‘Leftover’ Women and ‘Surplus’ Men in China?

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster
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This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.

Yingchun Ji is a research fellow in the Changing Family in Asia research cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She has been studying the so-called “leftover” women in China. Adopting the Modern-Traditional Mosaic framework, she investigates how marriage mismatch between urban “leftover” women and rural “surplus” men reinforces social stratification and transforms marriage as a traditional social institution in transitional China.

**Regional Heterogeneity**

Ji and Yeung illustrate geographic heterogeneity in marriage formation in China with a focus on four areas: Beijing, Henan, Guangxi and Ningxia based on the 2005 population survey data. Near universal and early marriage largely remains true in contemporary China. The 2005 Population Survey data revealed that the average age at first marriage was about 24 for women and 26 for men. By age 30-34, only about 2 percent of women and 10 percent of men remain single. Yet regional variations in marriage prevalence are notable and more prominent at younger ages of twenties, but regional patterns converge fast after age 30. The East metropolitan areas witness a slower entry to marriage than in the Central and West. Beijing has the highest average age at first marriage in the country - men and women get married at age 28 and 26 respectively. Local cultural norms, ethnic traditions, and religious practices are important factors in understanding regional variations in marriage formation in China. Interestingly, provinces with more ethnic minorities show more heterogeneity in marriage formation. For example, Ningxia, the Hui ethnic autonomous region, have the shortest single years before marriage; whereas Guangxi, the Zhuang ethnic autonomous region, and Hainan province with a relatively high concentration of the Li ethnic group have relatively long years of singlehood before marriage. The length of singlehood for men in Guangxi is comparable to that for Beijing men and even longer than that for Shanghai men. Ji and Yeung speculate that it could be due to both ethnic historical marriage practices and socioeconomic disadvantages of some ethnic minority men.

**Gender and Education**

Ji and Yeung show that gender and education largely differentiate men and women’s marriage formation. Although higher education delays both men and women’s marriage formation, the effect is stronger for women. College graduated women are almost 60 percent less likely to get married by the age of 30 than women with no education. Nonetheless, most of female college graduates do get married eventually. However, men with very limited education or uneducated, not only tend to marry late but can also have difficulty in finding mates. For example, in Beijing, by age 30, more than 20 percent of men without college education remain single.
On the other hand, almost all women ultimately get married, despite their educational background, even in cities like Beijing. For example, only about 10 percent of college-graduated women in Beijing remain single by the age of 30. But, by age 40, almost all women are married in Beijing. Hence, Ji and Yeung argue that the so-called “leftover” women issue has been greatly exaggerated in the media. Chinese college-educated women may delay marriage formation for career development as they are faced with increasing discrimination in the job market in recent decades. Financially they can afford to spend a longer time searching for a compatible mate, compared to poorly educated women. However, constrained by the social norm of status hypergamy and “gender double standard of aging,” women may face more challenges in searching for a mate than their male counterparts. As higher education continues to expand, it is likely that more Chinese women will further postpone their marriage formation. As late marriage becomes more socially acceptable, it is difficult to predict to what extent Chinese women will eventually forgo marriage in the future, a pattern that has already been observed in societies such as South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. As in these other societies, Chinese women who choose to remain single voluntarily may continue to be derogated as “leftover” women due to the strong patriarchal social norms.

A severe challenge falls on men with limited or no education. The social norm of status hypergamy and the severely skewed sex ratio have produced a double whammy for these men, particularly those living in remote, rural areas. Past studies have estimated that, due to the highly skewed sex ratio resulted from the one-child policy started in 1979, the excess males in China will continue to increase in the next two to three decades, reaching 30 to 50 million, and cause a severe marriage squeeze for males. With the continuing expansion of higher education and a massive excess of young men coming to marriage age, Ji and Yeung argue that the issue of “leftover” men will be a much more severe concern in China than the “leftover” women issue. The context of universal marriage in China can be expected to transform into a context of involuntary singlehood for many men. However, this will not necessarily result in less marriage for poorly educated women because the pool of “leftover” men with higher levels of education will grow. Following the social norm of hypergamy, these women can always marry men of similar or better education. Ji and Yeung note that the picture we see in China will thus be different from the case in the United States, where a substantial number of women with low socio-economic status cannot find marriageable men due to the deterioration of poorly educated men’s labour market situation.

For more details about the article, visit http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/06/06/0192513X14538030.abstract
Recent Cluster Activities and News

New Research Grant: Divorce and Single Parenthood in Singapore

Dr Sharon Quah, a postdoctoral fellow in the Changing Family in Asia cluster, has won a research grant from the Ministry of Social and Family Development, Family Research Fund on her research project on Transnational Divorces in Singapore.

- She aims to find out the divorce biographies of Singaporean citizens who have dissolved their transnational marriages with non-Singaporeans – if their divorce trajectories are different from local divorces and if they encounter cross-border challenges in marital dissolution and working out different aspects of their post-divorce lives.

New Special Issue on Marriage in Asia


Presentations at Shanghai Forum, May 24-25, 2014.

- Gavin Willis Jones, “The Demography of Asian Labour Markets”.
- Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, “Youth Unemployment and Transition to Adulthood in Asia”.

Presentations at The XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology Facing an unequal world: Challenges for Global Sociology, Yokohama, Japan, 13 - 19 July 2014.

- Adam Ka-Lok Cheung and Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, “Temporal, Spatial Distribution and Determinants of One-Person Households in China”. (oral presentation)
- Susanne YP Choi and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung, “Age Differences or Socioeconomic Disadvantages? Factors Shaping Negative Marital Outcomes in Cross-Border Marriages”. (oral presentation)
- Sharon Quah, “Reconfiguring personal communities in a divorce biography”. (distributed paper)

Transition

Dr Adam Ka-Lok Cheung has taken up a position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Editors of this issue: Qianhan Lin and Tharuka Prematillake Thibbotuwawa