

From Collective Synchronization to Individual Liberalization: (Re)emergence of Late Marriage in New Shanghai

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Long Abstract

Introduction

In the last half century, two phases of late marriage emerged in urban Shanghai, China's largest and most cosmopolitan urban center. Mean age at first marriage first rose from 20 for females and 22 for males in the early 1950s to 25 for females and 27 for males by the late 1970s, the highest among any Chinese cities. Yet, mean marriage age dropped precipitously after 1980, by two years both for females and males, only to be followed by a gradual rise again, approaching the level of the previous peaks by the early 21st century. In urban Shanghai, as elsewhere in China, a late marriage regime has reemerged.

The forces underlying these two late marriage periods however are vastly different. The first late marriage era, while initially rooted in individual choices and preferences, was a product of forced collective synchronization, under the socialist government's late marriage campaign as part of a forceful birth control program. When such a requirement was withdrawn, as was the case in 1980, individuals reacted and readjusted their behaviors, which led to a sudden and significant drop in marriage age within a short time period. The second late marriage era, which emerged gradually over two decades since the early 1980s and is continuing today, has brought mean marriage ages back to the level of the previous peaks, especially for males. Unlike the first phase of late marriage, this reemergence of late marriage is no longer the product of government policy enforcement, but due entirely to individual volition and choices, conditioned by a post-socialist society that has commodified everything from real estate property to human body. The reemergence of the late marriage regime in Shanghai, following a rise and then a drop in marriage age during the previous decades, tells a vivid story of the social transformation in China, seen from one of the most long-lasting and important social institutions. In this paper, we use urban Shanghai as an example to examine the reemergence of the late marriage in contemporary China.

Data and Research Design

We use data from China's Inter-census Survey of 2005 collected by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (Zhang et al. 2005) to examine changes in marriage in Shanghai. The survey's questionnaire is very similar to the census questionnaires of 2000 and 2010 with 35 items at the individual level, and 20 items

at the household level. The data used in this analysis is a 15% sub-sample of the mini-census for Shanghai. The survey not only contains information on respondents' current marital status, but also year and month of their first marriage. Computer algorithm is used to match marriage partners within a household according to their relationship with the household head, for generating data needed for spousal information. In this paper, we will first delineate the main features of change in age at first marriage in Shanghai between 1950 and 2005, and then examine the (re)emergence of late marriage in connection with major social and political events that influenced individual choices.

Main Findings: From Collective Synchronization to Individual Liberalization

Two phases of late marriage age are evident among the population in Shanghai, as shown in Figure 1, in which we present the trends of male and female ages at first marriage in two separate panels, one with mean age at first marriage, and one with the standard deviation of age at first marriage. Age at first marriage has been on rise since 1950, with trends basically parallel for males and females, and females' mean age at first marriage about 2 years younger than males'. The revision of Marriage Law in 1980 divides the rise of age at first marriage in Shanghai from 1950 to 2005 into three stages: pre-1980, 1980-1990, and post-1990.

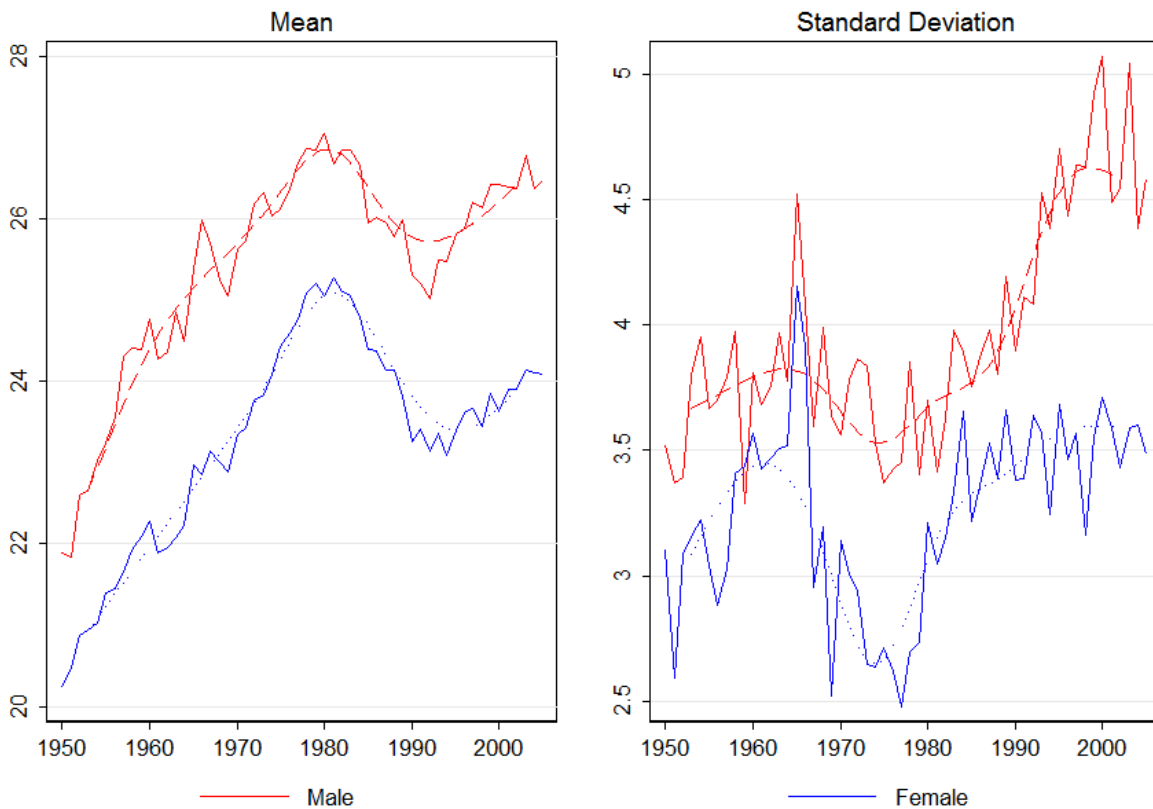


Figure 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Age at First Marriage, Shanghai 1950-2005

The shift from collective synchronization to individual differentiation is seen most clearly with the standard deviation of ages at first marriage in Figure 1 (right panel). The launch of the “late marriage” policy first greatly increased the variability of age at first marriage in early 1960s, especially for females. The unusual increase in mean ages was then associated with a decline in variability. Simultaneous to the first peak of age at first marriage in the 1970s is a sharp decline in the variability of marriage age, especially for female. Female’s standard deviation of age at first marriage declined from around 3.5 years to 2.5 years, before a reversal in 1980. Given that the Marriage Law sets the minimum marriage ages, the source of variability in age at first marriage over time is mainly in the upper end of marriage age, i.e. what are the proportions of people marrying at old ages. In the 1960s, there was an increase of proportion of women marrying in the late 20s, but this proportion declined in the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, the upper end of age at first marriage for females settled at about 30, and for males about 35. By the late 1990s, the standard deviation has returned to the pre-“late marriage” era, thus reestablished the traditional age variability. Since then, marriage age for males in Shanghai has shown further variability, a result of a greater degree of individual differentiation. Similar trends of collective synchronization followed by individual liberalization are also observed in the age difference within a couple (not shown).

The rise of age at first marriage in Shanghai since 1950 shows both the cultural resilience and cultural change in the Chinese marriage regime. Dramatic, sometimes chaotic social, economic, and political changes in China since the founding of the People’s Republic have had direct impacts on China’s marriage system. The changes in the marriage system however seem to be more an evolutionary than revolutionary process. Even the forceful push of “late marriage” by government fiat only had a temporary effect. Looking from a long-term perspective, age at first marriage in urban Shanghai was on a course of steady and gradual rise. The underlying forces driving such a long-term trend, as we observe above, vary by historical time and institutional conditions.

Having delineated the two phases of late marriage in urban Shanghai and identified that a defining feature of the reemergence is increasing individualization, our next questions are 1) what the effects of such delayed marriage have on the marriage institution itself, namely whether the delay is also associated with staying out of the marriage institution all at once, and 2) how such an increased individualization plays out, namely who are the ones marrying the latest, if at all. We find that under the general picture of universal marriage is a social gradation of marriage in relation to other socioeconomic indicators. For example, in 1971-1980, the differential effect of education is shown primary as a delaying effect. However, in the decade of 1996-2005, the differential effect of education on marriage had become much more evident and widespread, with marriage timing clearly differentiated by the level of educational attainment. Unlike in the decade of 1971-1980, when females regardless of educational attainment eventually converge to universal marriage, in the 1996-2005 decade, among women with the highest levels of education, almost 7 percent of them would remain single at the age of 45 if the risk of marriage stays at the level of 1996-2005. The differential effect of education on marriage is more than a mere delay, either long delay led to missed opportunities, or some highly educated women made a deliberate choice to stay single.

Conclusions

In a time span of half of a century, the institution of marriage, a traditional social pillar of the Chinese society, has witnessed profound changes. Behind such changes are both the force of the state and social changes as embodied in changing family relationships and individual values and choices. In Shanghai, and likely in China as a whole, 50 years of state engineered social development has greatly weakened the traditional preference of early marriage. The first socialist marriage law of the 1950 liberated individuals from the rules of their family elders and led to a gradual increase in age at marriage, but did not weaken the marriage institution itself. State's enforcement of late marriage in the 1970s pushed age at marriage to a historical high, erasing individual differences and creating a collective synchronization. When such a strong intervention was withdrawn, marriage age first fell, followed by a gradual and still ongoing rise. By the end of this half-century, a second height of marriage age emerged, as seen in urban Shanghai. Unlike the previous peak of age at marriage, the recent one is featured by increased individual choice and differentiation. And unlike the previous late marriage era, which retrenched quickly when the state intervention was withdrawn, the current one carries its own momentum and has no end in sight.

What has also emerged in association with the reemergence of late marriage in recent years is a move away from the traditional model of universal marriage. Such a trend resembles what has taken place in societies elsewhere, including those in East Asia, and departs from the patterns seen only two decades ago in urban China, where marriage age delay was associated with a "stalled wall," namely eventually almost all young people still got married (Whyte 1993). At least for the highly educated women in Shanghai, almost 7 percent will remain single at age 45 if the marriage trend observed in the decade of 1996-2005 continues. With the rapid expansion of China's high education, especially women's education, if this trend of non-marriage continues, China will soon face a marriage revolution just like what has happened in many developed countries.