

Changes in the conception of marriage in China: Social consequences

A házasságról alkotott felfogás változásai Kínában: Társadalmi következmények

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Abstract

Chinese modernization influenced public views on marriage. Improved education, democratization, women's emancipation, economic development, and the new emphasis on one's self-actualization were the main factors that influenced marriage relationships. Changing attitudes and behaviors are a challenge to societal stability. Young people seem to turn away from previous traditions, conceiving marriage as an economic alliance, and look for romantic love and intimacy. Using the data from the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) of China, this paper explores the resulting gender disparities, the improvements in education and the parallel increase in divorce rates, decrease in marriage rates and birth rates, as indicators of the changing conceptions on intimate relationships and marriage.

Keywords: romantic marriage, generational patterns, intimacy, social change in China

Absztrakt

A modernizáció erősen befolyásolta a házasságról alkotott közvéleményt Kínában. Az oktatás fejlődése, a demokratizálódás, a nők emancipációja, a gazdasági fejlődés és az önmegvalósítás mind befolyásolták a házastársi kapcsolatokat. Ezek a változó attitűdök és magatartások viszont kihívást jelentenek a társadalmi stabilitás szempontjából. Úgy tűnik, hogy a fiatalok elfordulnak a korábbi hagyományoktól, a házasságot gazdasági szövetségként fogják fel, és a romantikus szerelmet, illetve intimitást keresik. A Kínai Nemzeti Szabványügyi Hivatal (NBS) adatait felhasználva jelen cikk az ebből adódó nemek közötti egyenlőtlenségeket, a legmagasabb iskolai végzettség és ezzel párhuzamosan a válások arányának növekedését, a házasságkötések és születésszám csökkenését tárgyalja mint az intim kapcsolatokról és a házasságról alkotott felfogás változásának mutatóit.

Kulcsszavak: romantikus házassági stílus, generációs minták, intimitás, társadalmi változás Kínában

Introduction

There are salient generational differences in the attitudes towards romantic love and marriage in China. In the past, marriage was seen to serve the purposes of survival, economic gains, and instinct gratification. Little room was left for emotional and spiritual reciprocity.

Chinese modernization, beginning in the 20th century, brought about large-scale social changes, such as improved access to education, democratization, women's liberation, increasing living standards, and a new emphasis on self-actualization. Individualism views marriage as a personal choice rather than an institution (Cherlin, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 2010). The implications of women's education and access to economic resources also influenced marriage patterns (Becker, 1973).

In China, modernity has turned the ideas on romantic love and relationships from the dreams and visions of young people into a new reality of everyday life. Young people began to pursue “free love” and pleasure. Love and intimacy are essential for one's psychosocial wellbeing but the inconsistent expectations due to traditional and newly introduced marriage models, and the lack of relationship skills as well as unrealistic expectations concerning romantic love may negatively affect persons' well-being and satisfaction with life.

Traditional and romantic marriage patterns in China

China's reform and opening up has ushered in a sea of changes in the sphere of personal relationships. Due to the lasting impact of feudal society traditions up to the middle of the twentieth century, falling in love without parental consent was considered shameful and even “aberrant”. Parents' commands and matchmaker's words were obeyed. Marriage was parent-arranged and occurred early and almost universally (Lee & Wang, 2009). People did not have the liberty to choose their partner; instead, they needed to comply with the choice of their parents and relatives. This was the “for us, but not *for* us” era. Resisting parental authority was seen as an extremely disrespectful and shameful conduct, with serious consequences: punishment and ostracization. Shame extended to one's family and even to the community. Between the individuals, their families, the community, and the society there existed an extremely tight and coercive relationship.

The reform has changed this Chinese traditional feudal culture, and the subsequent rise of the internet era has broadened people's communication options as well as their social networks. “One person for a lifetime” now seems a noble wish appearing in the novels. More and more people conceive love as a source of pleasure and narcissistic gains without commitments and responsibility. Freeing love from external restraints does not necessarily go hand in hand with an increased capacity for intimacy and mutuality. Understanding old and new, conflicting models of love and marriage in China may reveal that young couples can find themselves in a socialization vacuum by simply choosing to get rid of traditions.

Modern people's mindsets are oriented towards liberalism and individuality. Consequently, polyamorous relationships have become widespread. Polyamory is “living by the idea that it is possible to love more than one person at the same time without deceit or betrayal” (White, 2004, p. 17). White (2004) also pointed out that most online polyamory definitions “use terms like ethical, responsible, honorable, open, honest, purposeful, and principled” (White, 2004, p. 19). As Perel (2013) concluded in her TED talk: “Monogamy is a choice for us, not a given. As a result, it's a negotiated choice. More to the point, if we're going

to spend fifty years with one person—and we want a happy jubilee—it might be a good idea to revisit our contract at various points along the way” (Perel, 2013, February 14).

Changes in public perceptions and in the legal system

In the traditional Chinese society, most marriages were parent-arranged. “Blind marriages” with the bride and groom not meeting until the day of marriage were not uncommon (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Whyte, 1990). Marriage was to serve the interests of the extended family and not to gratify individual preferences. Thus, the major function of marriage was to ensure patrilineal descent and expand family relationships (Wang & Yang, 1996). In this cultural setting, husband-wife closeness is not a fundamental condition of marriage.

Traditionally, premarital relationships are frowned upon in Chinese society and a social stigma is attached to premarital and extramarital sexuality. Anti-feudalist principles stated that:

- marriage should be free,
- arranged forced marriages should be abolished,
- child brideship should be prohibited,
- monogamy should be practiced,
- men and women should be treated equally,
- and women's legitimate rights and interests should be protected.

When the foundations for People's Republic of China's were laid in the 1940s and 1950s, the feudal marriage system, with the belief that men are superior to women, was still prevalent, and numerous Chinese families were linked by disastrous marriages.

In 1950, the Marriage Law of the people's Republic of China played a significant part in the changes in marriage and family perspectives. Monogamy did not become a legal requirement until the formation of the People's Republic of China and the enactment of the marriage law in 1950 (Engel, 1984). Monogamy was stipulated as the only legally acceptable form of marriage, while polygamy, child betrothal, concubinage, and other alternative forms of marriage that had existed and even thrived in the past were prohibited, and offenders were to be punished (Xiao, 2014, p. 13). For the first time, the Marriage Law set the minimum age for marriage at 20 for men and 18 for women. Marriage registration became mandatory in 1955. Official arguments for obligatory registration were to enforce the minimum marriage age and reduce the occurrence of “depraved” marriages such as child marriage and concubinage (Johnson, 2009). Monogamy raises women's social status, allows them to participate in the labor market, gives them economic power, and considerably improves their position within the family. New societal advances were accompanied by the Second Marriage Law of 1980 replacing the previous one. It raised the legal marriage age to 20 years for women and 22 years for males. Parallel to this, the Chinese state's withdrawal from monitoring individual sexuality since the late 1970s has redefined the public and private domains of intimacy, allowing for more diversified family and sexual behaviors (Cai & Feng, 2014). Cherlin (2004) commented such changes as the “de-institutionalization” of marriage and the weakening of societal norms that govern people's related behavior.

Psychological factors

Based on the results of Harlow's (1958) empirical experiments (newborns prefer to cling to the soft-cloth doll mother, whether she feeds them or not), attachment is not a natural response to some inner, basic drive such as hunger. We learn about love from the people who care about us. Attachment is a particularly profound emotional bond that extends from our birth to the end of life. It connects one person with another to seek intimacy with someone and to feel safe in their presence (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is not only a crucial part of human survival, but it also shapes people's lifelong adaptation and personal sense of wellbeing.

Adult attachment anxiety and adult attachment avoidance are the two possible problems in adult life. Adult attachment anxiety is defined as a fear of interpersonal rejection and abandonment, excessive needs for approval from others accompanied by a negative self-perception. Persons overreact to negative feelings to gain others' comfort and support (Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003). Attachment anxiety is a condition when people are excessively worried about being undervalued or abandoned by their romantic partners. Individuals who are highly anxious make great emotional investments and want to be closer to their partners to feel more secure. They have low self-evaluation and are cautious, yet they maintain hopeful views of their romantic partners. Avoidant persons attempt to achieve and retain independence, control, and autonomy, because they believe that it is either impossible or undesirable to seek psychological/emotional proximity with their romantic partners. These ideas encourage them to use distancing coping mechanisms

Interrelationships between marriage, romantic love, and social values

In a Marxist framework, emotional relationships are also determined by production relations (Marx, 1967). Women's participation in economic production has steadily grown and their reliance on males has diminished. Today's society has substantially enhanced production, and everyone has the possibility to make a living, therefore women's subordination is not a necessity any longer.

Romantic love and marriage are the two crucial milestones in most persons' life as sources of happiness and of stabilized social roles. People's ideals and conduct have changed in response to the constant shifts in the social structure. Most Chinese young people have a positive attitude towards marriage, and their general attitudes to love is also positive (Chen et al., 2009). However, as economic globalization and information networks continue to expand, negative role models appear in the mass media, and the negative influence of the market economy is also present in their lives. Without counselling and guidance, young people's perspectives on romantic love and marriage have become unrealistic, what is destructive not only to their physical and mental health, but also to societal stability. Their value orientation on marriage and love is connected to the future development of family structure in Chinese society. Studying modern Chinese youth's marriage and romantic love difficulties is necessary to predict the future of marriage and family in China.

Values of the different generations

The older generation, who were born in the 70s/80s, spend most of their time with their family, what they view as their obligation. They often lose their aspirations, hobbies, and even block

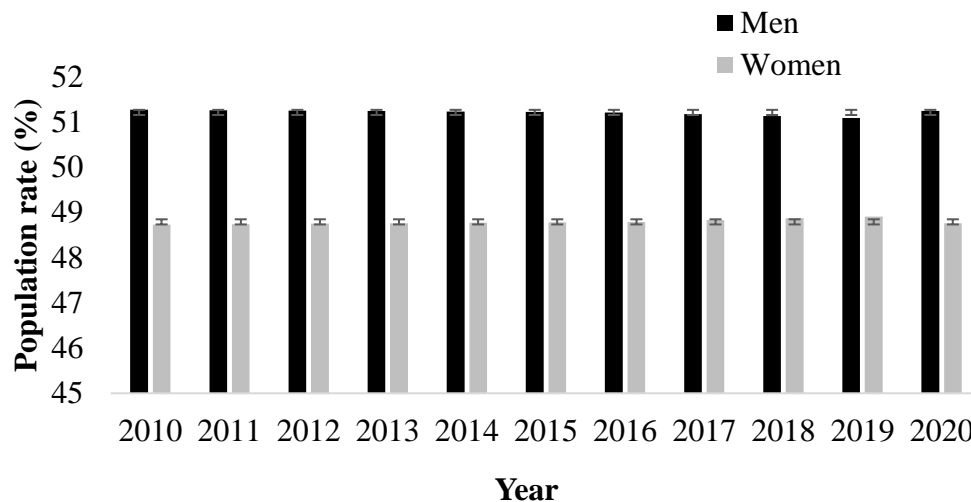
out many of their own aspirations while providing for the family. They just do not want their “peaceful existence” to be disturbed. This way of life is full of compromises and sacrifice in exchange for a supposedly happy existence and stability. Young Chinese people are now paying greater attention to sentiments in their relationships. They are more self-centered as they have been educated to be uncompromising, independent, and distinctive. In this value system, happiness comes first. Young people appear to prioritize their interests above stability when choosing a position. Many young Chinese people admire their parents' long-term marriages and willingness to sacrifice for the family but cannot afford to lose themselves when loving someone. Today's young people are torn between the traditional responsibilities of marriage and romantic love and their own wishes.

Gender disparity

In China, the proportion of males and females in the population is unbalanced. By 2020, there will be approximately 30–40 million more men than women of marriageable age, implying that one in every five males will be unable to find a partner and get married (Figure 1). An immediate effect of this male excess will be a shortage of possible spouses on the marriage market (Merli & Hertog, 2010). This will result in an increase in non-elective bachelorhood and a widening of the age difference, with unmarried men looking for younger wives or needing to wait longer before marrying (Ní Bhrolcháin, 2000). The disparity between male and female population ratios is probably a legacy of traditional ideas (preference of males over females).

Figure 1

Population rates between men and women in 2010–2020



Source: Author's calculations based on NBS, 2021

Figure 1 illustrates that the rates of men and women maintains a steady pattern ratio, around 51.2% males to 48.8% women as, for instance, in 2019. The male population is 713.51 million, while the female population is 681.87 million. The overall population sex ratio is 104.64 males for 100 females, meaning that the male population in mainland China exceeds the female population by 31.64 million. The graph indicates a slight increase in female population over time of women has increased slightly but the figures for males are steady. Although the

disparity between men and women in China has narrowed in recent years, the ratio of males to females in China remains slightly larger than in most other nations.

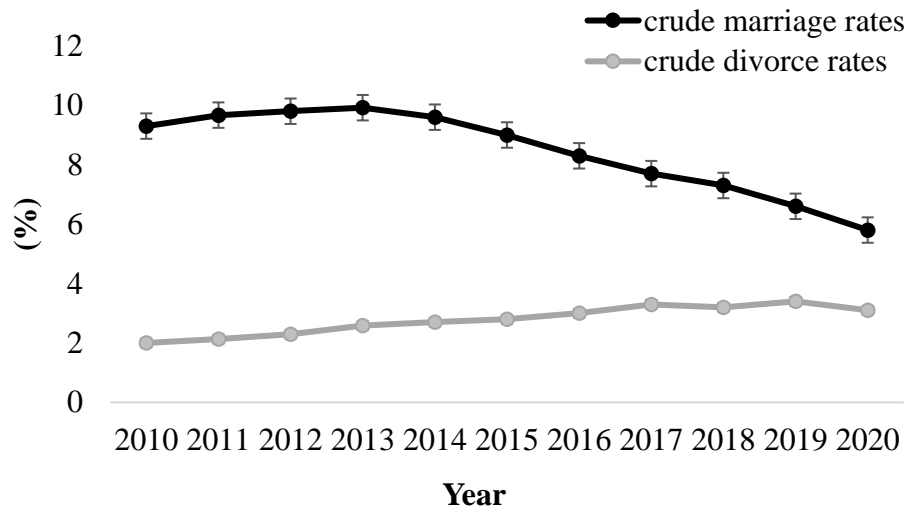
Divorce, marriage, and birth

Exposure to Western ideas and culture, education expansion, and chances for personal careers have all been credited with changing attitudes on divorce in contemporary Chinese society (Alford & Shen, 2003). With the increased availability of individual-level data on marital histories in recent years, a few research have begun to look at the factors that influence divorce in China (Ma et al., 2018).

The question how economic development impacts family life is addressed by modernization theory. The primary thesis of modernization theory is that “family structures change as the economic system expands through industrialization” (Goode, 1963, pp. 23–28).

Figure 2

Crude marriage and divorce rates in 2010–2020

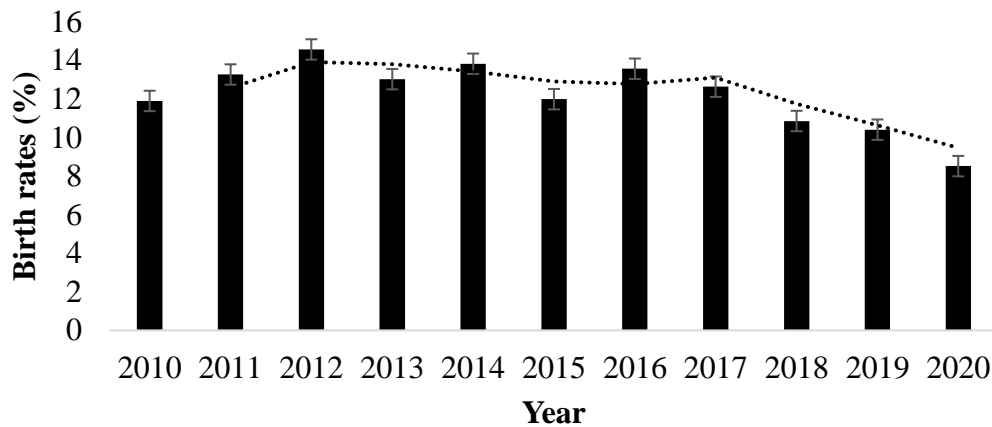


Source: Author's calculations based on NBS, 2015 and NBS, 2020

The number of individuals getting married (Figure 2) has clearly declined every year since 2013, but the number of people getting divorced has gradually increased between 2010 and 2020. Divorces increased from 2.678 million in 2010 to 4.701 million in 2019, illustrating the shifting marriage trend in society. The marriage rate peaked in 2013 at 9.92 ‰ people and is expected to drop to 5.8 ‰ by 2020. Prior to 2012, the divorce/marriage rate was quite constant, hovering around 20%. But, despite the first drop in divorce for different causes in 2020, the divorce rate has soared, with the divorce/marriage ratio going from 50.7 % in 2019 to 53.3 % in 2020. Chinese people's perceptions on marriage and divorce are changing, from talking about divorce negatively in the past, to struggling whether to leave or not in the 70s, and finally to “divorce is no big deal” in the 80s. One out of every ten marriages in the country ends in divorce. Economic development raises people's educational levels, which lengthens their time in school and reduces the time window for female reproduction.

Figure 3

Birth rates in China between 2010–202

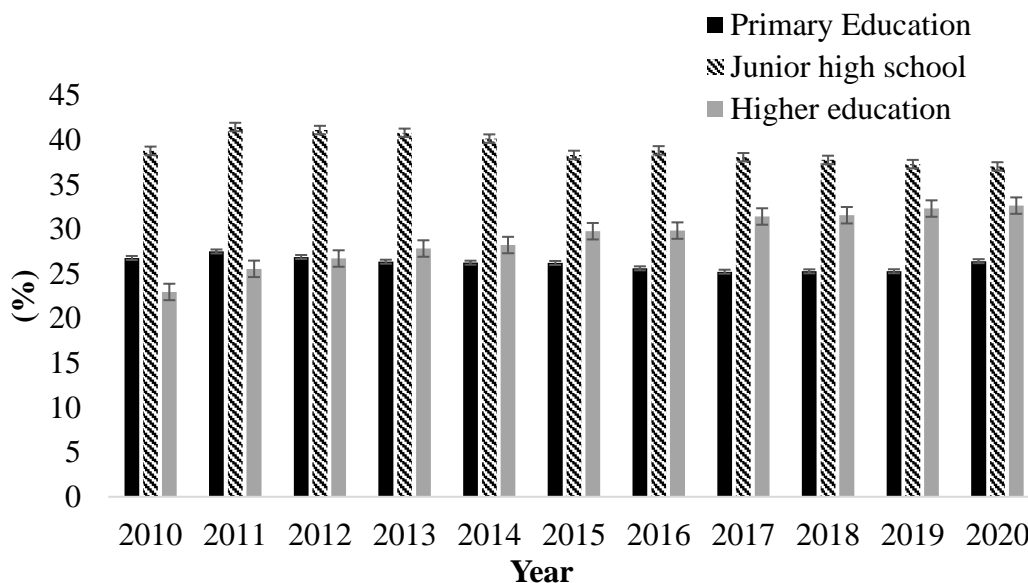


Source: Author's calculations based on NBS, 2021

Figure 3 illustrates that between 2010 and 2017, birth rates did not change much, with an average rate of 14.97%. However, between 2017 and 2020, the rates dropped fast to roughly 10,60%. Furthermore, in 2020, the birth rate dipped below 1% for the first time. The linear given demonstrates a trend of an acute decline from 2017 to 2020.

Figure 4

Education levels in China



Source: Author's calculations based on NBS, 2021

Recent studies have suggested that marriage as a universal way of life has been questioned and lifelong singlehood among less-educated rural men and highly educated women is on the increase, due to asymmetric mate preferences and surplus males in the marriage market since the introduction of the One Child Policy (Piotrowski et al., 2016).

Figure 4 depicts persons completing primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Since 2012, the number of persons with a poor level of education has steadily decreased. From 2011

through 2020, junior high school will gradually diminish. Since 2010, the rate of persons graduating from higher education has been steadily increasing. There is an inverse tendency in lower and higher education rates. Participating in higher education is a popular trend in society. Both for men and women, delayed marriage has been linked with prolonged time spent in education (Piotrowski et al., 2016).

The development pattern was quite comparable whether we connect marriage/divorce rates (Figure 2), birth rates (Figure 3), gender rates (Figure 1) and education levels (Figure 4). Parallel to an increase in higher education, marriage and birth rates are on the decline and these data are interrelated.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper uses representative survey data on China's changing marriage customs. Due to industrialization and individualization tendencies, and to an overall increase in education, Chinese residents now engage in more individualized family behaviors than ever before, including the emergence of a lifetime singlehood. Being unmarried and living together before marriage is common. Gender differences, and marriage/divorce rates are correlated with educational attainment, which is proportional to marriage rate. Lifelong singleness will increase in China due to the continuation of the tradition of polygamy, and higher education. Divorce rates are also connected to educational achievement.

Traditional family values, particularly the emphasis of maintaining family lineage and raising children, supported the preservation of the Chinese family's traditional functions. Previous marriage rates and birth rates reflected these values and customs. Although the public's tolerance for divorce is increasing in China, marriage still remains the dominant institution of reproduction. Counselling programs for couples should cover not only interpersonal skills development, but also intergenerational issues and practical challenges that these couples encounter. This is how in the transition between modernity and tradition, Chinese social workers can assist the couples to solve their emerging problems. More data on the recent changes of lifestyles is required, also examining those whose satisfaction with marriage is high.

When a client requests assistance from a social professional, the social worker should assess and analyze the problem and manage the case. It is also important to inspire and empower single persons to pursue their happiness. In the face of generational conflict, social workers must first learn about the client's – be them a couple or single persons – family background while respecting their individual preferences and decisions. The social worker's personal understanding of love and marriage can be a source of bias, and the lack of professionals' self-reflection result in the intervention's failure and ineffectiveness.

According to a traditional theory of group development, groups go through four stages: forming-storming-norming-performing (Tuckman, 1965). When it comes to love-based marriages, the storm seems to precede the form, at least in China. In China, for the previous generations the metaphor of marriage was the refrigerator. If this appliance broke down, it could be repaired repeatedly. This generation is attracted to mechanical metaphors and perceives human life in terms of machines. Today's young people are different and are ready to replace a broken relationship.

Young Chinese people are torn between their own romantic ideals and admiring the older generation for treating marriage as a serious responsibility requiring great courage and sacrifice for the family. Human needs are complex: if we merely want food and warmth, even

the majority of those who used to live in poverty and hunger would find themselves in a hard situation by not responding the needs related to attachment. On the other hand, individuals who are under the strong influence of the social media and the internet in general might develop unrealistic models of romantic love. This paper is a snapshot on the social and cultural transformations and on the main questions related to these changes that permeate the lives of individuals, families, and communities in China.

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