Getting Married in Shanghai: Arrival of a New Marriage Regime in China?

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WANG Feng
University of California, Irvine (fwang@uci.edu)

Yong CAI
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (caiyong@unc.edu)

SHEN Ke
Fudan University, Shanghai, China (shenke@fudan.edu.cn)

(Short Abstract)

China in recent years has embarked on a new phase of marital change. Following the spectacular economic boom and other social changes, marriages in China have become significantly later and even less frequent. Unlike the previous wave of rising marriage age in the 1970s, when a forceful government policy engineered a collective synchronization of late marriage, this new phase shows all signs of individual volition under the context of the privatization of marriage. Using data from recent Chinese censuses and in particular data from a 2013 survey of youths in Shanghai, this study explores the underlying factors affecting the recent rise in marriage age, and attempts to address the question of whether this new phase of delayed marriage is a sign of “flight from marriage,” or just a postponement in the absence of any signs the deinstitutionalization of marriage, a change in the marriage institution observed elsewhere in the world.
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(Long Abstract)

Introduction: A New Phase of Late Marriage in China

Less than a decade ago, in an in-depth review and analysis of delayed marriage and low fertility in Pacific Asia, Gavin Jones, a veteran expert of demographic and sociological studies of Asian marriages, remarked that “China provides the greatest challenge to the theories of marriage change. If we compare percentages of women remaining single at age 30 around the year 2000, the figures for Thailand, Taiwan, and the Chinese populations in Singapore and Malaysia are in the 20-30 percent range; in China, the figure is less than 2 percent. The figure for Bangkok is 33 percent; for Shanghai, 3 percent. These are extraordinary differences.” (Jones 2007, 466)

Extraordinary indeed. What were not anticipated by Jones, and by almost everyone else a decade ago, however, are the rapid changes since then. In a short decade after the year 2000, China seems to have embarked on a new march in the road of changing marriage behavior, a march observed earlier in many Asian societies, and a process called a quiet revolution (Rindfuss and Morgan 1983).

In a single decade between 2000 and 2010, the share of women aged 25 to 29 who were never married doubled, from 10 to 20 percent for China as a whole. In urban China, the share doubled from 15 to 30 percent. In 2000, 6 percent of urban Chinese women remained single at age 30. By 2010, that number more than doubled, to 15 percent. Mean age at first marriage shows a similar trend (see Figure 1 below). Following a decade of decline after 1980, when China relaxed the late marriage rule at the same time as it restricted the number of children a couple could have (with the enforcement of the one-child policy), mean age at marriage began to increase again, after 1990. In the last two decades, mean age at first marriage for men rose more than two years, to 27 and for women to 25, surpassing the peak ages reached in the late 1970s under the forceful government late marriage policy (Coale 1989).
Research Questions

Unlike the previous wave of rising marriage age in China in the 1970s, when a forceful government policy of late marriage engineered a collective synchronization, this new phase of marriage change shows all signs of individual volition under the context of the privatization of marriage (Cai and Wang 2014, Davis 2014).

China’s new phase of marriage change hence offers an opportunity to examine a set of more interesting theoretical questions that have long preoccupied sociologists on the institution of marriage. One question is the factors affecting “singlehood,” and another, more important, is whether this new phase of delayed marriage is a sign of “flight from marriage (Jones 2005),” or simply just a delay in marriage age in the absence of any fundamental changes in the marriage institution. The question in other words is whether China has begun to follow a path of the deinstitutionalization of marriage, as has been observed in the U.S. and in other parts of the world (Cherlin 2004, Davis and Friedman 2014).

In this study, using data from recent Chinese censuses and in particular relying on data from a recent survey in Shanghai, we explore a number of specific explanations for the recent rise in late marriage. These hypotheses or explanations are not mutually exclusive and include the simple role of higher education expansion in postponing marriage (annual enrollment rose from 1 to 6.3 million between 1998 and 2009, to 7 million in 2013), by examining whether rising age takes place at all educational levels or only restricted to those going to college. Another hypothesis is marriage squeeze of educated women (Jones 2007). The share of female students among all college students rose from 38 percent in 1998 to 52 in 2013. A third explanation is changing sexual morale and behavior, namely the de-coupling of sex and marriage (Parish et al. 2007, Farrer 2014). The fourth explanation is the role of changing attitude toward marriage. The fifth explanation is the deterring effect of rising economic expectation and cost for marriage in the wake of rapid income and wealth explosion. By examining these and other possible explanations, we hope to gather
some insights into understanding the causes and implications of the recent sharp increase in postponement of marriage in China.

**Study Setting**

We use Shanghai as the geographic and social setting in this study. Of all places, Shanghai, China’s largest metropolis, serves as an ideal setting to examine both the changes in marriage behavior. Over the last two decades, Shanghai has reemerged as one of the most dynamic and preeminent economic centers in the world. Shanghai’s population is young and mobile, largely due to the influx of migrants from other parts of China, who comprise a third of the city’s population. Shanghai is also the site of headquarters of numerous multinational companies, and hosts the largest share of resident foreign population in China (in 2013, 25% of all foreign residents in China lived in Shanghai). Mean marriage age in Shanghai, at 30.2 for males and 28.2 respectively in 2013, already rivals that in Japan and Singapore, and its total fertility rate, at 0.7 per woman in 2010, is lower than that in Tokyo (1.13 in 2013) and Singapore (1.29 in 2012). Our earlier work (Cai and Wang 2014) already examined the broad trends of rising marriage age in Shanghai (see Figure 2), and we now have data from a survey of youths in Shanghai, completed in 2013 (see below).

![Figure 2 Five Decades of Marriage Age Change in Shanghai](image)

**Data and Analytical Approaches**

A major data source for this study comes from the 2013 wave of Fudan Yangtze River Social Transition (FYST) longitudinal survey, conducted by the Institute for Social Research at Fudan University in Shanghai. The survey is a probability sampling survey and follows a multi-stage complex sampling design. The 2013 baseline survey interviewed 2,357 youths currently residing in Shanghai who were born in 1980s, the period when China began
radical social transformations, dramatic economic development, and a one-child policy. This cohort, known as “the post-80” (80-hou) cohort in China, reached the ages of 24 to 33 at the time of the survey.

Almost all of survey respondents (90%) had completed their education at the time of the survey, with many having already passed other classic milestones of transition to adulthood: 83% of those not in school were employed, among them, even as mostly recent entrants into the labor market, 41% changed jobs at least once. Among these respondents born in the 1980s, 55% got married, with nearly half, 43%, reported cohabitation before marriage. Among married respondents, 75% already had children, with 10% having two. These members of China’s new young generation also demonstrated a political and social diversity: a large share of all respondents were either members of the Chinese Communist Party (10.9%) or the Chinese Communist Youth League (28.7%), but in a society that is largely atheist, one in ten in this young cohort reported to believe in a religion. A quarter of the respondents held an “agricultural” household registration, who by Chinese institutional arrangement were excluded from receiving many types of social benefits.

We will apply event history analyses using Cox Proportional Hazard Model to estimate the impacts of factors that affect the timing of marriage and childbearing, to address our first research question, namely the explanations for “singlehood”. We will also apply multivariate logit model and ordered logit model to explain difference in cohabitation before marriage. This is to provide some hints for the second research question whether China has begun to follow a path of the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Even though it’s too early to reach any conclusion about how high is the proportion of the post-80 cohort who would stay away from marriage in lifetime, understanding the factors for cohabitation before marriage would help us predict the cohabitation trend and recognize the accompanying changing attitudes toward marriage institution. Following the theoretical framework, we include both macro-level and micro-level explanatory variables. Several structural factors are highly relevant to Chinese marriage, including gender, household registration type, formal or informal employment sector, and ownership type of work organizations. To examine the influence of globalization on marriage, we will also make use of gender attitudes and media exposure information collected in the survey. At the micro-level, in addition to the respondent’s personal characteristics such as educational attainment, we will also introduce and examine the roles of familial background, such as parents’ educational, occupational, and political status. We will also add an interaction term between gender and educational level, to examine whether higher education expansion imposes different impacts on the timing of marriage for men and women, or in other words, whether marriage squeeze for college-educated women is more pronounced.

Together, such an examination of marriage in China’s most globalized city can help reveal the underlying forces driving the recent rise of marriage age in China, and contribute to the understanding of the rapid transformation of a fundamental social institution in a fast-changing society.
References cited


