Population Studies Center

PSC Research Reports

Report 13-808
October 2013

Yu Xie

Gender and Family in Contemporary China

Population Studies Center
University of Michigan
Institute for Social Research

www.psc.isr.umich.edu

Gender and Family in Contemporary China

Yu Xie

University of Michigan

Population Studies Center Research Report 13-808
October 2013

ABSTRACT

Both gender relations and family structures have undergone tremendous changes since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This article reviews the recent literature on gender and family in contemporary China, focusing on social changes. As a whole, research has shown both radical departures from, as well as a continuation of, traditional practices concerning gender relations and the family. Examples of departures include women's significant improvement in socioeconomic status relative to that of men, rises in premarital cohabitation and divorce, and elderly no longer depending on sons for old-age support. Examples of continued traditions include wife's primary housework role, social hypergamy, multi-generational coresidence, and substantial son-preference. In recent years, rapid economic development and the associated high consumption aspirations have exerted economic pressures on young persons entering marriage.

Traditional Chinese Family and Gender Roles

Family, a group of individuals connected by either marriage or blood, is the most elementary social, economic, and residential collective unit in most human societies. While family as a social institution is universal, its manifestation and significance vary both across societies and over time. Ample evidence indicates that the traditional Chinese family, in its ideal form, is different from the "modern family" that evolved from Western Europe.

One distinct feature of the traditional Chinese family is the paramount importance of family lineage (Chu and Yu 2010). In this tradition, individuals are no more than temporary carriers who perpetuate familial male lines, with ancestors assuming spiritual roles. Ancestors are believed to be active in their afterlives and need to be worshiped, offered, and respected through family rituals. In return, they provide protection and assistance to their living offspring. Thus, ancestors assume a god-like status in Chinese culture, with each large family clan essentially having its own folk religion (Thompson 1989). The god-like status of ancestors also carries practical implications for everyday life in the form of filial piety. The core value in the Chinese family, filial piety requires that children or grandchildren respect and care for their parents or grandparents (Thornton and Lin 1994; Whyte 2004).

The traditional Chinese family has long been characterized as patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal, putting women at a severe social disadvantage relative to men (Thornton and Lin 1994). Indeed, in a classic paper on the influence of Chinese family structure on gender inequality, Greenhalgh (1985, p.265) stated that "Traditional Confucian China and its cultural offshoots, Japan and Korea, evolved some of the most patriarchal family systems that ever existed." There are rational bases for this gender inequality. In this family system, sons are permanent members of their natal family and retain life-time financial relationships with their parents. They are expected to contribute to their parents' economic well-being even after they are married themselves. Thus, it is in their self-interest for parents to invest in sons because they may reap long-term returns from this investment. In contrast, daughters are only temporary members of their natal families before marriage, upon which a woman serves her husband's extended family (Whyte and Xu 2003). Thus, due to the limited time during which daughters serve their natal families, parents often extract resources from unmarried daughters, for example in terms of remittances from daughters' market labor or housework, to improve the family budget and invest in sons. In Greenhalgh's (1985, p.276) words, "Put baldly, parents' *key strategy* was to take more from daughters to give more to sons and thus get more for themselves."

Empirical Evidence and Social Changes

Researchers have found empirical evidence, mostly based on data from Taiwan, to illustrate the traditional Chinese family system. For example, two studies report that Taiwanese families tend to sacrifice older daughters' educations to benefit the educational outcomes of younger sons (Chu, Xie, and Yu 2007; Parish and Willis 1993). Furthermore, several studies have found that married sons provide larger amounts of financial support than married daughters to elderly parents in Taiwan (Hermalin, Ofstedal, and Shih 2003; Lee, Parish, and Willis 1994; Lin et al. 2003) and in rural China (Yang, 1996). More evidence is given in books by Chu and Yu (2010) and Thornton and Lin (1994).

China has undergone major social changes in the last six decades, due to several revolutionary movements, most notably the Communist Revolution that resulted in the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in1949, the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, and the economic reform that began in 1978. In 1950, China instituted the Marriage Law, which formally legalized free-choice marriages and explicitly equalized wives' rights and interests with those of husbands. As I will show below, changes in education, the pension system, and economic structure have also greatly altered family life in contemporary China. There are also good indications that a substantial fraction of Chinese parents today, especially educated ones, no longer subscribe to the traditional Chinese value of maintaining family lineage (Wu and Xie 2013).

Gender Inequality in Contemporary China

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, women's socioeconomic status has significantly improved. This is most significantly shown in education. While women's education fell far below that of men in the early years of the PRC, women's educational attainment has gradually caught up with that of men (Hannum and Xie 1994; Li and Xie 2013; Wu and Zhang 2010). For instance, in 1982, the percentages receiving postsecondary education were respectively 1.24% for men and 0.64% for women; these percentages increased to 6.72% and 5.63% in 2005 (Mu and Xie forthcoming). Women's employment has been nearly universal throughout the history of the PRC, although severe occupation segregation has persisted for non-agricultural jobs over time (Wu and Wu 2008). Although the gender gap in earnings was low among urban workers, especially educated urban workers, in the early years of the reform era (Xie and Hannum 1996), the gender gap has increased over time (Hauser and Xie 2005). A recent study based on data from 2010 and 2012 estimates women's earnings to be 70% those of men, without any controls (Li and Xie 2013). The same study also reports gender differences, in favor of men, in middle- and higher-level administrative/managerial positions and political participation.

An explanation of the paradox of women's large improvement in educational attainment being accompanied by lower economic standing for women than for men, especially for high-level positions, lies not only in the labor market but also in the family. Yu and Xie (2012) report large gender gaps in household work in contemporary China, with the lion's share falling on the shoulders of the wife rather than the husband. It is quite possible that this traditional division of labor in the household, with women being mainly responsible for caring for children and the household, may impede realization of women's full potential in the labor market.

Marriage Behaviors

The rapid improvement in women's social status has important implications for marriage behaviors in China. The median age of first marriage rose steadily for women, from 20 in the 1940s birth cohort to 23 in the 1980s birth cohort; by comparison, the increase for men was smaller, from 24 in the 1940s birth cohort to 25 in the 1980s birth cohort (Mu and Xie, forthcoming). Despite these delays, marriage has remained nearly universal, except for less educated men in the most recent birth cohort to be discussed below (Yu and Xie 2013).

Status hypergamy – the tendency of women to marry men of higher social status – has been a traditional practice in China (Thornton and Lin 1994; Xu, Ji, and Tung 2000). This cultural norm has remained in place in contemporary China, although mate selection has largely been transformed from being parent-arranged to being love-based (Xu and Whyte 1990). In the past, hypergamy was achieved by women marrying men of higher educational attainment. With women now closing their overall educational gap with men, however, hypergamy cannot be achieved easily through educational hypergamy. Instead, we now observe a trend of increases in the age gap between husband and wife so as to allow prospective husbands to accumulate more economic resources than prospective wives of similar education (Mu and Xie forthcoming).

Mu and Xie (forthcoming) propose that high consumption aspirations resulting from the recent economic boom in China have exerted economic pressures on young persons entering marriage. Consistent with this conjecture, Yu and Xie (2013) find that, defying the universal marriage norm, more than a quarter of men with primary school educations who were born after 1974 still remained single after age 32, while similarly educated men in earlier birth cohorts did achieve universal marriage. Through multivariate analysis of the hazard of marriage entry, Yu and Xie conclude that economic factors have increased in importance as determinants of entry into marriage during the economic reform era. Most directly, they report evidence that housing prices affect marriage entry interactively: higher housing prices at the city level are associated with later age of marriage and a more positive effect of education on

marriage entry. Wei and Zhang (2011) argue that the economic pressure for marriage comes from China's rising sex ratios. But this pressure may actually be generated from a combination of broader factors, such as hypergamy, improvement of women's socioeconomic status, and rising consumption aspirations. Thus, economic pressure, combined with a hypergamy culture, will make marriage difficult to attain for two groups: men with little education and highly educated women.

Cohabitation, Divorce, and the Second Demographic Transition

By the 1990s, China had completed its first demographic transition from a regime with high fertility and high mortality to a regime with low fertility and low mortality (Xie 2011). The second demographic transition refers to social trends of increases in non-traditional family practices such as cohabitation, divorce, and out-of-wedlock childbirths (Lesthaeghe 2010). Has China experienced the second demographic transition?

Out-of-wedlock childbirths remain almost absent in China. However, both premarital cohabitation and divorce have risen. For example, the crude divorce rate increased from 0.3 per thousand in 1979, to 0.7 per thousand in 1990, to 1.0 in 2000, and 2.1 in 2010 (*Fa Zhi Wan Bao* 2010). The latest data from the China Family Panel Study (CFPS) indicate that premarital cohabitation, virtually absent for marriage cohorts before the 1980s, has reached almost a third for the most recent marriage cohort in 2010-2012 (Xu, Li, and Yu 2013). Cohabitation rates are much higher in more developed coastal regions, such as Shanghai and Guangdong, than in less developed inland regions, such as Gansu (Xu, Li, and Yu 2013). Furthermore, the same study also finds that cohabitation is positively associated with education. These results reveal that premarital cohabitation has become a more socially accepted form of living arrangement before formal marriage in China.

Coresidence and Elderly Support

CFPS data from 2012 show that about a third of the Chinese population still lives in multi-generational families (Xu, Li and Yu 2013). Data from the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) 2011-2012 baseline survey reveal that about 43 percent of elderly persons aged 60 and above still lived with a child, the proportion being higher in rural than in urban China (Lei et al. 2013). However, this number may substantially underestimate the social support that elderly receive from their children, as another 31 percent have a child living in the same neighborhood, and 13percent more in the same county but not in the same neighborhood (Lei et al. 2013). When the elderly coreside with children, they are far more likely to coreside with sons than with daughters (Chu, Xie and Yu 2011).

There are two main explanations for a higher percentage of Chinese elderly persons living with children than in western countries. First, the traditional Chinese family is patrilinear and patrilocal. Indeed, surveys show that a large portion of the elderly prefer or expect to live with their children (Chu and Yu 2010). Second, largely due to lack of public support, a significant portion of Chinese elderly still count on their children for old age support (Chu, Xie, and Yu 2011; Chu and Yu 2010; Lei et al. 2013; Logan and Bian 1999). Both CFPS and CHARLS data show a high frequency of financial transfers between elderly parents and their children. With China's further economic development and better provision of public support for the elderly, the rate of the elderly's coresidence with children may decline in the future.

Conclusion

Both gender relations and family forms have undergone tremendous changes in the past decades in China. Researchers of contemporary China have shown that women's socioeconomic status has greatly improved and indeed reached parity with that of men by some indicators, although women remain disadvantaged relative to men in terms of labor income, positions of authority, and housework. Marriage behaviors in China have trended increasingly towards patterns observed in the West, such as later marriage, more cohabitation, and more divorce. Despite these social changes, a high proportion of extended families with elderly parents living with their sons remains a distinct characteristic of the Chinese family today. Another pattern peculiar to Chinese marriages is social hypergamy, which remains in effect despite a significant improvement in women's socioeconomic status. The cultural expectation of hypergamy, coupled with rising consumption aspirations and fast increases in housing prices in many parts of China, exerts intense economic pressure on young men contemplating marriage. This pressure leads to a marriage squeeze for two demographic groups: low-status men and high-status women, who may find it increasingly difficult to fulfill their desires for marriage.

References

Chu, C. Y. Cyrus and Ruoh-rong Yu. 2010. *Understanding Chinese Families: A Comparative Study of Taiwan and Southeast China.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Chu, C. Y. Cyrus, Yu Xie, and Ruoh-rong Yu. 2007. "Effects of Sibship Structure Revisited: Evidence from Intra-Family Resource Transfer in Taiwan." *Sociology of Education* 80:91-113.

Chu, C. Y. Cyrus, Yu Xie, and Ruoh-rong Yu. 2011. "Coresidence with Elderly Parents: A Comparative Study of Southeast China and Taiwan." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73:120-135.

Fa Zhi Wan Bao. 2010. "Ministry of Civil Affairs: Divorce Rate in China Has Continuously Increased for 30 Years." Retrieved October 6, 2013 (http://news.163.com/10/1003/13/6I2T8NPB0001124J.html).

Greenhalgh, Susan. 1985. "Sexual Stratification: The Other Side of 'Growth with Equity' in East Asia." *Population and Development Review* 11: 265 – 314.

Hannum, Emily and Yu Xie. 1994. "Trends in Educational Gender Inequality in China: 1949-1985." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 13:73-98.

Hauser, Seth and Yu Xie. 2005. "Temporal and Regional Variation in Earnings Inequality: Urban China in Transition between 1988 and 1995." *Social Science Research* 34:44-79.

Hermalin, Albert I., Mary-Beth Ofstedal, and S. P. Shih. 2003. "Support Received by the Elderly in Baoding: The View from Two Generations." Pp. 121-142 in *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations*, edited by M. Whyte. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

Lee, Yean-Ju, William L. Parish, and Robert J. Willis. 1994. "Sons, Daughters, and Intergenerational Support in Taiwan." *American Journal of Sociology* 99:1010-1041.

Lei, Xiaoyan, John Strauss, Meng Tian, and Yaohui Zhao. 2013. "Living Arrangements of the Elderly in China: Evidence from the CHARLS National Baseline." Department of Economics, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX. Unpublished manuscript. Retrieved October 6, 2013 (http://econweb.tamu.edu/common/files/workshops/PERC%20Applied%20Microeconomics/2013_2_27_John_Strauss.pdf).

Lesthaeghe, Ron J. 2010. "The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition. " *Population and Development Review* 36(2): 211-251.

Li, Wangyang and Xie, Yu. 2013. "Gender Differences" ("**性别差异**"). Pp.215-249 in *Wellbeing Development Report of China 2013* 《中国民生发展报告 2013》(in Chinese), edited by Y. Xie, X. Zhang, J. Li, X. Yu, and Q. Ren 谢宇、张晓波、李建新、于学军、任强. Beijing, China: Peking University Press. 北京大学出版社。

Lin, I-Fen, Noreen Goldman, Maxine Weinstein, Yu Hsuan Lin, Tristan Gorrindo, and Teresa Seeman. 2003. "Gender Differences in Adult Children's Support of their Parents in Taiwan." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65: 184-200.

Logan, John R. and Fuqin Bian. 1999. "Family Values and Co-residence with Married Children in Urban China." *Social Forces* 77: 1253-1282.

Mu, Zheng and Yu Xie. Forthcoming. "Marital Age Homogamy in China: A Reversal of Trend in the Reform Era?" *Social Science Research*.

Parish, William L.and Robert J. Willis. 1993. "Daughters, Education, and Family Budgets Taiwan Experiences." *The Journal of Human Resources* 28: 863-898.

Thompson, Lawrence G. 1989. *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* 4th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Thornton, Arland and Hui-sheng Lin.1994. *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wei, Shang-Jin and Xiaobo Zhang. 2011. "The Competitive Saving Motive: Evidence from Rising Sex Ratios and Savings Rates in China." *Journal of Political Economy* 119: 511-564.

Whyte, Martin. 2004. "Filial Obligations in Chinese Families: Paradoxes of Modernization." Pp. 106-127 in *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, edited by C. Ikels. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Whyte, Martin and Qin Xu. 2003. "Support for Aging Parents from Daughters versus Sons." Pp. 167-196 in *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations*, edited by M. Whyte. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

Wu, Qiong and Xie, Yu. 2013. "Attitudes and Values" ("态度和观念"). Pp. 27-53 in *Wellbeing Development Report of China 2013* 《中国民生发展报告 2013》(in Chinese), edited by Y. Xie, X. Zhang, J. Li, X. Yu, and Q, Ren 谢宇、张晓波、李建新、于学军、任强. Beijing, China: Peking University Press. 北京大学出版社。

Wu, Xiaogang and Zhuoni Zhang. 2010. "Changes in Educational Inequality in China, 1990-2005: Evidence from the Population Census Data." *Research in Sociology of Education* 17: 123-152.

Wu, Yxiao and Xiaogang Wu. 2008. "A Study on the Sex Segregation in Non-agricultural Occupations in China in 1982-2000." ("1982-2000 : 我国非农职业的性别隔离研究") *Society*《社会》28:5.

Xie, Yu. 2011. "Evidence-Based Research on China: A Historical Imperative." *Chinese Sociological Review* 44 (1):14-25.

Xie, Yu and Emily Hannum. 1996. "Regional Variation in Earnings Inequality in Reform-Era Urban China." *American Journal of Sociology* 101:950-992.

Xu, Qi, Jianxin Li and Xuejun Yu. 2013. "Marriage and Family" ("**婚姻与家庭**"). Pp. 305-343 in *Wellbeing Development Report of China 2013* 《中国民生发展报告 2013》(in Chinese), edited by Y. Xie, X. Zhang, J. Li, X. Yu, and Q. Ren 谢宇、张晓波、李建新、于学军、任强. 2013. Beijing, China: Peking University Press. 北京大学出版社。

Xu, Xiaohe, JianJun Ji, and Yuk-Ying Tung. 2000. Social and Political Assortative Mating in Urban China. *Journal of Family Issues* 21: 47-77.

Xu, Xiaohe and Martin Whyte. 1990. "Love Matches and Arranged Marriages: A Chinese Replication." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52: 709-722.

Yang, Hongqiu. 1996. "The Distributive Norm of Monetary Support to Older Parents: A Look at a Township in China." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58: 404-415.

Yu, Jia and Yu Xie. 2012. "The Varying Display of 'Gender Display'." *Chinese Sociological Review* 44 (2): 5-30.

Yu, Jia and Yu Xie. 2013. "Changes in the Determinants of Marriage Entry in Post-Reform Urban China." PSC Research Report 13-802 (September). University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

PSC Research Reports

The **Population Studies Center** (PSC) at the University of Michigan is one of the oldest population centers in the United States. Established in 1961 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Center has a rich history as the main workplace for an interdisciplinary community of scholars in the field of population studies.

Currently PSC is one of five centers within the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The Center receives core funding from both the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24) and the National Institute on Aging (P30).

PSC Research Reports are **prepublication working papers** that report on current demographic research conducted by PSC-affiliated researchers. These papers are written for timely dissemination and are often later submitted for publication in scholarly journals.

The **PSC Research Report Series** was initiated in 1981.

Population Studies Center
University of Michigan
Institute for Social Research
PO Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248 USA
www.psc.isr.umich.edu