

Traces of the second demographic transition in East Asia:

Cohabitation and marriage patterns in China

Implicit in numerous demographic work is the assumption of convergence: Sooner or later more and more countries will go through the sequential stages of demographic change famously labelled as second demographic transition (SDT). As countries worldwide are equally hit by global social and economic changes, the question arises if they also follow a common path of societal development despite their cultural idiosyncrasies. This study compares the process of demographic change in two regions which experienced similar processes of economic change, while being culturally highly diverse: East Asia and Western Europe.

As the SDT in Europe occurred simultaneously to a period of industrialization and economic growth, countries outside of Europe, which are wealthy enough to have undergone Maslowian drift, provide interesting cases of study. Industrialized and urbanized Asian countries therefore seem to be of high relevance. Lesthaeghe (2011) already provided evidence that Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore experienced parts of the second demographic transition. China has been developing rapidly in the last three decades, experiencing social change such as a growing middle class. Furthermore, it represents an important case in the East Asian context as adjacent countries such as Taiwan are heavily influenced by traditional Chinese culture (Yeh et al. 2013).

Recent evidence seems to confirm the convergence assumption as China experiences rising numbers of cohabitation, decreasing marriage and increasing divorce rates just like countries in the Western hemisphere did several decades before. One third of all recent marriages in China began as cohabiting unions (Yu & Xie 2015). Due to its relevance in the process of family formation, this study analyzes pre-marital cohabitation as new and quickly emerging phenomenon in the Chinese context. Cohabitation could even become more widespread in the future as the average age at first marriage for both men and women increases and the traditional early and universal marriage pattern erodes (Yu & Xie 2015). We furthermore analyze marriage patterns to shed light on the interdependencies between periods of cohabitation and marriage in individual life courses.

On the basis of a nationally representative annual longitudinal survey, namely the China Family Panel Studies CFPS, partnership formation of the cohort which recently turned 35 is examined. Hereby, national patterns of cohabitation are detected to determine the prevalence, occurrence and timing of cohabitation. In logistic regression models we also look at the impact of micro-level factors on partnership status named as influential during the SDT. We finally study the determinants of cohabitation duration in a survival analysis. Then we discuss the influence of macro-level factors such as China's housing policies and cultural norms on cohabitation and marriage patterns.

Preliminary evidence shows that 25% of our sample cohabited with their spouse before their marriage. As expected, we observe large urban-rural differences in the structure of pre-marital

cohabitants: 60% belong to the urban population and 40% to the rural population. We further observe that variations in economic resources and educational level make a huge difference with regard to marriage timing and the occurrence of pre-marital cohabitation: Cohabitation rates of the lowest educated individuals are much lower than those of the highest educated individuals. The former group marries their partners early, while the latter group cohabits until they reached a sufficiently high educational level and income. Only then they are in the position to marry their partner. Individuals therefore move in with their partner if they still lack the means to marry or need to complete their training. In line with this finding, the highest educated individuals in our dataset cohabit much longer than the lowest educated individuals. In opposition to Oppenheimer's (2003) famous thesis of cohabitation as the "poor man's marriage", cohabitation has therefore established as the "rich man's marriage" within the Chinese context. Being a man or a woman does surprisingly not make any difference with regard to age at first cohabitation or the duration of cohabitation.

As opposed to Western Europe nowadays, cohabitation in the Chinese context should be viewed as a precursor rather than an alternative to marriage (Raymo et al. 2014, 20) and marriage remains nearly universal. Here, the question arises why individuals cohabit at all instead of directly getting married. We analyze the decision to cohabit or marry in two separate analyses. First, we study the determinants of getting married instead of remaining in a Living Apart Together relationship. Second, we look at the determinants of getting married instead of cohabiting. We study the influence of hukou status, income level, educational level, living in an urban or rural context and employment status on partnership status in two logistic regressions, while we control for ethnicity, age, health status and gender. We continue by studying the determinants of cohabitation duration in a survival analysis.

This study is among the first to jointly analyze cohabitation and marriage patterns in China, using a unique, previously unknown, nationally representative dataset: the CFPS. We conduct different types of quantitative analyses to jointly examine the determinants of cohabitation and marriage in the Chinese context. Furthermore, we study the individual-level determinants of cohabitation duration. By studying its dominant partnership formation patterns, we aim at situating China within the model of the SDT to draw conclusions on the similarity and differences of demographic change in the Eastern Asian and Western European context.

References

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