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# Marital age homogamy in China: A reversal of trend in the reform era?

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 13 April 2012

Revised 7 October 2013

Accepted 25 November 2013

Available online 1 December 2013

## Keywords:

Marital age homogamy

Economic reform

Economic pressure

Gender gap in education

Status hypergamy

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of trends in marital age homogamy in China from 1960 to 2005 that uses data from the China 2005 1% Population Inter-census Survey. Instead of a consistent increase in age homogamy, results show an inverted U-shaped trend. One plausible explanation is that intensified economic pressure, rising consumerism, and a shrinking gender gap in education during the post-1990s reform era have acted to increase women's desire to marry men who are more economically established, and thus usually older, than less financially secure men. We argue that age hypergamy maintains status hypergamy, a deeply rooted norm for couples in China. An auxiliary analysis based on the human capital model for earnings supports this interpretation. A continued trend in age hypergamy implies a future "marriage squeeze" for men of low socioeconomic status.

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## 1. Introduction

Social homogamy, or marriage between individuals with similar social characteristics (Burgess and Wallin, 1943), is a common practice in many societies. In the literature on marriage and social stratification, an increase in homogamy based on such attributes as socioeconomic status, education, and race/ethnicity is generally considered an indicator of declining social openness and increasing social inequality (Harris and Ono, 2005; Kalmijn, 1991, 1998; Mare, 1991; Mare and Schwartz, 2006; Raymo and Xie, 2000; Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz and Mare, 2005; Smits et al., 1998; Torche, 2010; Zijdeman and Maas, 2010).

Another form of homogamy is age homogamy, or marriage between individuals of similar ages. The level of age homogamy is also an important indicator of social closure and gender inequality, as large age differences between spouses have been associated with more patriarchal family systems and less spousal intimacy (Blossfeld, 2009; Shorter, 1977; Van de Putte et al., 2009; Van Poppel et al., 2001). However, this type of homogamy has received less attention among researchers than social homogamy based on the aforementioned attributes. While the literature includes several studies of age homogamy (e.g., Atkinson and Glass, 1985; Esteve et al., 2009; Van de Putte et al., 2009; Van Poppel et al., 2001), none deals with a long-term trend in contemporary China, particularly reform-era China.

This study analyzes trends in age homogamy in China between 1960 and 2005, using indicators based on Schoen's forces of attraction (Esteve et al., 2009; Qian and Preston, 1993; Schoen, 1981, 1988) and data from the nationally representative China 2005 1% Population Inter-census Survey (or the 2005 mini-census). Instead of a consistent increase in age homogamy, as one might expect from the literature, we found an inverted U-shaped trend over the period. One plausible explanation is

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that intensified economic pressure, rising consumerism, and a shrinking gender gap in education during the post-1990s reform era have acted to increase women's desire to marry men who are more economically established, and thus often older than their less financially secure counterparts. Age hypergamy acts to maintain status hypergamy, a deeply rooted value for couples in China.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Age homogamy and economic development

A large literature in sociology has explored trends in social homogamy (Atkinson and Glass, 1985; Esteve et al., 2009; Han, 2010; Kalmijn, 1991, 1993, 1998; Mare, 1991; Qian, 1997; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Raymo and Xie, 2000; Schwartz and Mare, 2005; Song, 2009; Van de Putte et al., 2009; Van Poppel et al., 2001; Zijdeman and Maas, 2010). Whereas homogamy in other social attributes reveals inequality and social closure, age homogamy is indicative of gender equality and social openness (Casterline et al., 1986; Shorter, 1977; Van Poppel et al., 2001; Wheeler and Gunter, 1987). A few studies have found either an increase or no clear trend in age homogamy with economic development (Atkinson and Glass, 1985; Casterline et al., 2010; Esteve et al., 2009; Qian, 1998; Van de Putte et al., 2009; Van Poppel et al., 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Age homogamy may increase with economic development for several reasons. While practices have varied across populations and periods, the traditional family in pre-industrial societies is characterized by a relatively large age gap between an older breadwinner husband and a younger wife with limited nondomestic labor participation (Van Poppel et al., 2001). This pattern of large age gap supports the patriarchal family system by reinforcing the husband's authority and impeding spousal intimacy (Barbieri et al., 2005; Cain, 1993; Van Poppel et al., 2001). However, with greater industrialization comes an expansion in women's economic roles outside the home and generally a narrowing of the age gap between husbands and wives. In this context, increasing age homogamy is taken to indicate a concomitant rise in gender equality and love-based (as opposed to necessity-based) marriages (Bozon, 1991; Van de Putte et al., 2009; Van Poppel et al., 2001).

Kalmijn's (1991, 1998) general framework for explaining social homogamy offers a rationale for why the spousal age gap is affected by social development. Within Kalmijn's framework there are three sets of explanatory factors: (1) the preferences of marriage candidates, (2) the impact of "third parties" (e.g., marriage candidates' parents), and (3) the interaction structures of the marriage market. All three factors are affected in favor of age homogamy by the process of economic development (Raymo and Iwasawa, 2005; Smits et al., 1998; Song, 2009).

By "preference," social researchers commonly mean individuals' choices free of structural constraints and motivated by their own social values and beliefs. Marriage is a social institution that binds two persons together in an intimate living relationship. Of course, people may get married for different reasons: some to complete an economic exchange, some out of family or even national interests, and some for romantic love. As a society changes from agricultural to industrial, however, romance becomes increasingly the accepted and even predominant basis for marriage due to the less necessity and desire for economic-exchange marriages and also due to more opportunities for the young adults to interact (Blossfeld and Timm, 2003; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu and Whyte, 1990). Admittedly, persons of different ages can and do form strong bonds based on romantic love, but romance is most likely to develop when partners interact directly and are similar in such characteristics as age, culture, tastes and physical conditions (Bhrolcháin, 1992; Van Poppel et al., 2001). Thus, a shift to a love-based mate-selection norm is more likely to lead to smaller age differences (Bozon, 1991; Van Poppel et al., 2001; Wheeler and Gunter, 1987).

Regarding the second set of factors, it is well established that as a society becomes industrialized, individuals depend less on parents or other authority figures ("third parties") in their decisions about family-related behaviors – including marriage (Barbieri et al., 2005; Goode, 1970; Thornton, 2001; Thornton et al., 2007; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu and Whyte, 1990). When young adults are left on their own to choose potential spouses, they select from those whom they know best – most likely age peers – and these marriages reduce the overall spousal age gap (Bozon, 1991; Casterline et al., 1986; Van Poppel et al., 2001; Wheeler and Gunter, 1987).

Along with personal preference and the impact of the third parties, age homogamy can also be affected by the structure of the marriage market, which itself may be affected by economic development (Atkinson and Glass, 1985; Bhrolcháin, 1992; Bytheway, 1981; Kalmijn, 1991, 1998; Lichter et al., 1995; Stier and Shavit, 1994; Todd et al., 2005; Vera et al., 1985). With development, educational attainment generally increases. As a result, youths spend an increasingly large fraction of their pre-marital years in school, resulting in a much higher probability of individuals finding spouses among their schoolmates. This may be especially true for those receiving higher education, as the timing for pursuing postsecondary education usually parallels that for selecting marriage partners. Therefore, lengthened education completion may transform postsecondary institutions into important marriage markets and thus may increase the incidence of age homogamy (Blossfeld and Timm, 2003; Mare, 1991).

For the reasons above, a consensus has emerged in the literature that economic development generally leads to a rise in age homogamy. This prevailing theoretical view is supported by empirical evidence from a variety of countries. For example,

<sup>1</sup> We are aware that there are some empirical literatures showing no clear trend in age homogamy. However, we will make no further discussion on this finding. The reasons are two-folds: first, literatures of this kind are highly limited in number and are subject to very restrictive social or temporal contexts. Therefore, findings of no clear trend are mostly made as auxiliary results aside from the main findings. Secondly, none of the literatures provide theoretical explanations on this kind of findings and most of them left them as empirical inconsistencies.

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