



Islamic Norms & the Hui's Residential & Marriage Patterns

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.



Mu, Zheng and Xiwei Wu (Forthcoming), “Residential Concentration and Marital Behaviours of Muslim Chinese”, *Chinese Journal of Sociology*.

Zheng Mu is Joint Postdoctoral Fellow with the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, and the Centre for Family and Population Research, NUS. Her current work focuses on marriage and family behaviours of Muslim Chinese and Chinese internal migrants.

In the article featured in this issue, Mu and Wu, with the use of Chinese census data in 2000 and 2005, look at how residential patterns of Muslim Chinese have shaped their marital choices.

Hui – The Chinese-Speaking Muslims

Hui Muslim is the largest and the only Chinese-speaking Muslim group out of ten Muslim ethnic groups and the second largest minority group out of 55 minority ethnic groups in China. The Hui’s origins can be traced back to immigrants from the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, and other Islamic regimes in Central Asia between the 7th and 13th centuries, and most of them set foot in northwestern China. As a stateless Muslim group, after generations of settling-in and intermarriage with the local Han people, Hui are closely similar to Han in physical appearance. They speak Chinese and have adopted most of the cultural practices of the Han. Hui have been well accustomed to majority Han practices except for their religion, Islam. For instance, during the ethnic classification by the Chinese socialist state in the 1950s, while language was the major consideration in identifying all ethnic minorities, Hui were identified by their religion instead. Therefore, Hui people have been constantly faced with tensions in settling-into the Han while preserving their Islamic identity. Getting married within Hui community has been significant in maintaining their religious identity and purity, and their marriage behaviours have also been deeply shaped by Islamic norms regarding marriage.

Norms Regarding Hui Marriage

It has been widely established that Islam is patriarchal and promotes marriage within the Islamic community in the area of family practices. Islam strongly emphasises and considers ‘family’ as the foundation of a society. Therefore, Hui people also tend to marry within their group to value the Islamic norm, but also at early ages in order to value universal marriage practices norm. Although Hui people tend to value both of the aforementioned norms, it would be interesting to know how they respond when circumstances imposes them to choose one over the other—Do they delay marriage, stay single or marry outside of the group? The answer to this question sheds light on the relative strengths of the two norms.

In addition, Islam prescribes that women should be subordinate to men. Specifically, according to Muslim family law, it is highly important for women to preserve their chastity and enter marriage and give birth to children while young, in order to guarantee the religious purity and physical vitality of their offspring. Moreover, unlike for Muslim men (who are permitted to contract marriages based on their own judgements) marriage decisions for Muslim women typically have to be made by one of their male guardians. Would women thus be subjected to stronger religious norms in marital behaviours? The answer to this question contributes to an understanding of the gendered restrictiveness of the above mentioned two norms.

Hui's Residential Patterns

Hui's residential concentration well reflects the strength of religious norms prevalent in the local area. Specifically, the most significant feature of Hui's residential concentration is "national dispersion, local concentration"—that is, although their presence spreads all over the country, Hui still have relatively segregated Muslim communities at the local-level. On the one hand, as the most widely spread minority group, Hui are subjected to different levels of local residential patterns. Thus, they experience tensions between the desire to retain their own ethnic identity and the necessity to incorporate into the Han culture. On the other hand, residential areas with high volume of Hui people tend to reflect a more Islamic atmosphere. For instance, Hui Muslims prefer to live in areas with more Hui so that they can build their own facilities—such as mosques, schools and restaurants—and perform Islamic religious practices more rigorously. Correspondingly, in places with more Hui residents, Islamic beliefs are usually more powerful, and Hui Muslims are often more devout and follow religious practices more strictly.

Caught between the Two Norms

In places with higher Hui residential concentrations, they tend to have married within the Hui community and at early ages with higher marriage rates, thus following both the norms mentioned above. In these areas the choice of getting married out of the Hui group is significantly less. Nevertheless, the choice between staying single or getting married out of the Hui group is somewhat uncertain. In other words, while some Hui tend to stay single for a future possible marriage within the Hui group, others tend to sacrifice religious purity in order to fulfil the expectation of universal marriage. This indicates the coexistence of and the competition between the two norms. That is, in places with higher Hui concentrations, pressures to practice early marriage and within the Hui group are both stronger than in areas where there are not many Hui people. Thus, it is more difficult for them to make a choice between staying single for a late-marriage within the Hui group and marrying early out of the Hui group. This difficulty in marital choice makes the link between Hui concentration and the choice between singleness and marriage out of the Hui group somewhat uncertain.

Gendered Restrictiveness of the Two Norms

Results show that women have consistently higher marriage rates than men, no matter by age 25 or age 30, and regardless of the Hui residential patterns elaborated above. This means that women are more obliged than men to get married by a young age, so as to fulfil the norm of universal marriage. However, men's marriage rate range across places of different Hui concentrations is larger than that for women, which makes men more responsive to the change in Hui concentrations. Moreover, although men and women are equally restricted to marriage within the Hui group, higher education seem to have provided women with the freedom to stay single, but not so much in marrying someone outside of the Hui group. This may be attributed to the fact that since marrying within Hui is a crucial strategy to preserve ethnic purity and identity, as the more subordinate group and as the one who gives birth to Hui offspring, Hui women's marital choices are under tighter control.

Up-coming Research Cluster Activities

Singapore Families and Population Dynamics, University Hall Auditorium, NUS, 28 April 2015, 10am-6pm.

Conveners: Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, Catherine Tang and Thang Leng Leng

Organised by: Centre for Family and Population Research (CFPR) and co-sponsored by the Singapore Research Nexus, Asia Research Institute and the Department of Sociology, NUS.

This conference marks the official launch of the Centre for Family and Population Research (CFPR) in NUS. The event also commemorates Singapore's 50 years of nation building and the University's 110th anniversary.

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For more details about the conference visit,

http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/research/weblinks/Singapore_families_conference.html

For CFPR website, visit <http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/>

Singapore Families and Population Dynamics Conference, NUS University Hall, 28 April 2015

- Sharon Quah and Shawna Tang, "Female-headed Households in Singapore: A Case of Never Married and Divorced Mothers".