DIVORCE CHINESE STYLE

Li Ma¹, Jani Turunen²,³, Ester Rizzi¹

¹Université catholique de Louvain
²Stockholm University
³Karlstad University

Abstract
In this study, we investigate the Chinese style divorce over China’s transformation period from 1970 to 2012. Specifically, we are attentive to the trend development of divorce and the roles of socioeconomic characteristics. Moreover, for the first time in literature on China, we address the role of marriage pathways in divorce. We apply event-history analysis to longitudinal data from the China Family Panel Studies (2010-2012 waves). The results show a threefold increase of divorce from the pre-1990s to the 1990s. Surprisingly, the trend shifted to a plateau towards the 2000s. When cohabitation was at its initial stage of diffusion, individuals who cohabited prior to marriage had substantially higher likelihood of divorce. With cohabitation becoming an increasingly prevalent practice in the 2000s, its effect weakened. The roles of socioeconomic characteristics in divorce also vary across time. This study enriches our knowledge of family dynamics in Chinese society.

Introduction
China’s economic reform and opening-up policies since the late 1970s have been accompanied with remarkable demographic changes, such as the delay and decline of marriage, the rise of cohabitation, the increasing diversification of marriage pathways, and the rise of divorce (Ma & Rizzi, 2016; Mu & Xie, 2014; Wang & Zhou, 2010; Yeung & Hu, 2013; Yu & Xie, 2015a, 2015b). The crude divorce rates of China increased steadily during the 1990s. The speed accelerated after the turn of the new century, rising from 0.98 per thousand in 2001 to 2.79 per thousand in 2015 (NBS 2017).

Existing research on divorce for the context of China has largely relied on aggregated data. Zeng & Wu (2000) demonstrated a substantial rise of general divorce rates from 1982 to 1990. Wang & Zhou (2010) documented a steady increase of refined crude divorce rates from 1979 onwards. However, the aggregated data cannot truly reflect the development of divorce, as they ignore the real number of population at risk of divorce, the age structure of the population, and other socioeconomic and demographic factors that may be at play.

Based on an individual level data collected in Shanghai, Shaanxi, and Hebei in 1985 and multivariate hazards model, Zeng et al. (2002) estimated the socio-demographic determinants of divorce for the period of 1955-1985. This article serves as a basis for examining divorce in China from an individual level perspective. The authors found that early marriage and arranged marriage were associated with a high risk of divorce. Education did not play a significant role in divorce propensity. Further, the number of children was negatively associated with divorce risk. The divorce level in urban areas was higher than that in rural areas. Owing to the lack of follow up data, we know little about the divorce patterns and trends after 1985, a significant period in Chinese history with remarkable social and economic changes.
In this study, based on individual-level data from the China Family Panel Studies, we update the knowledge of divorce for the context of China from three perspectives. First, we investigate how the divorce trend has developed in the past five decades, from 1970 to 2012. Second, we explore how marriage type is associated with the divorce likelihood. In particular, we look into the roles of premarital cohabitation and conception in divorce. This is the first time in literature on China that addresses how marriage formation pathways are related to divorce propensity. Third, we look into the association between individual socioeconomic characteristics and divorce.

Theoretical and research framework

Trends of Divorce

The societal characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) comprise industrialization, modernization, rise of female educational attainment and economic autonomy, the value of tolerance, and norm change. With these societal conditions fulfilled, innovative family behaviors would emerge, including the reduction of marriage, the rise of cohabitation, and the rise of divorce (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; van de Kaa, 2011).

European societies have witnessed a steady rise of divorce from the mid of the 20th century, though variations exist across regions. The divorce rates of Southern Europe (except Portugal) have been rather low and steadily increasing; the rates of the Western and Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, increased a great deal faster (Sardon, 2006). However, after reaching a peak at around year 2000, the divorce trend in the latter region more or less levelled off, or even slightly declined in some places (Andersson & Kolk, 2016; Sardon, 2006; Thomson & Eriksson, 2013). The shift from rise to plateau also occurred in the US, but at an earlier time. After a substantial increase from the 1950s to the early 1980s, the divorce trend of the US shifted to a plateau towards the early 1990s (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Goldstein, 1999; Raley and Bumpass, 2003; Teachman, 2002).

In China, the divorce rates stayed at a rather low level during the 1960s and 1970s. It was argued that the legal procedure of “mediation” provided by the court, the work unit, the residents’ committee, and family members as a necessity in the process of divorce blocked the rise of divorce (Platte, 1988). Under the 1981 Marriage Law, the requirement for mediation was abandoned, which simplified the divorce procedure (Huang, 2005; Platte, 1988). In 2001, the amendment to the law regulated that unilateral divorce was allowed in circumstances of domestic violence and extramarital relationships. The innocent party can seek damages from the guilty party (Sun & Zhao, 2016).

Year 1978 marked a turning point in contemporary Chinese history, as in that year the country started its economic reform and opened itself up to foreign investment. Its transformation to “market socialism” has not only yielded industrialization, economic development, but has also resulted in immense changes in Chinese society (Chen, 2002; Jackson, 1992; Spence, 2001). The expansion of education from the 1990s and the prosperity of job market provide both women and men opportunities to seek for personal achievements (Alford & Shen, 2003; Dommaraju & Jones, 2011; Yeung & Hu, 2013; Wang, 2001; Wang & Zhou, 2010). Further, exposure to the Western ideas and culture has given rise to changes in attitudes towards marriage, divorce, and the standards for a happy family. The Chinese are becoming more open and more tolerant of different lifestyles, including divorce (Wang & Zhou, 2010; Yu & Xie, 2015b).

Hypothesis 1: Based on the theory of the SDT, the divorce trend development in the Western societies, and given China’s substantial socioeconomic changes since the late 1970s, as well as the liberalization of divorce procedure from 1981, we expect to see a rise of divorce trend in China from the 1980s onwards.

Marriage Type and Divorce

A large body of research has addressed the link of marriage type and divorce, in particular for the context of industrialized societies. Christensen & Meissner (1953, 1956) were probably the first to address the
link of premarital conception and divorce. They found disproportionately higher divorce likelihood of couples who entered into marriage subsequent to pregnancy in the US. Later studies for different developed societies consistently consolidated this knowledge (see Christensen, 1960, 1963; Coombs & Zumeta, 1970; Furstenberg, 1976; Teachman, 1982 for the context of the US; Balakrishnan et al., 1987; McKie, Prentice, & Reed, 1983 for the context of Canada; Liu, 2001 for the context of Sweden).

Beginning from the 1970s, with cohabitation emerging and developing into a common family behavior in industrialized societies, the roles of cohabitation in marriage dissolution started drawing attention in social science research. Researchers often view cohabitation as a testing period to evaluate the compatibility of a relationship (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Bumpass et al., 1991). Cohabitation offers couples an opportunity to learn about each other, strengthen their bonds, and make a more “informed” choice to marry, which should increase their chances for a successful marriage (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Smock, 2000). In other words, cohabitation should have a function of screening out risky relationships (Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). The prevalence of cohabitation and the prevalence of separation of cohabiting relationships before marriage indirectly help restrain the rise of divorce (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Goldstein, 1999).

Nonetheless, empirical research has proved in remarkable consistency that cohabitation prior to marriage is closely associated with higher likelihood of divorce (Balakrishnan et al., 1987; Bennett, Blank, & Bloom, 1988; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Hoem & Hoem, 1992; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Smock, 2000; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Further, the effect of cohabitation on divorce varies across time and contexts. Existing research shows that in contexts where cohabitation is at its initial stage of diffusion, those who start a union by cohabitation are pioneers in divorce. When cohabitation becomes a majority behavior and a modal way of marriage entry, the effect of cohabitation on divorce would weaken (Brown et al., 2006; Lyngstad & Jalovaara 2010; Smock, 2000). It is no longer necessarily a strong indicator for divorce (de Vaus et al., 2005; Hewitt & de Vaus, 2009; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Schoen, 1992; Reinhold, 2010).

In China, direct marriage (without premarital conception or a prior period of cohabitation) has been the predominant marriage formation behavior. In the 1960s and the 1970s, more than 70% of total first marriages were direct marriage; the remaining 30% of marriages were subsequent to premarital conception (Ma & Rizzi, 2016). With cohabitation emerging as an innovation family behavior in the 1980s and quickly spreading thereafter, marriage pathways have become more diversified (Ma & Rizzi, 2016; Yu & Xie, 2015b). In the 2000s, 50% of first marriages were formed directly, 26% of marriages were subsequent to a premarital conception without a prior period of cohabitation, and the remaining 24% were preceded by cohabitation or a combination of cohabitation and conception (Ma & Rizzi, 2016).

Based on the findings regarding the effect of premarital cohabitation and conception on divorce for the Western societies, given the diffusion process of cohabitation in China from an innovative family behavior to an increasingly accepted family behavior, and given the long existence of marriage subsequent to pregnancy in Chinese society, we expect that;

Hypothesis 2: During the initial stage of cohabitation diffusion, the association between cohabitation and divorce should be strongly positive; when cohabitation becomes an increasingly accepted behavior, the role of cohabitation in divorce should weaken.

Hypothesis 3: The association of premarital conception (without cohabitation) and divorce should be positively stable during our entire observation period.

_Socioeconomic Characteristics and Divorce_

Individual’s socioeconomic characteristics are important indicators for marriage stability. Existing literature has largely demonstrated the importance of education - a frequently used proxy for one’s socioeconomic characteristics - for divorce. According to Becker (1981), with women’s opportunities in education and labor market improving, they depend less on marriage for economic gains. Hence, women with more education more easily terminate an unhappy marriage. Furthermore, divorce is costly. The high educated may have more socioeconomic resources than others to handle divorce and life after divorce (Blossfeld et al. 1995). However, some researchers argue that the highly educated may have
stable marriage, as they are more likely to find a matching partner and have higher communication skills, which are important grounds for marriage stability (Hoem, 1997).

The effect of one’s socioeconomic characteristics and divorce may vary across time and contexts. According to Goode’s theory of modernization (1960, 1972, 1993), during the early stages of modernization when social and economic barriers to divorce are high, those with better socioeconomic resources, such as the highly educated are more prone to divorce, largely because they have resources to deal with life after divorce. With the level of modernization increasing, such positive relationship would disappear. Instead, divorce would become more affordable for those with less socioeconomic resources. A lot of empirical research has confirmed the theory of modernization (see Chan & Halpin, 2005 for UK; Hoem, 1997 for Sweden; Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006 for 17 European countries). For example, the comparative study of Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) for European societies show positive education and divorce relationships in contexts where the social and economic costs of divorce were high; whereas no or negative relationships where the costs were lower.

In China, one’s educational attainment functions as an important indicator for socioeconomic characteristics. The large-scale higher education expansion started in 1999 after the implementation of the college expansion policy (Meng et al., 2013; Yeung & Hu 2013). Prior to the expansion, the proportion of Chinese population with higher educational attainment was low. In 1978, the gross enrollment ratio to tertiary education was only 0.72%. A secondary school educational attainment at that time could be viewed as high educational level. The figure rose to approximately 40% by 2014 (World Bank, 2016). One other important indicator for individual socioeconomic characteristics in China is hukou (household registration) status. China’s population is divided into agricultural (or rural) hukou and non-agricultural (or urban) hukou. Social welfare services are tightly bound to one’s hukou status. Normally, those with urban hukou enjoy better socioeconomic resources than those with rural hukou. It has been argued that this system is one of the main driving forces behind social inequality in China (Wu and Treiman 2004).

Based on Goode’s theory of modernization, and given China’s specific contexts in economic development, education expansion, and the rural-urban hukou division system, we hypothesize that;

Hypothesis 4: During the early stages of China’s economic reform (the 1970s-1980s), individuals with better economic resources such as the secondary educated and the urbanites should be under higher risks of divorce than others. With China’s modernization level increasing, especially over the turn of the new century, the low educated and the rural born should catch up and become active practitioners of divorce.

Data and method

Data used for analyses come from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS waves 2010 and 2012), launched by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Peking University. CFPS is a nationwide, comprehensive, longitudinal social survey intended to serve research needs on a variety of subjects in contemporary China. It gathers a wealth of information, including individual’s life history in educational attainment, cohabitation, civil status change and childbearing. 14,960 households from 25 provinces were interviewed in 2010. 85% were followed in 2012.

We apply event-history analysis (or hazard regression model) to test our hypotheses. Our observation starts at the month of first marriage and stops at the month of divorce. If there is no occurrence of divorce, the observation censors at 25 years after marriage, the death of spouse, or the last interview time, whichever comes first. The episodes before 1970 were left truncated due to insufficient number of observations during those earlier periods. Hence, our observation period ranges from the 1970 to 2012. Altogether, 32,169 ever-married respondents (including 16,619 women and 15,550 men) are included in the analysis. Within our observation window, 911 divorces occurred, accounting to 3 percent of total first marriages.
Calendar periods, marriage type, education and hukou origin are the four focal variables for this study. Calendar periods is grouped into the 1970s-80s, the 1990s, and the 2000s. Marriage type is constructed according to two demographic markers - premarital cohabitation and conception. Based on whether our respondents cohabited with their first spouse prior to marriage and whether the conception of the first live birth predated first marriage (we subtracted nine months from the month of first live birth to obtain the timing of conception), we categorize marriage type into four exclusive marriage formation pathways: direct marriage, conception marriage, cohabitation marriage, and C+C marriage (i.e., marriage preceded by a combination of conception and cohabitation). Education is grouped into primary or below, secondary, and tertiary or above. As we do not have access to our respondents’ hukou status change before the occurrence of divorce, we use hukou status at age 12 as a time-fixed variable.

A few variables are controlled for, including parity (time-variant variable), age at marriage, how couples met, ethnicity, parents’ education, and parents’ political status.

Results

Figure 1 demonstrates the relative risks of divorce by calendar periods, while all other covariates are standardized. It shows that divorce was rather uncommon during the period of the 1970s-80s. The divorce risk increased approximately threefold from the pre-1990s to the 1990s. However, the increase substantially slowed down thereafter, and the trend shifted to a plateau towards the 2000s. These results partially confirm our first hypothesis. The plateau of divorce during the 2000s was out of our expectation.

Figure 2 displays an over-time variation of the association between marriage type and calendar periods. First, we can see that individuals who cohabited (without conceiving a child) prior to marriage had the highest likelihood of divorce over the entire observation period. They were followed by cohabiters who conceived a child before marriage. The divorce patterns and trends for direct marriage and conception marriage resemble each other, with those who conceived a child prior to marriage having slightly higher risk of divorce than those who entered into marriage directly. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a significant surge of divorce occurred to all types of marriage groups. However, a diversity of trend development came into view towards the 2000s: the trends for direct marriage, conception marriage, and C+C marriage more or less plateaued, whereas the trend for cohabitation marriage declined. The results imply that during the 1990s when cohabitation was an innovative family behavior, its positive role in divorce was rather pronounced. When cohabitation became a more common practice in the 2000s, its positive effect on divorce substantially weakened. The role of premarital conception in divorce has been rather weak during the entire observation period. These results confirm our second and third hypothesis.

Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate how the effect of socioeconomic characteristics on divorce may change over time. Figure 3 presents the interactive effect of education and calendar periods on divorce, while all other covariates are standardized for. It shows that the divorce trends for all education groups experienced a notable escalation from the pre-1990s to the 1990s. Towards the 2000s, the trends developed in different directions. The divorce trends for the secondary and the college educated plateaued, whereas the trend for the low educated kept increasing significantly and even surpassed that of the secondary educated. Figure 4, which presents how hukou origin and calendar periods interactively affect divorce likelihood, demonstrates a similar story. It shows that the urbanites were at the forefront of divorce over the entire observation period. During the 1990s when the rise of divorce was particularly conspicuous, the urbanites had particularly higher intensity to divorce than the rural born. In the 2000s when the divorce trend for the urbanites shifted downward, the trend for the rural born kept increasing, and the gap between the urbanites and the rural-born reduced. These results confirm our fourth hypothesis by showing that during the early stages of modernization, those with better economic resources were pioneers in divorce; with the level of modernization increasing, those with fewer economic resources became active practitioners.
**Figure 1:** Relative risks of divorce by calendar periods, China, 1970-2012 (Reference category: 1970-89)

Source: Authors’ own calculation based on CFPS (2010-2012 waves)

**Figure 2:** Interactive effect of marriage type and calendar periods on divorce, China (1970-2012) (Reference category: 1970-89, direct marriage)

Source: Authors’ own calculation based on CFPS (2010-2012 waves)
**Figure 3**: Interactive effect of education and calendar periods on divorce, China (1970-2012) (Reference category: 1970-89, secondary education)

![Interactive effect of education and calendar periods on divorce, China (1970-2012)](image)

*Source: Authors’ own calculation based on CFPS (2010-2012 waves)*

**Figure 4**: Interactive effect of hukou origin and calendar periods on divorce, China (1970-2012) (Reference category: 1970-89, rural hukou origin)

![Interactive effect of hukou origin and calendar periods on divorce, China (1970-2012)](image)

*Source: Authors’ own calculation based on CFPS (2010-2012 waves)*

**Conclusion**

This study enriches our knowledge of divorce patterns and trends in Chinese society. Some of our findings resemble those for developed societies in the West, such as the shift of divorce trend from rise to plateau, and the over-time changes of the effect of cohabitation as well as socioeconomic characteristics on divorce. It deserves noting that it takes China only 20 years to complete the transition
process from rise to plateau, whereas it takes US and the Western and Northern European societies around 40-50 years to come to this plateau.

Some findings of this study are typical of the Chinese society. The role of premarital conception (without cohabitation) in marriage dissolution has been rather week over the entire observation period. We argue that the long existence of conception marriage as an important marriage formation behavior in Chinese society is an important reason that drives the divorce trend for conception marriage closer to that of direct marriage.

References


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