

Changing Marriage Patterns in the Global Context

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Transcript of *Yixi* talk in English

Hello everyone, I am Yue Qian! I obtained my PhD in sociology and my research focuses on marriage and family. Currently, I am an assistant professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

First of all, I would like to point out with great regret that in this public lecture, I will mainly talk about research on different-sex couples. We still have a long way to go in fight for equality. I hope that same-sex couples will one day have the same rights as different-sex couples.

When it comes to marriage, one of the most common questions that everyone may ask at some point is: Why do people get married? American Sociologist, Andrew J. Cherlin, addressed this question in one of his research papers. In American history, there have been three major models of marriage, representing different meanings of marriage.

Before 1850, American marriage followed the institutional model. Premarital sex was seen as a taboo and only married people could have sex, have children, and raise children.

Starting around the 1850s, marriage changed from an institutional model to a companionate model. Companionship became a key component of marriage. Individuals started to expect their spouse to be not only their romantic partner but also their best friend. Such expectation did not exist in the institutional marriage.

In the past few decades, the companionate marriage has lost its dominance in America. As more women are attaining college degrees, they no longer solely play the homemaker role; instead, similar to men, women enter the labour force and financially provide for the family. A deeper sense of personal growth, self-expression and authenticity becomes the key to a happy marriage. The result was a transition from the companionate marriage to the individualized marriage.

The individualized marriage heavily emphasizes personal choice and self-development. In other words, each person should develop a fulfilling, independent self instead of merely sacrificing oneself to one's spouse or familial needs.

Is everyone really married?

When you are being pressured to get married by your parents and elder relatives, if you ask them, "why should I get married?" they will probably not discuss change in the meaning of marriage with you; instead, they may simply tell you "because everyone else is married."

Of course, our marital decision should not be dictated by what other people do. But today, I would like all of us to take a step back and think about this question: Is everyone really married?

Here, I will show you the percent never married for women aged 30-34 years in some Asian societies. The blue bars represent the results in 1970 and the red bars denote the results in 2010. For now, I hide the results of Chinese women, and will reveal the results later.

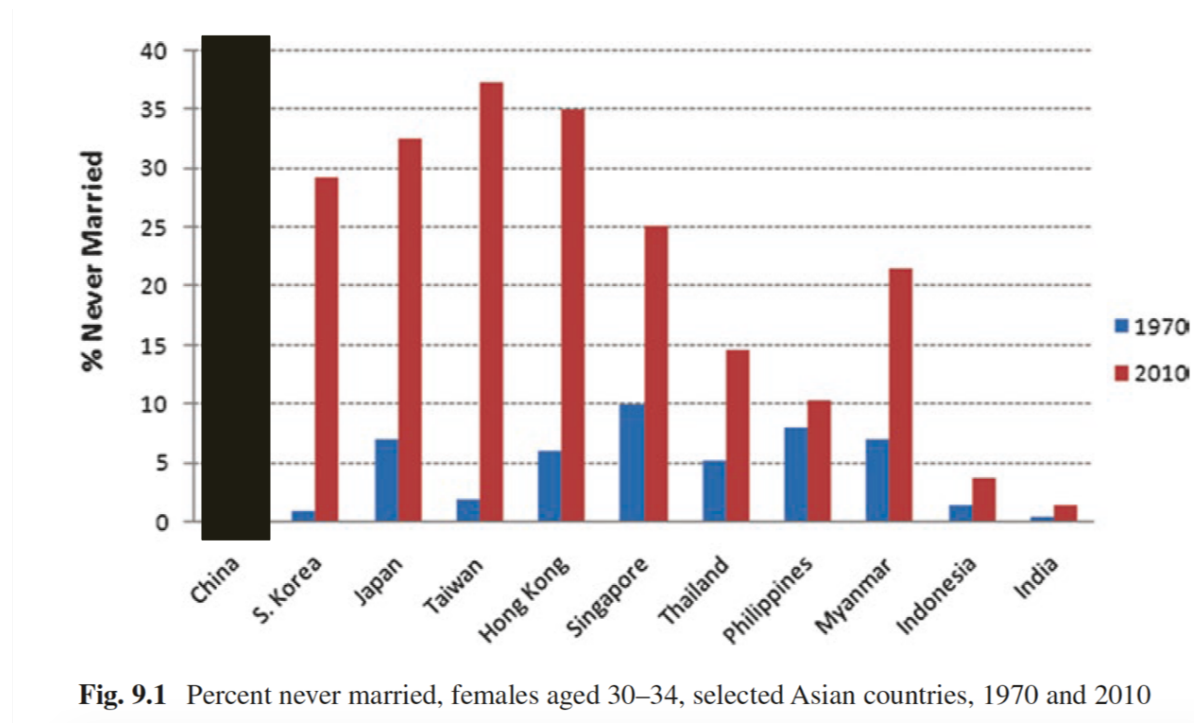


Fig. 9.1 Percent never married, females aged 30–34, selected Asian countries, 1970 and 2010

Source: Jones, G. (2018). What is driving marriage and cohabitation in low fertility countries?. In *Low Fertility Regimes and Demographic and Societal Change* (pp. 149-166). Springer, Cham.

Clearly, the red bars are much higher than the blue bars, which indicates that the percent never married among women aged 30-34 increased dramatically between 1970 and 2010. For example, in Taiwan, only 2% of women aged 30-34 were never married in 1970, but this figure increased to almost 40% in 2010.

Similarly, let's take a look at Korea. In 1970, about 1% of women between the ages of 30-34 were never married, but in 2010, the percentage increased to almost 30%.

Moreover, the red bars for Korea, Japan, and Singapore are all very high, indicating that it is now very common for women to delay and even forgo marriage in East Asian societies.

Everyone must be very anxious to know about what the trends are like in China.

Surprise! The percent never married is extremely low among Chinese women aged 30-34, as compared to other East Asian societies. As we can see, in China, only 1% of women aged 30-34 were never married in 1970, and even in 2010, the percentage was as low as 5%, which were comparable to the never-married rates in Indonesia and India.

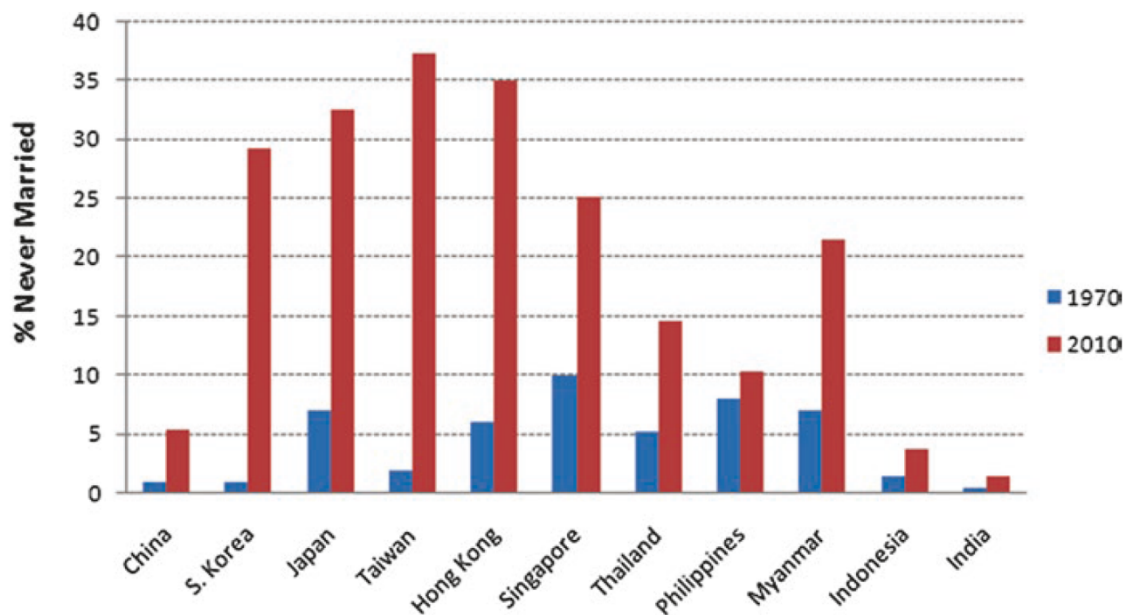
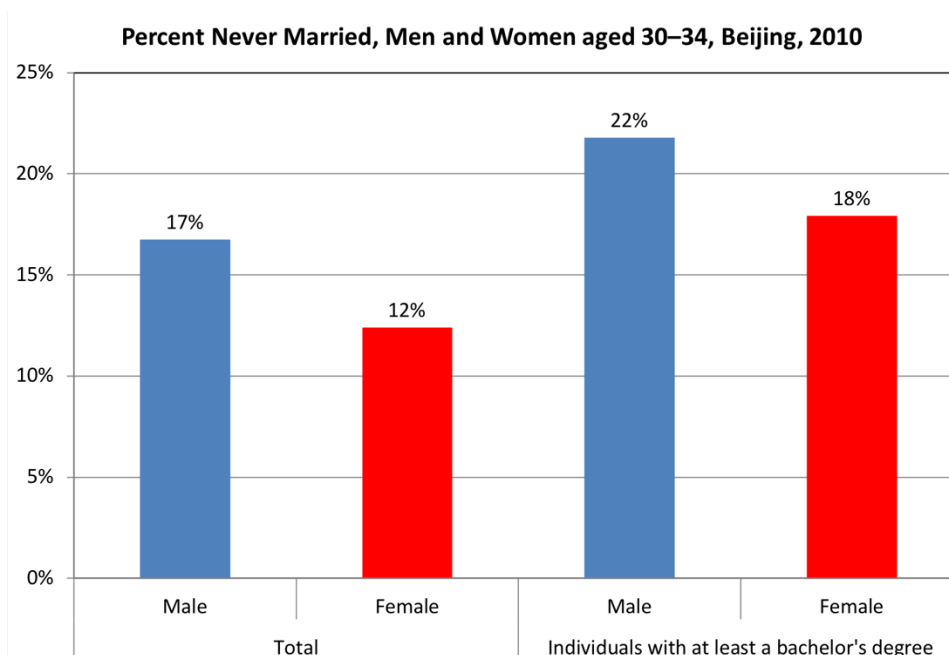


Fig. 9.1 Percent never married, females aged 30–34, selected Asian countries, 1970 and 2010

Oh no! You must all be very concerned that maybe the words of your parents and older relatives are true, that everybody else really is married. In fact, the data above represent all Chinese women aged 30–34, including those living in urban areas and those in rural areas, but most young people in China live in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

Hence, for today's lecture, I obtained data from the website of Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics and did some calculations with the 2010 Beijing census data.



In this graph, the blue bars represent the percent never married among men aged 30-34 and the red bars denote parallel results for women. Results show that in Beijing, 17% of men and 12% of women aged 30-34 years were never married in 2010. Clearly, the never-married rates in Beijing are much higher than the national average. These results are the averages across all educational levels. Would the percent never married increase as educational levels increase?

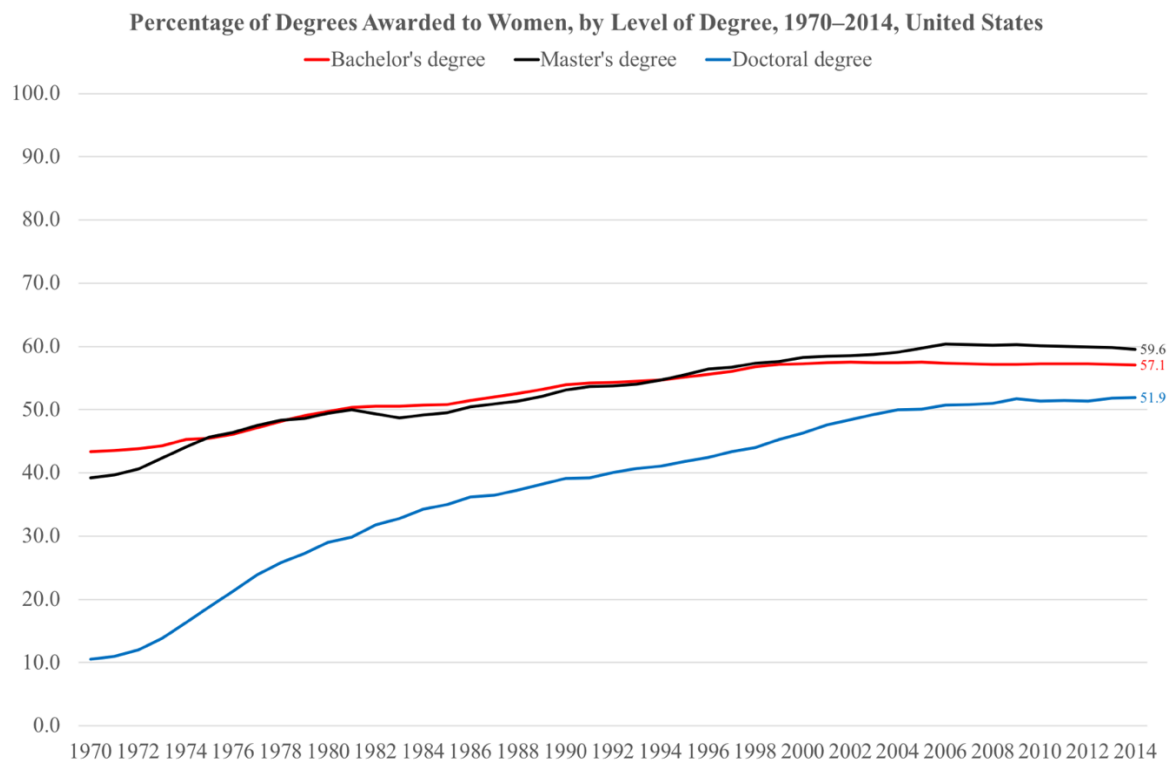
I now turn to the results of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree. In 2010, among 30-to-34-year-old college graduates in Beijing, 22% of men and 18% of women were never married. In other words, in big cities like Beijing, many people in their 30s are still single (never married).

In Asian Societies, why do so many highly-educated women remain single?

In fact, I have been criticized by many elder relatives for being a “leftover lady” since I was 26 or 27 years old. This inspired and motivated me to conduct research on education and marriage. Today, I will share two of my research projects to answer some questions on this topic.

Instead of talking about China, let's first look at some U.S. findings.

Female education levels around the world have improved considerably. In many Western countries, women have already outpaced men in educational attainment. Here, I am showing you the percentage of U.S. bachelor's and advanced degrees awarded to women from 1970 to 2014. The red line represents statistics for bachelor's degrees, the black line is for master's degrees, and the blue line is for doctoral degrees.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 318.10:

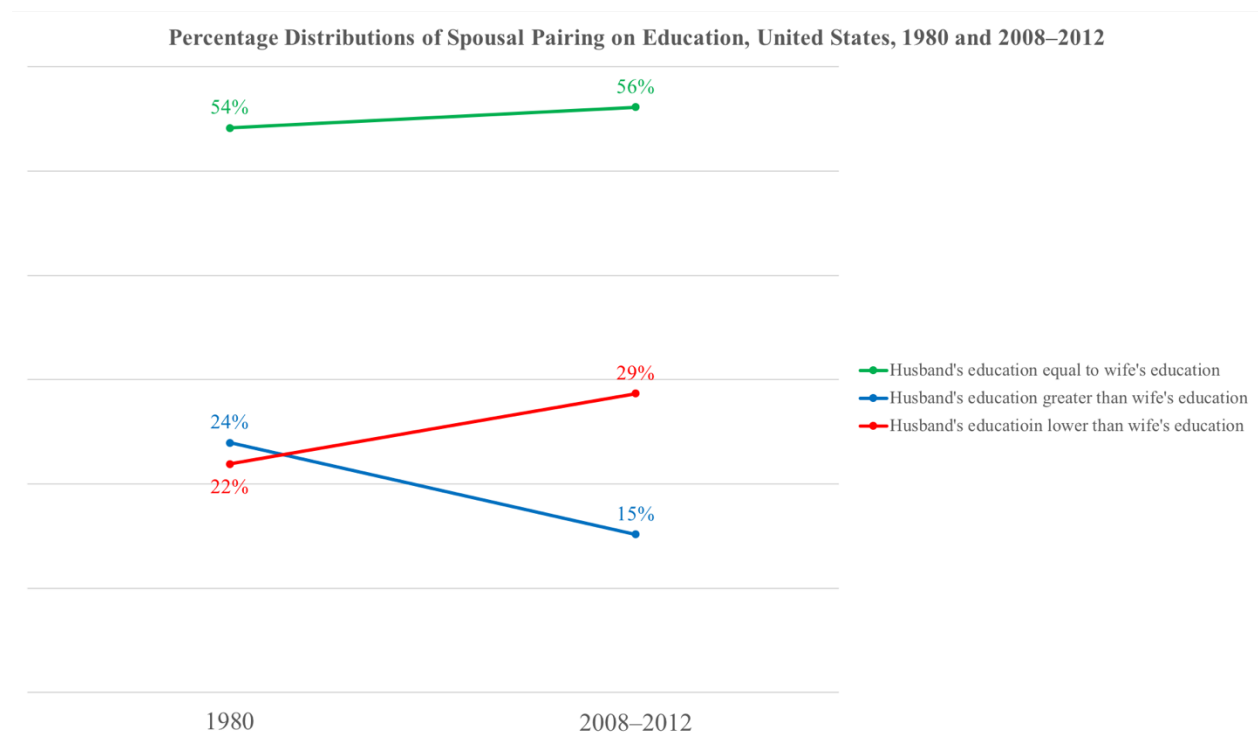
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_318.10.asp

The graph shows that about 40% of the bachelor's and master's degrees awarded in 1970 went to women whereas 60% went to men. Meanwhile, women only earned about 10% of the doctoral degrees in 1970. By contrast, in 2014, the share of bachelor's degrees and master's degrees that were earned by women increased to 60% and the representation of women among doctoral degree recipients also exceeded 50%. Clearly, in the United States, women have surpassed men in college completion.

In China, parents of highly-educated women tend to worry about their daughters' marriage prospects. With the growing female advantage in education, would more U.S. women have trouble finding a husband, because they are "too" educated?

Interestingly, research has consistently found that the higher the level of a women's education, the more likely she is to be married. Moreover, in the past few decades, U.S. society has witnessed a shift away from the traditional practice of women marrying up in education.

For example, my own research took data from the 1980 U.S. Census and the 2008–2012 American Community Surveys to examine the educational pairing of spouses among newlywed couples. In this graph, the blue line represents the traditional couples in which the husband is more educated than the wife, the green line denotes the couples in which two spouses share the same educational level, and the red line represents the non-normative couples in which the husband is less educated than the wife.



We can see from the graph that the dominating pattern is still a type of marriage in which two spouses have similar levels of education. Additionally, in 1980, the proportion of couples in which the husband had more education than the wife was 24%, whereas the share of couples in which the wife had more education than the husband was 22%.

Now, things have changed. Among newlyweds in 2008–2012, the percentage of couples in which the wife was better educated than the husband increased to 29%, whereas the share of couples in which the husband was more educated than the wife dropped to 15%. In other words, women have become more likely than men to be the more educated spouse in marriage.

You must be curious: how is it like in China? My research published in 2014 examined first marriage rates in urban China during 2000–2008 and found that highly-educated women who had not yet married by age 30 were indeed faced with lower marriage likelihoods than those who married in their 20s. One possible explanation is that men marrying at older ages have an increased likelihood of marrying women with less schooling than themselves. Women's mate selection criteria did not vary much with age.

Recall the high percentages of never-married women in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. You may wonder: Why do so many highly-educated women in East Asia remain single?

Demographers used a metaphor, “marriage package,” to provide a theoretical answer to this question. The metaphor was first proposed to explain low marriage and fertility rates in Japan, but I think it is applicable to other East Asian societies.

In traditional Japanese families, numerous intra-familial roles are bundled together, especially for women. Generally speaking, marriage, childbearing, childrearing and care of the elderly are linked. Hence, marriage and family roles are a package.

In such a family system, couples who live an independent and childfree life often experience social pressure and negative judgment; thus, very few couples do so. Most of the time, once women decide to get married, they are expected to prioritize familial responsibilities. Women have to take on a greater share of the housework and childcare burden and are chiefly responsible for the educational success of their children.

Women have gained more opportunities outside marriage, but within marriage, men have not correspondingly increased their contribution to housework and childcare. In the past, even if women did not get married, they still had little chance of achieving career promotions or financial success. But now, for many Asian women, getting married means giving up their careers. As a result, for many women, being married is longer a more attractive option than staying single. With diminishing returns to gender-specialized marriage for highly educated women, they are likely to delay or forgo marriage.

However, what is intriguing in urban China today is that those women are labeled “leftover ladies,” regardless of the fact that they may choose to do so in response to undesirable gender roles in Chinese society. This gendered, stigmatizing term devalues women's own marital choices regarding whether they marry and whom they marry.

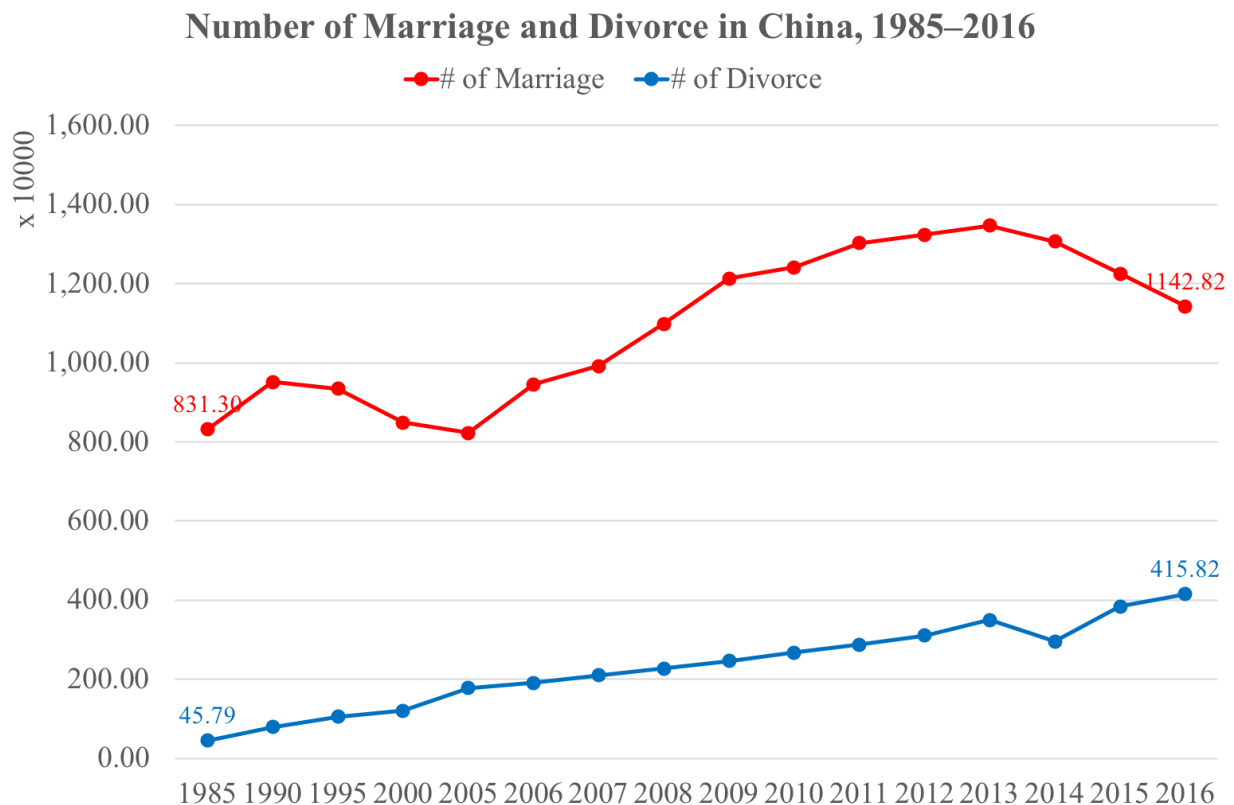
Instead of derogatively referring to highly-educated women as “left-over ladies” or pressuring them to get married and have children, I think it is more important for us to think about how to change the traditional gender norms in society and how to design and implement public policies that provide support for various non-traditional families.

How to lower your risk of divorce?

Having said so much about marriage, let me talk about divorce.

Last year, when I was doing interviews in Shanghai for my research project, I interviewed a 36-year-old single woman. She told me: “my parents have already stopped pressuring me to get married because this world is changing so fast. I am not married yet, but many of my peers have divorced.” Her parents came to understand that marriage is not something that happens once and for all. Marital relationships are unpredictable.

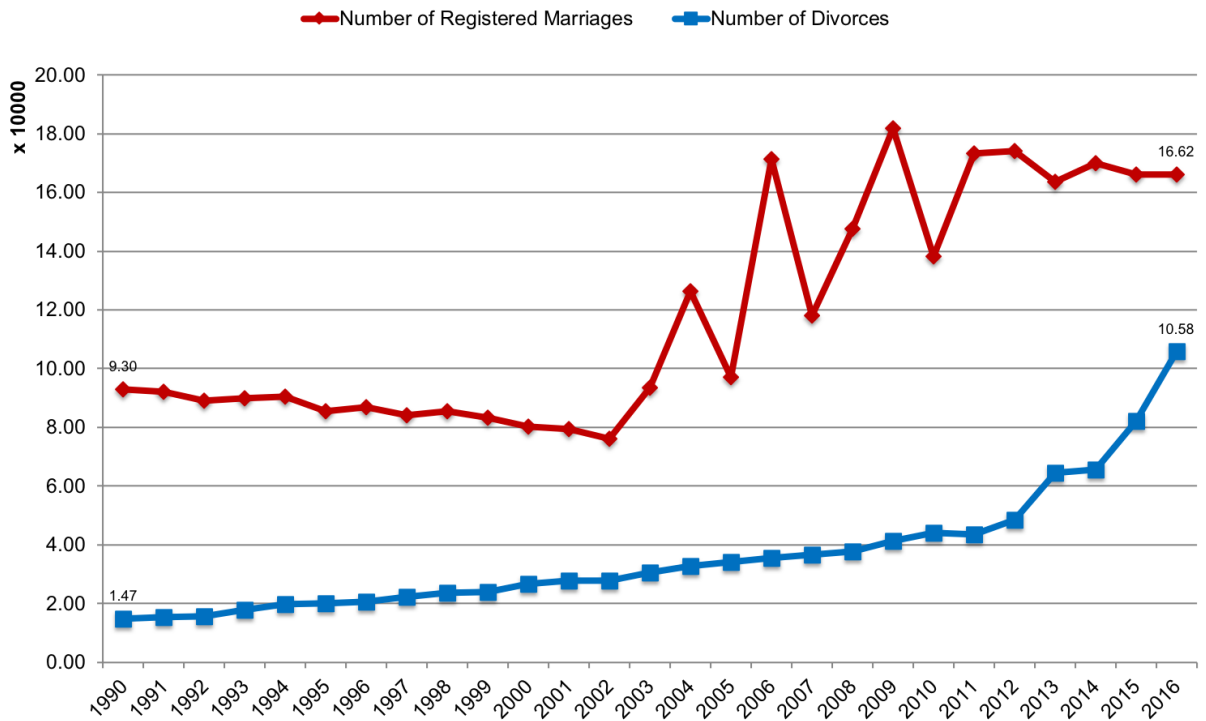
I am a demographer, so I show you some data first. I got the data from the 2017 China Statistical Yearbook. The red line indicates the number of marriages that take place yearly, measured in 10,000. The blue line represents the number of divorces per year, also measured in 10,000.



We see that the number of marriages increased about 38%, from 8.31 million in 1985 to 11.43 million in 2016. Let's take a look at the blue Line. The number of divorces in China underwent a ninefold increase from about 460,000 in 1985 to 4.16 million in 2016.

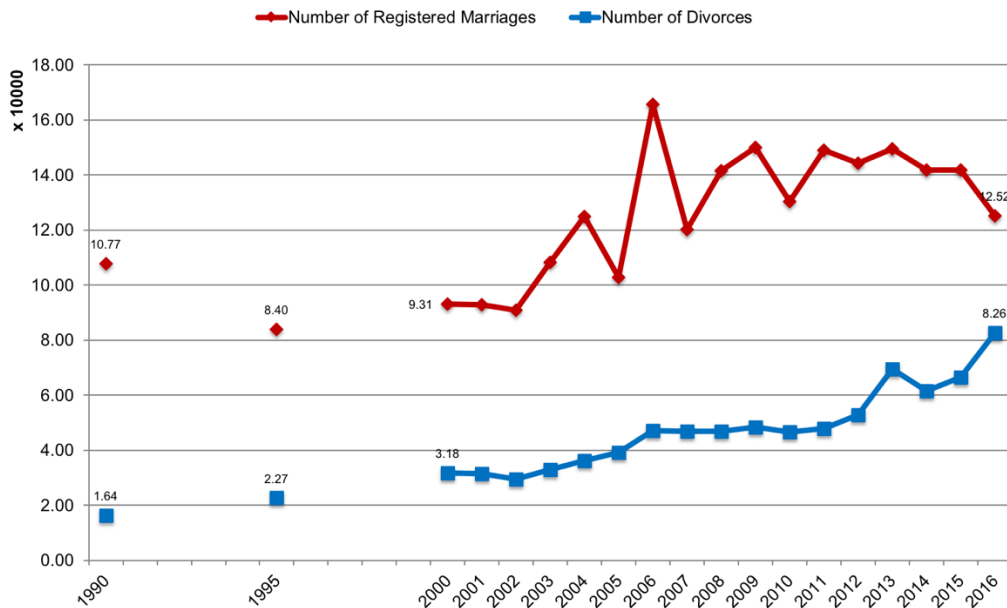
I also found similar data for Beijing and Shanghai. We see that the number of divorces in Beijing increased from 14,700 in 1990 to 105,800 in 2016, which was a sevenfold increase.

Number of Registered Marriages and Divorces in Beijing, By Year



Similarly, the number of divorces in Shanghai increases from 16,400 in 1990 to 82,600 in 2016, a fivefold increase.

Number of Registered Marriages and Divorces in Shanghai, By Year



Moreover, we notice that the number of marriages was fluctuating and even shows signs of declining, but the number of divorces has been steadily increasing in recent years. As a result, in Beijing and Shanghai, the number of divorces in 2016 almost caught up to that of marriages.

Perhaps you have already started to wonder how we can reduce the risk of divorce. Based on past research, I offer some suggestions for your reference.

Many studies have shown that marrying at young ages is one of the most important predictors of divorce. This is because when we are young, we tend to lack clear understandings of ourselves, which in turn leads to false expectations of who we will become and who our partners will become in the future. Moreover, when we are relatively young, we are changing a lot. Hence, at that age, it is difficult to identify a suitable partner. Looking back, I think my experiences in graduate school and my PhD journey transformed me. I definitely did not anticipate such radical change when I was younger. U.S. research has found that postponing marriage generally helps lower your risk of divorce. Those who wait until they grow older to get married are usually more mature and make fewer mistakes when choosing their spouses. As a result, they are able to better cope with challenges in their marital lives.

Admittedly, this research was done in the U.S. context. We still need more China-based studies before we determine whether or not the U.S. findings can be generalized to the Chinese context. But at least, one implication of this research is that instead of rushing into marriage, it is better to let yourself become mature first, so you figure out who you are and what qualities you look for in a partner before making marital decisions.

In addition, research suggests that later marital instability can be traced back to couples' courtship experiences. Who should you choose as your spouse, the one you love or the one who loves you? This has long been a debated matter.

A U.S. longitudinal study that lasted 14 years found that the risk of divorce would decrease the more similar partners were in the depth of their love and their assessment of the likelihood of marriage. In explaining their results, the researchers highlighted an important concept called "shared reality." We all know a saying, "love is blind." During courtship, individuals oversell their enthusiasm in an effort to cultivate or maintain their partner's interest, and they also elevate the importance of partners' virtues or redefine unpleasant qualities as peculiar or unique.

Marriage is, however, more realistic. According to the disillusionment theory, once the marital knot is tied, inaccurate views are challenged in their daily living and difficult to sustain, ultimately being replaced by more realistic beliefs. Hence, if partners feel comparable depths of love for one another and show similar changes in their estimation of the likelihood of marriage during courtship, this builds a solid foundation for their marital lives in the future.

Then the question becomes: How can we develop and maintain a shared reality? Research shows that couples who spend quality time together and talk about their feelings in an honest and open manner are more likely to accumulate shared experiences and maintain a shared understanding of their relationship. In other words, it is good to love or be loved, but it is the best if partners feel comparable depths of love for one another.

As our desires, experiences, and feelings, as well as the relationship per se, are ever-changing, this shared reality can only be obtained and sustained through an ongoing dialogue, which in turn increases marital stability.

How to have a better marriage?

Well, after speaking at length about divorce, let's be more positive and turn to our next question: How can we make our marriage better?

Let's go back to the three major models of marriage we touched on at the beginning of the talk. In the institutional marriage, marriage met individuals' most basic level of needs, such as safety and physiological needs. The main purpose of marriage was to provide individuals with shelter, food and protection from harm and danger.

Moving onto the companionate marriage, since the basic needs became easily attainable outside marriage, individuals expected marriage to meet their secondary level needs, such as love, intimacy, and companionship.

Finally, In the individualized marriage, people expect marriage to meet their higher level needs such as self-expression, personal growth, and respect.

The meaning of marriage and "Maslow's hierarchy of needs", a well-known theory in psychology, can be combined to understand marital quality. According to Maslow's theory, we can think of marriage as mountain climbing. If you have been to Tibet, you know that as you go higher up the mountain, it becomes more difficult for you to breathe, since there is less oxygen available for every breath.

Hence, if we want our higher level needs to be met in marriage, that is, higher up the Maslow mountain, the time and energy that we invest in marriage are the key to "oxygenating" the marriage. For example, if a husband only needs to satisfy his wife's basic material necessities, such as food and warmth, then he can easily meet this generic expectation with minimum effort.

But if the wife asks the husband to meet her very personalised needs, such as self-actualization, everyone has very different definitions of what "self-actualization" really means. As such, he will have to spend a lot of time communicating with his wife and listening to his wife's feelings.

But what is the situation like in today's society? Due to time-intensive work and parenting, couples end up spending little quality time together. It is so common nowadays to see couples "spending time together" on their phones whilst sitting side-by-side.

On the one hand, we expect marriage to meet our higher level needs. On the other hand, we spend less time communicating with our partners and learning about each other's personal needs. In short, it becomes more challenging to climb as we approach the top of a mountain, and at the same time, we fail to intake enough oxygen with each step. As a result, many couple nowadays feel a sense of suffocation in marriage.

The next question becomes: How can we deal with this feeling of suffocation in marriage?

On Valentine's Day this year, Stephanie Coontz, a renowned U.S. scholar of marriage, published an op-ed article in *New York Times*, titled "For a Better Marriage, Act Like a Single Person."

In the article, she wrote that with delay in marriage, the rise in divorce rates, and increases in longevity, we actually spend more and more of our lives outside marriage. Therefore, it is important to cultivate the skills of successful singlehood. And doing that doesn't benefit just people who never marry. It can also make for more satisfying marriages.

You may ask: Why? To give you an example, research shows that many of the problems experienced by divorced and widowed people may result not so much from the end of their marriage; instead, many of the problems result from having relied too much on their spouse and thus failing to maintain social networks and the skills of self-reliance. Another study shows that single older people with solid friendships, whether previously married or never married, are just as happy and healthy as married people. Good friendships greatly benefit marital relationships. For instance, happily married wives who experience conflicts in their marriage generally feel closer to their husbands when they can discuss and reframe the issues with a good friend.

In contemporary society, individuals expect too much from their spouse, hoping that one person can meet all their needs, but "you are my everything" is not the best recipe for a happy marriage.

My good friend, Professor Shen Yang at Shanghai Jiaotong University wrote in her recent article published on *Ms-Muses*:

"I have always felt that love has been overemphasized in contemporary society. The more you love and rely on each other, the more painful it is when you lose it. Even if you grow old together with your partner, you ultimately die alone, or you end up living alone as widows... Instead of focusing so much of our effort on finding love, we should rather learn how to be solitary."

What I want to clarify is that acting like a single person does not mean living an isolated life. I am saying that we should learn to enjoy time alone and maintain relationships with people around us through communication and mutual support. This will benefit not only you but also your marital relationship.

Where to look for the future of marriage?

This world is changing so fast. Can sociologists predict where we shall look for the future of marriage?

The United States witnessed the transition from the institutional marriage to the companionate marriage. Now, the individualized marriage has become the norm. More and more people delay and even forgo marriage. Marriage experts start to recommend that individuals should not rely on their romantic partners to fulfill all their needs. Instead, it is important to cultivate the skills of successful singlehood and maintain a wide network of friends and other social relationships. At the same time, we should understand and accept more diverse family forms.

American sociologist, Andrew Cherlin, once predicted that although because of institutional lag, many people still marry, marriage will become just one life-style among others.

Finally, I want to say: Hope you live a positive and happy life and be your true self, no matter whether you marry or not.

The link to the original transcript in Chinese “大家真的都结婚了了吗| 钱岳 ——席第576位讲者” is:
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/3H0hNjKgDC9lOui6vy0PWw>

The author, Yue Qian, would like to thank Charmaine Lee, Siqu (Suki) Xiao, and Priscilla Wong, for their assistance with translations from Chinese to English.