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*Descriptive Finding*

### **Recent trends in the Chinese family: National estimates from 1990 to 2010**

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## Contents

1	Introduction	596
2	Data and measures	597
2.1	Data	597
2.2	Measures	597
3	Results	598
3.1	Marriage entry	598
3.2	Cohabitation	600
3.3	Divorce	601
3.4	Nonmarital fertility	602
3.5	Childlessness	602
4	Conclusion and discussion	603
	References	605

## **Recent trends in the Chinese family: National estimates from 1990 to 2010**

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### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Family in China has experienced drastic changes in the past decades. Yet we have limited knowledge of the trends and patterns of the Chinese family in transition.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

This study provides a systematic documentation of the Chinese family in transition by estimating a variety of indicators of marital and fertility behaviors in China, including the singlehood rate, first marriage age, cohabitation rate, divorce rate, and nonmarital childbirth rate.

#### **METHODS**

We analyze data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 China Censuses, the 2005 1% China Population Inter-Census Surveys, and the 2010–2016 China Family Panel Studies.

#### **RESULTS**

The results indicate trends of delays in first marriage age and increases in premarital cohabitation in China. Despite below-replacement fertility, childlessness remains rare among married Chinese couples. In addition, almost all children are born and raised within marriage, with a virtual absence of nonmarital childbearing in China. Although we observe a slight increase in divorce across cohorts, the divorce rate within 10 years in China was much lower than in other East Asian societies.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Our research suggests both continuity and changes in marital and childbearing behaviors in China. The trajectory of family changes in China has not followed those in Western countries.

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## CONTRIBUTION

This article documents the most recent Chinese family changes and provides national estimates of family behaviors in China.

## 1. Introduction

Families in China have experienced dramatic changes over the past decades. The most prominent one is a sharp fertility transition. Resulting from both the government's family planning policy and economic development, the total fertility rate in China declined from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.0 in 1992 and has fluctuated around 1.6 since 2000 (Cai 2013; Wang 2011; Gietel-Basten, Han, and Cheng 2019). Along with the below-replacement fertility, China also underwent many new family changes: a delay in first marriage age (Mu and Xie 2014; Yu and Xie 2015a), an increase in premarital cohabitation (Yu and Xie 2015b), and a rise in divorce rate (Wang and Zhou 2010; Zeng and Wang 2000). However, some significant aspects of family changes have not been explored in China, most notably nonmarital childbirth and childless families.

In today's China, family behaviors are shaped by both rapid social changes and historical traditions. In the past century, China has experienced multiple social revolutions and major transitions that eroded the traditional functions and authority of the family. First, the *danwei* system assumed some of the all-encompassing role of the traditional family in China, and individuals became less restrained by their families (Xie, Lai, and Wu 2009). Second, government policy and legislation have changed Chinese citizens' family behaviors directly. For example, the 1950 Marriage Law abolished arranged marriages, with love-based matches highly encouraged. Moreover, this was the first time that all Chinese women had the right to initiate divorce against their husbands and the first time widowed women were allowed to remarry. Legal regulations also disrupted the early marriage tradition. Third, the introduction of Western ideologies has given rise to individualism in China (Hansen and Svarverud 2013; Yan 2009, 2010). Individual choice is now less subject to traditional norms, as young people increasingly value personal freedom (Davis 2014). Finally, Chinese women have been empowered through receiving more education and participating in the labor market and thus have more authority over their personal lives and family behaviors (Maurer-Fazio et al. 2011; Treiman 2013).

Despite these profound changes, certain features of the traditional Chinese family persist to this day, the most prominent being the high importance attached to children. Childbearing remains an obligation for married couples, and a childless family may face prejudice in certain social circles and in some areas of China (Zhang 2006). Another

manifestation of the emphasis on children is the high educational expectation and investment of Chinese families (Lei and Shen 2015; Li and Xie 2020).

Today's Chinese family has been influenced jointly by traditional Confucian culture, socialist revolution, and rapid modernization. Thus we expect that individualized family behaviors such as cohabitation and marriage entry have gained more acceptance, while changes in family behaviors pertaining to childbearing and child rearing have been much less significant and much slower paced. Capitalizing on the China Census and nationally representative survey data, we contribute to the literature by providing an overall assessment of family changes in China.

## **2. Data and measures**

### **2.1 Data**

For this study, we first use data from the China Censuses and the 1% Population Inter-Census Surveys (called mini-censuses). Specifically, we analyze the long-form data of the 1990, 2000, and 2010 China Censuses, as well as data from the 2005 mini-censuses. However, with limited questionnaires, the censuses and mini-censuses did not include detailed questions regarding key family behaviors, such as the timing of divorce. For better coverage of family behaviors, we use China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data to supplement the analysis. The CFPS is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of Chinese communities, families, and individuals, launched in 2010 by the Institute of Social Science Survey (ISSS) of Peking University (Xie and Hu 2014). It includes detailed information about union formation, fertility, and marital dissolution. We pool the 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 waves of the CFPS and construct a sample containing individuals, with longitudinal information updated from the most recent wave.

### **2.2 Measures**

We measure timing of marriage entry using the age of first marriage in the censuses and the 2005 mini-census. Cohabitation is measured by a binary variable indicating past cohabitation experience. The CFPS contains the marital history of each adult respondent, through which we construct the marriage duration variable. The censuses and mini-censuses asked married women about the number of daughters and sons ever born, from which we calculate the number of childbirths. Unfortunately, the censuses and mini-censuses include the fertility history of only married women, resulting in the difficulty of estimating the prevalence of nonmarital childbirths. So we use fertility and marriage

information from the CFPS to infer whether a woman gave birth to a child before marriage.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Marriage entry**

Using results from the 2010 China Census, in Table 1 we present the age at first marriage and the marriage rate for men and women in China by birth cohort. We observe an overall increase in median first marriage age for both men and women, albeit with some fluctuations. The median marriage age increased from 21.2 for men and 20.8 for women born before 1950 to 25.3 for men and 23.4 for women born in 1980–1984. The increase in first marriage age among those born in the 1950s is sharper, which is largely driven by the Later, Longer, and Fewer (Wan, Xi, Shao) policy designed in the early 1970s to control fertility (Coale 1984; Lavelly and Freedman 1990). According to the policy, rural men and women were encouraged to marry after 25 and 23 years of age, respectively, and urban men and women were encouraged to marry even later. Delayed marriage among Chinese men and women is also shown by the marriage rate. Among the cohorts born in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the proportion entering marriage before age 30 declined. The trends also differ by educational attainment, with the marriage rate particularly low for less educated men and highly educated women in recent cohorts. According to our estimation, for those born in the 1970s, about 20% of urban males with primary school or lower education will never get married, and more than 10% of urban females with graduate education will remain single. According to previous studies, the lifetime singlehood in these particular socioeconomic groups is mostly involuntary and primarily due to higher educational attainment and the persistent hypergamy preference of Chinese women (Jones 2007), resulting in the mismatched socioeconomic status between men and women. For the population as a whole, however, the lifetime nonmarriage rate was low, with 0.8% of men and 4.0% of women born between 1960 and 1969 not having entered marriage before age 40.

**Table 1: Cohort changes of marriage entry and cohabitation**

	Female						Male					
	< 1949	1950-59	1960-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	< 1949	1950-59	1960-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84
Marriage												
25 percentile marriage age	19.3	20.5	20.3	20.5	20.8	21.3	21.2	22.4	21.8	22.1	22.5	22.9
Median marriage age <sup>a</sup>	20.8	22.6	22.0	22.5	22.9	23.4	23.6	24.6	23.4	24.1	24.7	25.3
75 percentile marriage age	23.3	24.8	23.8	25.5	26.3	/	27.1	27.0	25.8	27.0	28.1	/
Marriage rate before 30 <sup>b</sup> (%)	95.5	96.8	96.9	94.9	93.0	/	85.9	88.5	90.3	86.2	83.1	/
Marriage rate before 35 (%)	98.1	98.9	98.7	97.7	/	/	93.1	94.3	94.5	92.6	/	/
Marriage rate before 40 (%)	98.9	99.4	99.2	/	/	/	95.2	95.8	96.0	/	/	/
Cohabitation												
Premarital cohabitation rate <sup>c</sup> (%)	1.1	1.9	4.9	11.1	17.7	24.0	1.7	2.6	6.0	12.9	21.8	24.4

Notes: a. Median marriage age is based on 2010 China Census data.

b. Marriage rates before age 30, 35, and 40 are based on 2010 China Census data.

c. Premarital cohabitation rate is based on 2016 CFPS data.

### 3.2 Cohabitation

We show the proportion of men and women who cohabited before marriage by birth cohort in Table 1. We observe a steadily increasing trend of premarital cohabitation over time. Of the men and women born in the early 1980s, almost one-quarter had cohabited before marriage. There are large regional variations in the cohabitation rate due to economic and cultural factors. In the CFPS data, the proportions of those who had cohabited were very high in Shanghai, the most metropolitan city of China, with 35.4% of men and 39.8% of women born between 1980 and 1984 having cohabited.

To gain a better understanding of the role of cohabitation in the family system in China, we analyze the timing of premarital pregnancy in relation to first marriage. In Table 2, we present the median marriage age and proportion experiencing premarital conception for each birth cohort by premarital cohabitation experience. First marriage was postponed by those who had cohabited before marriage. Median marriage age was delayed by cohabitation for about 1.5 years among men born between 1950 and 1979, and for about 0.5 years among women born before 1960 and in the 1970s. These results suggest that for many young Chinese, cohabitation was an alternative to early marriage. Since the CFPS does not directly ask about premarital conception, we compare the birth date of the eldest child and the marriage date to derive a proxy measure of premarital conception. If the birth date of the woman's first child is less than nine months from her first marriage date, the woman is considered as having premarital conception. As shown in Table 2, the proportion experiencing premarital conception was much higher among women who had cohabited before marriage. The premarital conception rate among women who had cohabited was almost twice the level of those who had not across all birth cohorts. We also observe an increase in the premarital conception rate over time. For women born before 1950, the overall premarital conception rate was 8.0%, while about a quarter of women born in the 1980s conceived before marriage.

**Table 2: Marriage age and premarital conception by cohabitation experience**

Birth cohort	Median marriage age				Premarital conception (percentage)		
	Male		Female		Female (nine-month window)		
	Cohabitation		Cohabitation		Cohabitation		Overall
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
< 1949	23.5	23.2	20.3	19.9	13.2	8.4	8.00
1950–1959	25.7	24.4	22.6	22.0	27.3	14.7	14.9
1960–1969	25.0	23.6	21.8	21.8	36.1	18.4	19.2
1970–1979	25.3	23.8	22.7	22.2	33.7	20.2	21.8
1980–1989	25.4	25.2	23.4	23.3	43.2	20.8	26.3

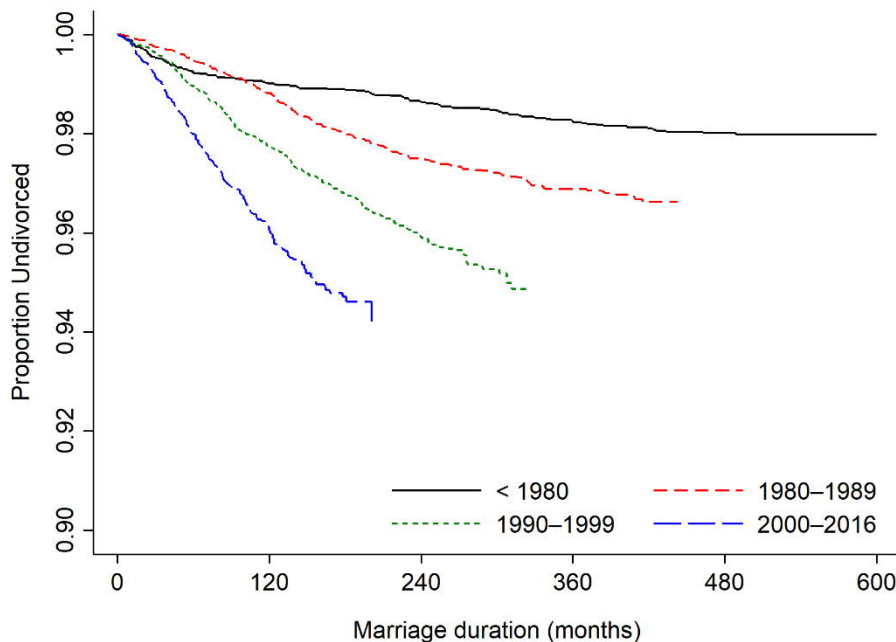
Source: CFPS 2016.



### 3.3 Divorce

Figure 1 shows the Kaplan–Meier survival curves of divorce by marriage cohort based on CFPS data. Previous studies showed that the divorce rate within 10 years exceeded 10% in Japan and Korea among those married in the 1980s. For the same marriage cohort in China, the divorce rate within 10 years was only a fifth of that, at 2%. Moreover, scholars suggested that about one-quarter of Korean and Japanese marriages after 2000 would end in divorce in 10 years (Park and Raymo 2013; Raymo, Bumpass, and Iwasawa 2004). As shown in Figure 1, more than 94% of marriages formed between 2000 and 2006 in China remained intact after 10 years. Thus we believe that from the life-course perspective, marriages are still relatively stable in China, at least more so than in Korea, Japan, and the United States. The strikingly high crude divorce rate of China reported by mass media is misleading, attributable to a combination of a composition effect – a large number of married persons at risk for divorce – and the concentration of divorces of married couples from different birth (or marriage) cohorts within a narrow period.

**Figure 1: Kaplan–Meier survival curves of divorce by marriage cohort**



Source: Authors' calculation based on CFPS 2016.

### 3.4 Nonmarital fertility

We use CFPS data to estimate the extent of nonmarital childbirth by constructing the two following measures: (1) the ratio of women who ever gave birth before marriage to all women in the same birth cohort; and (2) the ratio of single women who gave birth and remained single (until the time of the survey) to all women in the same birth cohort. We refer to the first measure as the premarital childbirth rate and the second as the nonmarital childbirth rate.

We show the results in Table 3. We observe that across different birth cohorts, about 5% of women had given birth to a child before marriage. However, 93.0% of those mothers got married afterward. Almost half of those mothers married within 10 months of the childbirth, and more than 70% married within 36 months. Due to data limitation, we do not know whether these mothers married the biological fathers of their children. However, we do know that many engaged couples in China have unprotected sex before marriage and prepare for pregnancy before marriage. Hence our premarital fertility measurement may severely overestimate the extent of nonmarital childbirth in China.

The proportion of women who gave birth to a child and remain unmarried is much smaller. It is less than 0.2% in our data across all women born before 1975. For the more recent cohorts, the proportion of unmarried mothers increased slightly. In addition to improved tolerance of nonmarital childbirth over time, another possible explanation is that the duration between childbirth and date of interview is too short to observe the eventual marital status of the mothers.

**Table 3: Proportions of women having premarital childbirths**

Birth cohort	Premarital childbirth rate	Nonmarital childbirth rate	Observations
< 1949	4.0%	0.2%	3214
1950–1959	5.3%	0.0%	3328
1960–1969	5.8%	0.2%	3952
1970–1979	5.9%	0.3%	3604
1980–1989	6.1%	1.2%	4258

Source: CFPS 2016.

### 3.5 Childlessness

Although much research has focused on low fertility in China resulting from the one-child policy, little attention has been paid to childlessness. Using data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 China Censuses and the 2005 mini-census, in Table 4 we provide estimates of the childless rate by age group in different years. Although the desired

number of children is below replacement in China, primarily between one and two children (Hou 2015), we do not observe a substantial increase in childlessness among married Chinese women. The results show that childlessness is quite rare among married couples in China, about 1% among married women ages 45 to 49 across all years, confirming that childbearing is nearly universal for married women. In addition, we observe that the timing of childbearing was slightly postponed between 1990 and 2010. In summary, in contrast to Western societies with a low fertility rate, we have not yet observed much childlessness in China.

**Table 4: Childless rate among married women by age group and year**

Age group	Year			
	1990	2000	2005	2010
20–29	16.5	16.4	20.0	21.0
30–34	1.4	2.3	3.9	5.9
35–39	0.9	0.9	1.5	2.4
40–44	0.4	0.6	0.9	1.3
45–49	1.0	0.6	0.8	1.1

Source: China Censuses (1990, 2000, and 2010) and mini-census (2005).

## 4. Conclusion and discussion

Capitalizing on census and nationally representative survey data, we provide estimates of various family behaviors and cohort trends in China. Our results indicate a unique development trajectory of family changes, characterized by both changes and continuities.

*Changes.* Driven by modernization, the rise in individualism, and the improvement of women’s education and social status, Chinese citizens now practice more individualized family behaviors than before, including an emergence of lifetime singlehood and the practice of premarital cohabitation. While the singlehood rate is still lower in China than in other East Asian societies (Raymo et al. 2015), there is a systematic pattern of nonmarriage by socioeconomic status and gender – higher among less educated men and highly educated women. With a persistent hypergamy tradition and continuation of women’s high educational attainment, we expect lifetime singlehood to increase in China’s future.

*Continuities.* Confucian family values, especially the importance of maintaining family lineage and raising children, have played a role in preserving the Chinese family’s traditional functions. As evidence of this, we have not observed substantial increases in

two important indicators related to fertility: nonmarital childbearing and childlessness. Marriage is still the primary institution for childbearing in China, and extramarital childbirth is rare. Also rare is childlessness among married Chinese women, as almost all married couples have at least one child to carry on the family lineage. Despite rising tolerance of divorce among Chinese citizens, marital dissolution remains at a relatively low level compared with rates of marital dissolution in other developed countries.

By documenting family changes in a society characterized by the coexistence of both rapid modernization and traditional Confucianism, our research reveals that changes in different family behaviors are neither simultaneous nor sequential. We also welcome future research to examine the influences of modernization and ideational changes on family behaviors like union formation and childbearing in other East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism (Casterline and Gietel-Basten 2018).

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