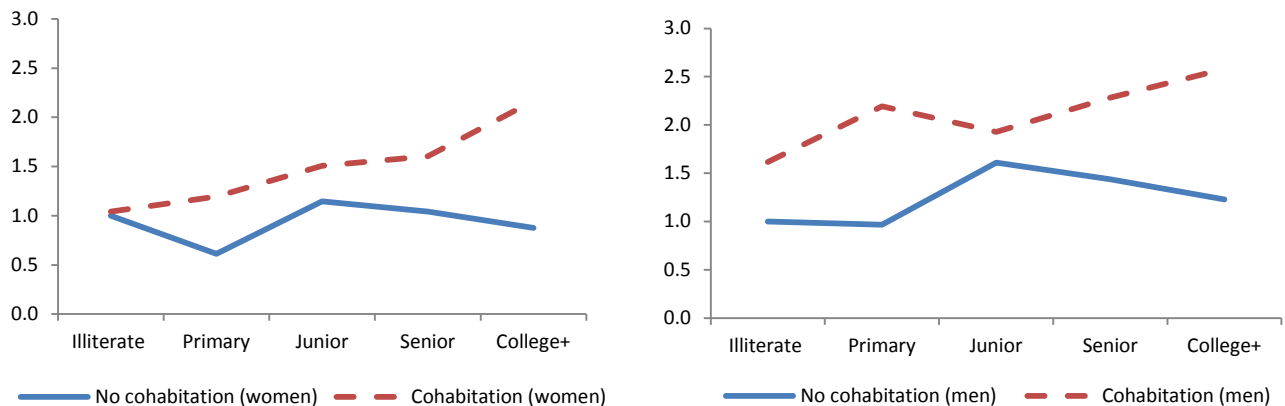
⁶ List of variables for the full model: time-varying variables include age, calendar periods, education, employment, and cohabitation before marriage; time-fixed variables include *Hukou* status at age 12, parents' education, parents' political status, ethnicity, and gender.

Figure 2: Interactive effect of *hukou* status and calendar periods on first marriage for women and men, respectively, 1940-2012 (reference category, rural, 1980-89)



The estimation cohabitation shows that cohabitation is positively associated with marriage entry for both women and men, in both rural and urban areas, suggesting that cohabitation has become an important process of marriage in Chinese society (Figures not shown). Estimations of interactive effect of cohabitation and education of women and men reveal that higher educated women and men were at the forefront of entering marriage after cohabitation (see Figure 3).

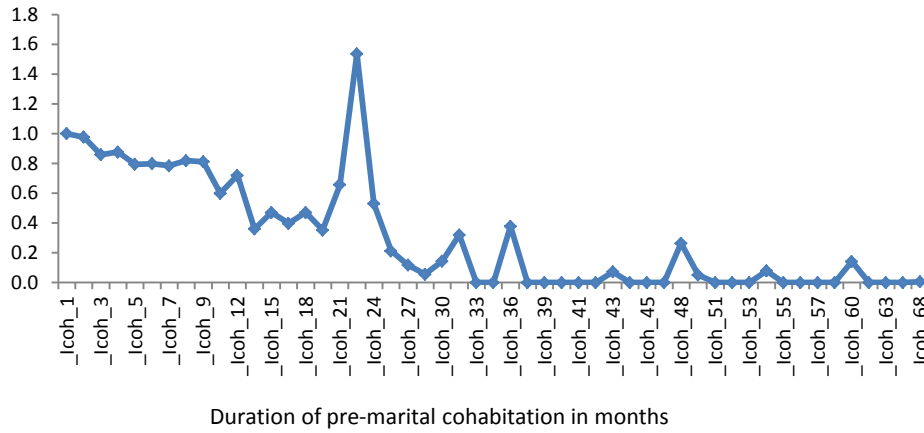
Figure 3: Interactive effect of education and cohabitation on first marriage of women and men, respectively, China (1940-2012) (reference category: Illiterate, no cohabitation before marriage)



Stage 2 results: From cohabitation to marriage

To explore how soon couples enter marriage after cohabitation, we replaced the covariate “cohabitation before marriage” with the duration of cohabitation in months. Figure 4 presents the relative risks of first marriage by duration of cohabitation for all respondents. Two important features in the figure deserve marking. First, during the first 18 months after cohabitation, couples tend to get married soon after moving together rather than later. Second, towards the second-year anniversary of moving together there is a striking rise in marriage entry, symbolizing that couples are determined to improve their relationship to a new milestone towards this time point. This anniversary effect can even be seen around the third or fourth-year of cohabitation, though the strength was less pronounced. Taken together, the Chinese cohabiting couples are likely to enter marriage soon after cohabitation, or towards the second anniversary of moving together. For the former, cohabitation acts as an indicator for commitment and a period of making wedding arrangements. For the latter, cohabitation is like a period of trial marriage.

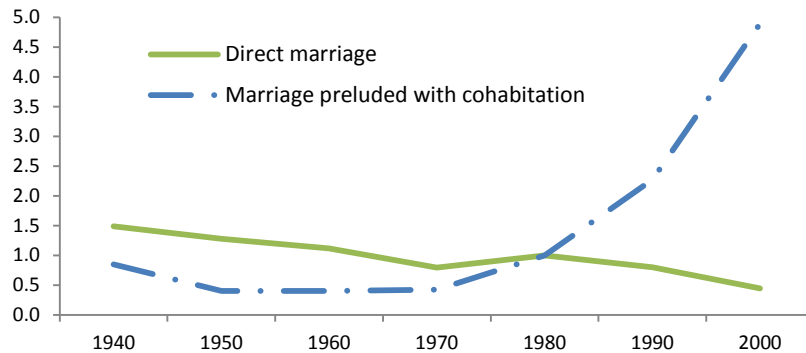
Figure 4: Relative risks of first marriage by duration of pre-marital cohabitation in months, China (1940-2012) (reference category: 1 month after cohabitation).



Stage 3 results: Competing risks of direct marriage and marriage precluded with cohabitation

To better present the link between cohabitation and marriage across years, we estimated the competing risks of entering marriage directly or entering marriage after cohabitation for all respondents. Figure 5 exhibits a decline of entering marriage directly across our entire observation period. Marriage preceded with cohabitation was rather uncommon during the first three calendar periods. This pattern of family practice started emerging in the 1980s and rapidly became pervasive in the 1990s and the 2000s. Further exploration based on Models 1 and 2 show that the over-time decline of direct marriage and the marked increase of entering marriage after cohabitation from the 1980s are seen among both men and women, in both rural and urban areas (Figures not shown). Our results show that changes in practices preceded changes in policies. In other terms, the increase in cohabitation as prelude to marriage came before the 2001 amendment of the Marriage Law that changed the expression “illegal cohabitation” to “non-marital cohabitation”.

Figure 5: Competing risks of direct marriage and marriage precluded with cohabitation in China by calendar years, standardized for other covariates (separate model for each transition based on Model 3, risks relative to 1980, no cohabitation before marriage).



Conclusion

This study presented first marriage trends in China over a time span of seven decades and marked the first time in literature the link of cohabitation and marriage in Chinese society. It shows that marriage trends for women and men in rural and urban areas developed in tandem with marriage policy and other socio-economic changes. Further, marriage precluded with cohabitation was almost non-existing in the 1950s-1970s. From the 1980s,

however, as either a preparatory stage of marriage or a trial period of family life, it has become a modal pathway to marriage. In our study, evidence was found for a socio-economic gradient of family formation, with marriage precluded with cohabitation more likely for higher educated men and women. In further development of the study, we will enquire this socio-economic gradient of family formation by calendar periods.

References

- Bethmann, D. and Kvasnicka M. (2011). The institution of marriage. *Journal of Population Economics*, 24: 1005-1032.
- Bumpass, L. L. (1990). What's happening to the family? Interactions between demographic and institutional change. *Demography*, 27 (4): 483-498.
- Bumpass, L. L. and Sweet, J. A. (1989). National estimates of cohabitation. *Demography*, 26 (4): 615-625.
- Bumpass, L. L., Sweet, J., A. and Cherlin, A. 1991. The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53 (4): 913-27.
- Frejka, T., Jones G. W. And Shardon J-P. (2010). East Asian childbearing patterns and policy developments. *Population Development Review*, 36:579-606.
- Hao, L., Hu, A. and Lo, J. (2014). Two aspects of the rural-urban divide and educational stratification in China: A trajectory analysis. *Comparative Education Review*, 58 (3): 509-636.
- Mu, Z. and Xie Y. (2014). Marital age homogamy in China: A reversal of trend in the reform era? *Social Science Research*, 44:141-157.
- Thornton, A., Axinn W. G. and Xie Y. (2007). *Marriage and Cohabitation*. The University and Chicago Press: Chicago and London.
- Yeung, W-JJ and Hu S. 2013. Coming of age in times of change: the transition to adulthood in China. *The annals of the American Academy*, 646:149-171
- Yu, J. and Xie Y. (2015a). Changes in the determinants of marriage entry in post-reform urban China. *Demography*, 52:1869-1892.
- Yu, Jia, and Yu Xie. (2015b). Cohabitation in China: Trends and Determinants. *Population and Development Review*. *Lives*, 26 (3): 847-886. *Forthcoming*.