

Premarital Cohabitation and Intimate Partner Violence in China

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Abstract

Objective: This study contributes to the emerging literature on cohabitation and post-marital outcomes by examining the associations between premarital cohabitation and six types of intimate partner violence (IPV).

Background: Premarital cohabitation has been on the rise, yet its evolving meanings and long-term implications for post-marital experiences remain underexplored. IPV, as a crucial indicator of marital dysfunction, provides an important lens through which to evaluate the “cohabitation effect.”

Method: Drawing on retrospective data from a representative sample of married women in Beijing, China, collected in 2020, we examine the relationship between cohabitation and IPV. We use the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) decomposition to quantify the relative contributions of two explanatory pathways: the *selection perspective*, which attributes IPV risks to the distinctive characteristics of cohabiters, and the *experience perspective*, which emphasizes the functional nature of cohabitation as a trial marriage.

Results: Cohabitation is positively associated with the four most severe types of IPV, which are predominantly perpetrated by men, and the selection perspective accounts for the majority of this association. However, this association has diminished among women born after 1980, reflecting broader demographic and normative shifts during China’s reform era.

Conclusion: While premarital cohabitation in China has increasingly been accepted as a transitional stage toward marriage, diluting its negative associations with post-marital outcomes, it remains linked to individuals with adverse childhood experiences and complex premarital relationships. By revealing the mechanisms underlying the “cohabitation effect,” this study sheds light on the evolving role of cohabitation in shaping marital dynamics and its intersection with IPV.

Keywords: cohabitation, intimate partner violence, selection perspective, experience perspective, marital quality

INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation has been on the rise and is becoming an integral part of courtship exploration among young adults in Asia (Lesthaeghe, 2020; Raymo et al., 2015; Yu & Xie, 2015; Lesthaeghe, 2022). In China, approximately one-third of young adults born after 1980 engage in premarital cohabitation (Yu, 2021). As it has become more prevalent in China, the meaning and function of cohabitation have shifted from an unconventional behavior to a widely accepted, practical arrangement, often described as a “trial marriage” (Yu & Xie, 2015; Zhang, 2017). What was once a novel and unorthodox choice for individuals less committed to relationships or for the socioeconomically advantaged as a modern, avant-garde practice, has evolved into a necessary arrangement for testing relationships. Particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, cohabitation has become a buffer, allowing them to accumulate resources to meet the increasing economic demands of marriage (Mu & Yeung, 2023; Yu & Xie, 2021, 2022). Despite this shift, marriage remains a central institution in China, and cohabiters continue to face moral risks shaped by cultural and social expectations. Therefore, although earlier studies establish a negative correlation between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital satisfaction and stability, it remains crucial to specify how cohabitation is associated with marital dynamics amid China’s evolving cultural norms and socioeconomic conditions (Ma et al., 2018; Mu, 2023; Zhang, 2017).

Intramarital intimate partner violence (IPV) represents an important indicator of marital quality, signaling abusive relationships and profound marital dysfunction. It poses significant threats to the physical and mental well-being of victims, with the most severe cases resulting in fatal injuries, thereby constituting a pressing concern for both public and academic

attention (Choi et al., 2012; Han & Wei, 2023; Yuan & Hesketh, 2021). Recent research increasingly seek to understand the determinants of IPV from a life course perspective, encompassing intergenerational and intragenerational factors and their interaction with sociocultural contexts (Cui et al., 2013; Eddy et al., 2018; Tur-Prats, 2019). Cohabitation, with its varied and changing meanings and practices, reflects and shapes formation processes of relationship quality and dynamics. On the one hand, cohabitation may represent a selective option shaped by individuals' earlier relationship experiences; on the other hand, its emerging role as a trial marriage positions lived experiences of cohabitation as a formative context that influence post-marital lives. To our best knowledge, this study is the first to systematically examine the association between premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV and to explore the mechanisms underlying such associations.

Understanding this association in the Chinese context is particularly pertinent, given the growing diversity and ambiguity surrounding the meanings and functions of cohabitation, as well as the complex power dynamics implicated in IPV. In China, domestic violence persists within a sociohistorical context marked by deep-rooted patriarchal norms, institutional ambiguity, and socioeconomic transformation. The traditional family system, deeply influenced by Confucian ideals, has long upheld male authority and female subordination as normative, legitimizing hierarchical gender relations that tolerate, or even obscure, the use of violence within the household (Han & Wei, 2023; Yuan & Hesketh, 2021). At the institutional level, the boundaries between state and family authority remain blurred; the legacy of socialist collectivism and the privatization of domestic affairs in the reform era have produced a fragmented governance structure in which intervention in family violence is

often limited or inconsistent (Zheng et al., 2024). Compounding these dynamics, China's rapid economic reforms have intensified social and financial pressures and eroded communal support systems (Mu & Xie, 2014). These overlapping forces create a climate in which IPV may be both structurally enabled and culturally minimized.

A national survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), an official organization in China with a longstanding role in advocating for women's rights and gender equality, reported that 24.7% of married women have experienced some form of IPV (NPC, 2011), though this figure likely underestimates the true prevalence due to the sensitivity of the issue and cultural norms that tend to normalize domestic violence as ordinary family conflict (Chan, 2012a; Jahromi et al., 2015). The enactment of China's first Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2016 marked a critical institutional development, formally legitimizing social intervention and affirming state responsibility in addressing IPV (Gu et al., 2022). Meanwhile, scholarly research on IPV in China has expanded, reflecting increasing social and academic attention to the issue. Although this body of work has yielded important insights into the determinants of IPV victimization risks, it remains underdeveloped and constrained by an overreliance on official records and a lack of robust empirical evidence (Cao et al., 2014; Chen & Chan, 2021; Hou et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022).

Drawing on data from the 2020 Beijing Family Life and Health Survey (BFLHS), this study leverages the "cohabitation effect" framework to examine the relationships between women's premarital cohabitation with their current spouse and multiple forms of intramarital IPV. Particular attention is paid to two mediating pathways: characteristics associated with

women who cohabit (selection perspective) and the specific functioning of the cohabitation experience (experience perspective). Consistent with the legal scope of China's Anti-Domestic Violence Law, this study focuses exclusively on heterosexual, cisgender partnerships.

This study aims to address three research questions. First, what is the association between premarital cohabitation and the risk of experiencing IPV within marriage? Second, drawing on the “cohabitation effect” framework, how do the selection mechanism, captured by adverse early life experiences and complex relationship histories, and the experience mechanism, reflected in specific characteristics of cohabitation, mediate the relationship between cohabitation and IPV? Third, how does the association between premarital cohabitation and IPV vary across birth cohorts and socioeconomic status?

THEORIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PREMARITAL COHABITATION AND

INTRAMARITAL IPV

Contesting the Cohabitation Effect

The term “cohabitation effect” describes the correlation between premarital cohabitation and poor marital outcomes (Brown, 2004; Stanley et al., 2006; Woods & Emery, 2002), including low life satisfaction (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009), poor relationship quality (Aarskaug Wiik et al., 2012; Mu, 2023), and a high likelihood of union dissolution (Ma et al., 2018; Zhang, 2017). Although such a negative association has been documented in various contexts, it is not universally observed. Research suggests that this association is more likely to appear in settings where cohabitation remains socially stigmatized or lacks institutional support. In

traditional Chinese society, rooted in Confucian values that emphasize sexual propriety and marital order, cohabitation was often viewed as morally suspect and socially deviant (Kobayashi & Kampen, 2015; Ng & Lau, 1990; Parish et al., 2007). Along with pervasive changes toward more inclusive and diverse family forms in China, cohabitation has been increasingly practiced as an individualistic and cosmopolitan lifestyle (Yu & Xie, 2015), a pragmatic trial marriage (Yu, 2021), or a transitional arrangement adopted under financial constraints to prepare for marriage (Mu & Yeung, 2023). Nonetheless, it largely remains socially unorthodox. Women may be seen as violating societal expectations of premarital chastity, while men, though less judged, are often stereotyped as shirking relational responsibilities (Mu, 2023; Song & Lai, 2022). Within this specific normative framework, cohabitation may correlate with reduced institutional support and greater interpersonal conflict, thereby elevating IPV risks.

Furthermore, in contexts marked by heightened social risks and limited state welfare provision, such as China, individuals heavily rely on family, rather than the public institutions, for socioeconomic security (Davis, 2014; Ji et al., 2024). Within this framework, marriage, especially for women, remains an important avenue for upward social mobility and overall well-being (Mu & Xie, 2014). Thus, decisions surrounding intimate relationships are often approached with greater conservatism and caution (Zhou, 2022). Despite notable advancements in women's educational and occupational attainment, entrenched gender hierarchies within the family and pervasive moral double standards across gender have continued to restrict women's agency in navigating intimate relationships. These constraints limit their ability to treat cohabitation as a legitimate strategy for assessing relationship

compatibility or safely withdrawing from harmful partnerships (Ji et al., 2017; Parish et al., 2007; Zhong & Guo, 2017; Song & Lai, 2020, 2022). Cohabitation thus remains to be perceived as a precarious and less desirable arrangement (Lai & Song, 2022), potentially contributing to adverse marital outcomes. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1A. Premarital cohabitation is positively associated with the risk of intramarital IPV.

However, cohabitation has taken on new meanings as it becomes more commonly practiced, reflecting changing social norms and expectations around intimate relationships. In recent decades, it has become increasingly accepted in many Asian societies, particularly among young couples, as a form of trial marriage that helps the cohabiting couple build emotional connections and assess compatibility (Lesthaeghe, 2020; Raymo et al., 2015; Yeung & Li, 2023; Yu & Xie, 2015, 2022). In the first place, cohabitation offers a less financially burdensome alternative to marriage, allowing couples to live together while saving for the costs associated with a formal wedding, especially in places with higher living costs (Mu, 2023; Mu & Yeung, 2023; Yu, 2021). For example, nearly 40% of Shanghainese born in the 1980s had cohabited before marriage (Yu & Xie, 2021). Additionally, cohabitation reflects broader shifts in young people's expectations for marriage, including desires for greater gender equality, emotional intimacy, and mutual support. Many view cohabitation as a flexible arrangement that allows for more informed and deliberate marital decisions (Song & Lai, 2022). For example, Yang's (2024) study has shown that urban couples who cohabited before getting married, particularly those who married after 1995, tend to adopt more egalitarian divisions of household labor (Yang, 2024).

As a result, given that cohabitation becomes more widespread and its meanings more varied in China, the negative consequences previously associated with it may be diminishing (Ma & Rizzi, 2017; Zhang, 2017). In light of these potentially countervailing mechanisms underlying the so-called “cohabitation effect,” we propose the following hypothesis alternative to Hypothesis 1A:

Hypothesis 1B. Premarital cohabitation is negatively associated with, or unrelated to, the risk of intramarital IPV.

Elucidating Mechanisms of the Cohabitation Effect

To understand the association between premarital cohabitation and marital experiences, two mechanisms – the “selection perspective” and the “experience perspective”, have been widely employed in existing research to explain the cohabitation effect with regard to relationship quality (Zhang, 2017), stability (Stanley et al., 2006), and health outcomes (Perelli-Harris et al., 2018). In this paper, we also draw on these two mechanisms to unpack the relationships between premarital cohabitation and IPV.

From the *selection perspective*, the “cohabitation effect” is attributed to the distinct characteristics of individuals who choose to cohabit, i.e., traits that predispose them to relationship problems and instability, irrespective of their eventual marital status. In China, the persistence of patriarchal norms and the moral stigma surrounding cohabitation renders it a socially unorthodox choice. Those who do cohabit tend to deviate from traditional expectations, and this divergence is often shaped by prior exposure to adverse relational experiences, such as childhood trauma or complex romantic histories (Axinn & Thornton,

1996; Cherlin et al., 2004; Conger et al., 2010; Teachman, 2003). These formative experiences foster skepticism toward long-term commitment and may simultaneously predispose individuals to both cohabitation and IPV (Cao et al., 2014). In the Chinese context, where male authority and intergenerational power hierarchies persist, children exposed to interparental violence, child abuse, or parental divorce may be socialized to normalize or tolerate violence, thereby amplifying the effects of such adverse experiences (Hou et al., 2016; M. Zhao et al., 2022). (Hou et al., 2016; M. Zhao et al., 2022).

Furthermore, individuals with complex relationship histories may develop alternative value systems, such as prioritizing emotional fulfillment or expressing ambivalence toward marriage, both of which encourage cohabitation and elevate the risk of marital conflict (Yu et al., 2022; Yu, 2023). Therefore, the extent to which cohabitation remains a socially selective and stigmatized behavior may be evidenced by differences in traumatic relational backgrounds among cohabiters and non-cohabiters and the degree to which these backgrounds mediate the link between cohabitation and IPV. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (selection perspective). If cohabiters represent a negatively selected group characterized by adverse early-life experiences, such experiences, i.e., adverse childhood events and complex romantic histories, will attenuate the association between premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV.

In contrast, the *experience perspective* emphasizes the transformative nature of cohabitation itself. Amidst rising individualism and a gradual erosion of traditional moral constraints in China, premarital cohabitation has become increasingly normalized. Many

individuals treat cohabitation as a form of trial marriage, allowing partners to assess compatibility through daily routines and shared responsibilities, while also preparing materially for future family life (Yeung & Li, 2023; Y. Zhang, 2017).

However, cohabitation may remain structurally ambiguous. It lacks clear, mutually endorsed scripts of commitment and obligation, which can breed relational uncertainty and conflict that persist into marriage (Dush et al., 2003; Manning et al., 2018; Rhoades et al., 2009, 2012; Stanley et al., 2004, 2006). In China, cohabitating couples, relative to their non-cohabitating counterparts, are more likely to engage in resource-sharing and obligation-laden arrangements such as premarital pregnancy or joint financial investments. These dynamics intersect with reputational risks may lead to heightened costs of relationship dissolution, constrained marital choices, and social pressure to formalize unstable unions into marriages (Song & Lai, 2022; Yu, 2021). Such coerced marital transitions can compromise subsequent relationships quality (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019, 2021; Sassler et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022).

Therefore, the extent to which cohabitation serves as an effective trial for marriage may depend on the quality of the cohabitation experiences. In China's shifting sociocultural landscape, where individual risk is increasingly privatized, parental endorsement, especially by the woman's parents, emerges as a crucial barometer of relational viability (Ji et al., 2024; Yan, 2018). Accordingly, measures such as love for the spouse, confidence in the marital decision, and parental approval at the time of marriage may reflect whether the cohabitation experience was constructive and effective in fulfilling its functionality as a trial marriage (Zhou, 2022). We thus propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (experience perspective). Given the relational ambiguity that may

represent cohabitation, the quality of the cohabitation experience, evidenced by spousal affection, confidence in marital decisions, and parental approval at the time of marriage, will attenuate the association between premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV.

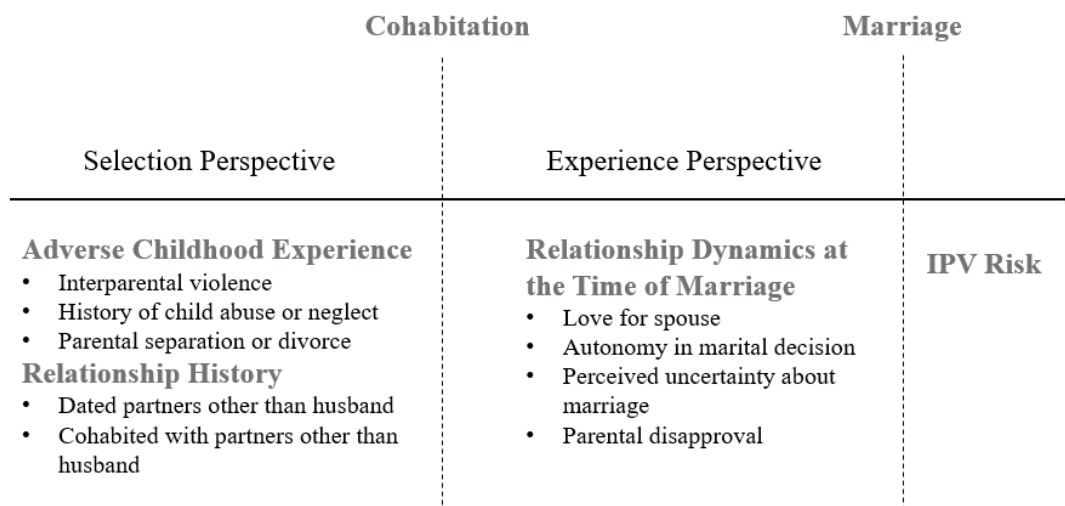


Figure 1. Conceptual Measurement Framework of Selection and Experience Perspectives Based on BFLHS Data

Figure 1 illustrates the alignment between the conceptual framework and its operationalization for the two mediating perspectives. The horizontal axis represents the individual’s life course trajectory from birth to post-marriage, highlighting how cumulative influences, including adverse childhood experiences, romantic history, and relationship dynamics at the time of marriage, shape post-marital outcomes such as IPV.

Cohort Variations

China’s sociodemographic context, where evolving norms around intimate relationships coexist with entrenched traditional familism, uniquely shapes the relationship between premarital cohabitation and IPV. A nuanced understanding of this association requires attention to transformations in family behavior across cohorts, which may be further

complicated by socioeconomic stratification.

Over time, as family norms evolve, cohabitation may become less socially selective, with its experiential function, such as improving compatibility and relational commitment, gaining greater importance (Yu, 2021). Extant studies often identify 1978, the onset of China's economic reforms, as a critical point in this transformation (Mu & Xie, 2014; Zhang, 2017). Prior to this era, sexual behavior and intimate relationships were subject to strict sociopolitical regulation (Yu et al., 2022). Public discourse on sexuality was severely circumscribed, and premarital cohabitation was not only stigmatized but also exposed individuals to legal sanctions (Yu et al., 2022). During this period, the Chinese Communist state exercised pervasive control over personal life through an extensive system of bureaucratically organized collectives, including residential committees, schools, and state-assigned workplaces (*danwei*). These institutional mechanisms penetrated deeply into the intimate domains, functioning as instruments of moral surveillance and social discipline (Yu & Xie, 2015). Premarital sexual relations were labeled as deviant, and those who engaged in them were often disparaged as "hooligans" (Farrer & Sun, 2003). With the advent of the economic reforms, China witnessed sweeping institutional and cultural shifts, including growing exposure to global consumerism and liberal sexual norms (Higgins et al., 2002; Zhang, 2017), and cohabitation gradually gained social and legal acceptance (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Wang & Kan, 2021; Yu & Xie, 2015). Thus, it is important to examine how the relationship between cohabitation and IPV changes across cohorts. We propose:

Hypothesis 4 (cohort difference). The association between premarital cohabitation and IPV becomes weaker among younger cohorts, compared to older counterparts.

The broader acceptance of cohabitation, however, has not occurred uniformly across social strata. While early cohabiters tended to be highly educated urban youth influenced by global cultural currents, among more recent cohorts, individuals with lower education and rural-to-urban migrant backgrounds are more likely to cohabit prior to marriage (Mu & Yeung, 2023; Yu, 2021; Zhang, 2017). This reversal in the socioeconomic gradients indicates that cohabitation is increasingly driven by practical constraints, such as economic precarity and barriers to housing, rather than by ideational commitments to liberal values (Yu & Xie, 2022). Such socioeconomic variations may further intersect with gender norms that stigmatize female sexuality to shape the link between cohabitation and IPV, with women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds facing heightened relational vulnerability (Song & Lai, 2020; Zhou, 2019). They are more likely to enter and remain in cohabiting unions due to economic dependence or limited alternatives, which may increase their exposure to relational inertia and subsequently adverse marital outcomes, including elevated risks of IPV. Although studies on divorce patterns provide suggestive evidence of such stratified outcomes (Ma et al., 2018), comprehensive empirical analyses of how the changing sociodemographic profile of cohabiters shapes marital quality or IPV remain limited. Given these complexities, rather than testing specific hypotheses, we adopt an exploratory approach to examine how cohabitation relates to subsequent experiences of IPV differently across different socioeconomic strata, which is indicated by educational attainment consistent with existing literature (Wang & Kan, 2021; Yu & Xie, 2015).

Understanding IPV in the Chinese Context

IPV in China was historically shrouded in silence. Under traditional patriarchal norms, the husband was regarded as the supreme authority within the household, entitled to discipline his wife, who was expected to display obedience and submission (Song et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Within this context, violence was tacitly condoned as a legitimate means for men to assert dominance, perform masculinity, and reinforce gender hierarchies (Anderson, 2007; Johnson, 2005). This normative backdrop not only reinforced female victims' compliance but also compounded the stigma experienced by male victims, who feared that disclosing abuse would delegitimize their masculinity and reduce them to a socially degraded identity (Tsang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Since the 1990s, China has seen a gradual strengthening of institutional responses to domestic violence. Legal reforms, changing family dynamics, and rising public discourse on gender equality have contributed to improvements in women's rights and the development of prevention and intervention against domestic violence (Song et al., 2021). However, vestiges of cultural ideology surrounding IPV persist. IPV continues to be conflated with general family discord, undermining its recognition as a distinct and serious form of violence (Zhang & Zhao, 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). The ideal of family harmony often pressures individuals to conceal familial "disharmony" to maintain social face, which reinforces silence and discourages help-seeking among IPV victims, and in turn, hinders public awareness, delays identification, and impedes effective intervention of IPV (Chan, 2012b).

Various studies have documented the prevalence and correlates of IPV in China, framing it as a pressing public health and social concern. The lifetime prevalence of victimization

reported in the general population varies widely from 10.2% to 65.0%, depending on the measurement scales used (Zhang et al., 2021). IPV arises from an interplay of individual, relational, and sociocultural factors, including gender, age, socioeconomic disadvantage, and economic stress (Cao et al., 2023; Cao et al., 2014; Yuan & Hesketh, 2021; Ma, 2013a). Different types of violence, including physical, psychological, and sexual, often co-occur (Hou et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2021). Mirroring findings from other contexts, Chinese studies using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) often reveal gender symmetry in rates of psychological aggression and minor physical assault, although violence involving severe injury remains disproportionately perpetrated by men (Chen & Chan, 2021; Hamby, 2017; Ma, 2013b). Legal case data similarly show that extreme physical harm is more commonly experienced by women (Zhang & Zhao, 2018). These empirical ambiguities highlight the limitations of binary discourses that frame IPV exclusively through gender symmetry or asymmetry (Anderson, 2013; Jones et al., 2018), which calls for a nuanced, contextualized approach moving beyond attributional binaries to illuminate the sociocultural logics underpinning IPV.

China's distinctive sociocultural context offers important insights into the normalization and interpretation of IPV. First, cognitive norms contribute to the under-recognition of less severe IPV, such as psychological aggression and minor physical assaults. The widely circulated adage "hitting is affection, scolding is love" (*da shi qin, ma shi ai*) exemplifies how both psychological aggression and physical assault are framed as misguided expressions of strong emotional attachment (Chen & Chan, 2021). Comparative research also suggests that Chinese youth are less likely than their peers in other societies to identify minor aggressions

as constituting IPV (Lin et al., 2016). Second, while some studies report higher levels of psychological aggression among women, such findings should not be interpreted as indicative of female dominance in IPV. Rather, psychological aggression, often pejoratively labeled as “evil tongue” (*zui qian*), an aggressive manner of speaking, is stigmatized and frequently used to rationalize male-perpetrated violence against women as a justified response and punishment of such behavior (Yang, 2007).

In sum, this paper situates IPV within China’s broader sociocultural context, examining how these contextual forces shape the relationship between premarital cohabitation and vulnerability to post-marital IPV. Particularly, we aim to shed light on the evolving meaning of cohabitation not only as a lifestyle choice but also as a living arrangement embedded in and shaped by shifting cultural norms, institutional structures, and social expectations.

METHODS

Date and Sample

For this study, we use data from the 2020 Beijing Family Life and Health Survey, a cross-sectional survey of ever-married women that the Center for Population and Development Studies at Renmin University of China, the Department of Sociology and Psychology at Sichuan University, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at San Antonio conducted jointly. The survey was based on multi-stage probability-proportional-to-size sampling and drew on the 2015 China Inter-census Survey, and it includes comprehensive information about retrospective premarital experiences and IPV outcomes.

Compared with non-probability sampling, the data collected using this sampling method generates more representative results (Zhang et al., 2021).

Given that divorce is associated with a greater risk of subsequent marital dissolution and increased exposure to IPV, we focus on women who remained in their first marriages. This criterion led to the exclusion of 33 observations (2.6% of the full sample). This restriction is also due to data limitations, as complete sociodemographic information about husbands is available only for first marriages. An additional 2.5% of the samples were excluded due to missing data, primarily regarding parental education. The final sample comprises 1,200 women, with an average age at first marriage of 25.2 years. Among them, 33.9% reported premarital cohabitation, typically initiated at an average age of 22.3 years and lasting for an average of 0.7 years. Details of the sample construction process are provided in Supplementary Table S1. All analyses were weighted to reflect the 2020 Beijing population census, ensuring representativeness (see Table S2 in the online supplementary material).

Measures

Dependent Variables

Based on the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2), women's experience of IPV was measured by both self-reported victimization and the perpetration of IPV in the past year, drawing on 29 pairs of IPV behaviors (58 outcomes in total) (Hamby, 2017; Straus et al., 1996). However, due to CTS2's limitations in capturing asymmetries in IPV, our primary analyses focus on women's reports of victimization, with perpetration data used in robustness checks, whose results were provided in the online supplementary material. The CTS2 is

widely regarded for its high sensitivity in detecting IPV, as well as its strong construct validity and internal consistency. In this study, Cronbach's alpha is as high as 0.95.

Following Straus et al. (1996), we distinguish between prevalence, i.e., the proportion of respondents reporting at least one instance of IPV, and chronicity, i.e., the frequency of IPV among those who report experiencing it. However, as Straus et al. (1996, p. 299) cautioned, chronicity data tend to be heavily skewed due to the small number of respondents engaging in repeated violence. Consequently, chronicity is only calculated among those who report at least one instance of IPV (as shown in Table 2). For regression analysis, we rely exclusively on prevalence measures to avoid the substantial sample size reduction resulted from restricting the sample to IPV-experienced individuals.

Additionally, we adopt a categorization of IPV types and severity based on Straus et al.'s criteria, distinguishing six categories, specifically, minor and severe psychological aggression, minor and severe physical assault, and minor and severe injury (Hamby, 2017; Straus et al., 1996). This distinction is theoretically grounded in Johnson's (2005) work, which highlights that while overall IPV rates may be comparable across genders, severe violence tends to be disproportionately perpetrated by men and is indicative of underlying power imbalances. Such a refined categorization of IPV is particularly important in the Chinese context, where minor forms of violence may be trivialized or even romanticized as signs of intimacy or passion. Survey responses were coded dichotomously, with "1" indicating that the respondent reported experiencing a specific form of IPV and "0" otherwise. Victimization and perpetration were analyzed separately to reveal the gendered dynamics of IPV.

Independent Variables

We created a dichotomous measure of premarital cohabitation based on responses to the question, “Have you ever cohabited with your (current) spouse before registering your marriage or holding a ceremony?” This question captures the nuanced definition of marital legitimacy in the Chinese context, which recognizes both legal registration and ceremonial practices as markers of formal union.

To capture the two primary theoretical pathways linking premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV, i.e., the selection perspective and the experience perspective, we included a comprehensive set of variables.

Selection perspective: In line with the selection framework, which posits that individuals who cohabit may be predisposed to relational difficulties due to earlier life experiences, we incorporate indicators of adverse childhood experiences and complex romantic histories. Adverse childhood experiences are assessed through three dimensions: (1) witnessing interparental violence, coded as 1 if respondents reported such exposure “very frequently” or “frequently” during childhood and 0 otherwise; (2) experiencing abuse or neglect, coded as 1 if respondents reported any form of physical neglect, emotional neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse during childhood; and (3) parental separation or divorce, coded as 1 if the respondent’s parents were separated or divorced at the time of the respondent’s marriage and 0 otherwise (Jones et al., 2018). To assess complex relationship histories, we include two dichotomous variables indicating whether the respondent had ever dated or cohabited with someone other than their current spouse (Jose et al., 2010).

Experience perspective: The extent to which the couple feels confident about their marital decision and their parents approve of such a decision may reflect the effectiveness of cohabitation as a trial marriage. Thus, to capture the experience perspective, we include reported love for spouse, autonomy in marital decisions, perceived uncertainty about marriage, and parental disapproval of the marriage, all referenced at the time of marriage. Specifically, we include the extent of love for spouse as measured by the answer to the question “Please estimate the level of love between you and your spouse at the time of marriage,” with responses ranging from 1 (“not in love at all”) to 5 (“love with all heart and soul”). We assess autonomy in marital decisions based on the question “How much autonomy did you have in your marital decision?” with a value of 1 indicating “very much” and a value of 0 indicating “some” or “none.” To evaluate uncertainty surrounding the marital decision, we include a variable indicating whether the respondent sought advice at the time of deciding to marry (coded as 1 if yes). Finally, we account for parental disapproval of the marital decision based on responses to the question “How did your parents feel about your marriage then?” and coded those who answered “strongly disagree” or “disagree” as 1 and 0 otherwise.

Control Variables

We further control for a set of variables to capture individual, spousal, parental, and couple-level characteristics. For *individual and spousal characteristics*, we include each partner’s years of schooling, pre-marital employment status (with unemployment as the reference), type of *hukou* (with rural *hukou* as the reference), wife’s age, and the age difference between the spouses (measured in years). *At the couple level*, we include the duration of the

relationship (measured in years). For couples who cohabited before marriage, relationship duration was calculated from the year when the couple started to cohabit; for others, it began at the time of marriage. We also included a binary migration status variable indicating whether the respondent holds *hukou* in Beijing, with local residents serving as the reference group. We also accounted for the number of children. Regarding *parental characteristics*, we control for the highest years of parental education (measured in years) and parental occupations (0= manual jobs, 1=clerical jobs).

Analytic Strategy

Our aim in this study is to examine the relationship between premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV among Chinese women and to identify potential mechanisms behind this relationship. The CTS2, while widely used for measuring IPV, has notable limitations regarding its reduced sensitivity to highly gendered and severe forms of violence. It tends to assess IPV in a behaviorally symmetric manner (e.g., whether either partner slapped, insulted, or hit the other) rather than capturing patterns of control or domination and may thus overstate mutual violence and underrepresent the severity and asymmetry of male-perpetrated IPV. In light of these limitations, we conceptualize IPV broadly as the presence of violence within a relationship, rather than focusing on the gender of perpetrators. Nevertheless, we present both female-reported victimization and perpetration rates in our descriptive analyses to offer a holistic empirical profile of IPV in China. As CTS2 is designed to assess bidirectional and often symmetrical forms of violence, our primary analysis focuses on female-reported victimization, with female-reported perpetration included as a robustness

check, whose results were included in the online supplementary material.

Our analytical strategy proceeds as follows. We begin by comparing demographic characteristics and IPV between women who cohabited before marriage and those who did not. IPV is assessed using both prevalence, i.e., whether violence occurred, and chronicity, i.e., the frequency of violent acts among those who experienced IPV.

Next, we estimate a series of logistic regression models to examine the association between premarital cohabitation and the risk of experiencing IPV within marriage. This modeling approach is widely used in IPV research (e.g., Chan, 2012a; Chen & Chan, 2021; Cheung et al., 2014). We conduct separate analyses for IPV perpetrated by women and by men, as reported by female respondents. We employ a stepwise approach that sequentially adds variables to the model. The baseline model only controls for sociodemographic characteristics. The second model further includes measures of adverse childhood experiences and relationship history to capture the selection perspective. In a parallel set of models, we test the experience perspective by introducing variables related to the quality of the cohabitation experience, while holding the control variables constant. All analyses apply weights and adjust for survey design effects to ensure representativeness and correct standard errors.

Next, the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) method was used to decompose the relative contributions of the selection and experience perspectives. This method addresses the scale identification issue in logistic models and decomposes the overall cohabitation effects into direct and indirect effects without bias. Compared to alternative methods, the KHB method provides more precise estimates, greater generalizability by relaxing the distributional

assumptions for the decomposed and control variables, and intuitive interpretation, all of which drive its widespread use (Karlson et al., 2012). By calculating the decomposed percentages, the KHB method quantifies the relative contribution of each mediator or group of mediators.

Lastly, we conduct a series of robustness checks to address potential concerns related to selection bias, the bidirectionality of IPV, and alternative operationalizations of key variables.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Who is More Likely to Enter Cohabitation?

Table 1 reports the weighted descriptive statistics by partnership type, showing that the selectivity of premarital cohabitation remains pronounced in China despite the increasing acceptance of the practice. Specifically, 11.1% of the respondents who engaged in premarital cohabitation had separated or divorced parents, 15.4% had been exposed to interparental violence during childhood, and 38.7% and 13.0% had dated or cohabited, respectively, with someone other than the spouse. The corresponding statistics for the respondents who had not cohabited before marriage were 6.3%, 6.3%, 11.7%, and 0.5%, respectively.

Furthermore, compared to their counterparts who had not cohabited, cohabiters reported weaker feelings of love for spouse at the time of marriage, with a mean score of 3.9 versus 4.1. Moreover, a significantly higher proportion of cohabiters reported seeking advice regarding their marital decision (89.4% compared to 73.6%) and reported lacking parental approval (10.6% versus 4.0%). Nonetheless, cohabiters also expressed a greater sense of

autonomy in making the decision to marry than non-cohabiters.

We further explored cohort variations in the relationships between cohabitation and IPV, with detailed results presented in Supplementary Table S3. The findings indicate that while differences in early life experiences persist, particularly regarding complex romantic histories, the degree of sociodemographic selectivity among cohabiters has diminished in more recent cohorts. Notably, younger cohorts who cohabited prior to marriage exhibit levels of affection toward their partners comparable to those who did not cohabit. However, they continue to demonstrate a greater reliance on external opinions when making marital decisions. These results suggest the rising functionality of cohabitation as a trial marriage.

Table 1. Weighted descriptive statistics, by premarital cohabitation ($N=1,200$)

	Total	Married w/o cohabitation	Married w/ cohabitation	T/ χ^2 tests
<i>Selection Perspective</i>				
Previously dated a partner other than husband, %	20.8	11.7	38.7	$p<0.001$
Previously cohabited with a partner other than husband, %	4.7	0.5	13.0	$p<0.001$
Interparental violence, %	9.4	6.3	15.4	$p<0.001$
History of child abuse or neglect, %	18.1	17.8	18.8	$p=0.713$
Parental separation or divorce, %	8.0	6.3	11.1	$p=0.011$
<i>Experience Perspective</i>				
Love for spouse at the time of marriage, M(SD)	4.0 (0.0)	4.1 (0.0)	3.9 (0.1)	$p<0.001$
Autonomy in marital decision, M(SD)	2.1 (0.0)	2.1 (0.0)	2.3 (0.1)	$p=0.005$
Perceived uncertainty about marriage, %	79.0	73.6	89.4	$p<0.001$
Parental disapproval, %	6.2	4.0	10.6	$p<0.001$
<i>Sociodemographic characteristics</i>				
Education (years), M(SD)	12.1 (0.1)	11.3 (0.2)	13.8 (0.2)	$p<0.001$
Husband's education (years), M(SD)	12.1 (0.1)	11.5 (0.1)	13.5 (0.2)	$p<0.001$
Work status (Employed), %	76.0	70.9	85.9	$p<0.001$
Husband's work status (Employed), %	88.0	85.3	93.2	$p<0.001$
Parental education (years), M(SD)	9.4 (0.1)	8.7 (0.1)	10.7 (0.2)	$p<0.001$
Parental occupation (Clerical Jobs), %	31.7	26.8	41.4	$p<0.001$
Urban <i>Hukou</i> , %	59.3	60.7	56.3	$p=0.181$
Husband's urban <i>Hukou</i> , %	61.4	85.3	63.0	$p=0.454$

Age (years), M(SD)	50.3 (0.4)	54.0 (0.5)	43.1 (0.7)	$p<0.001$
Age difference (years), M(SD)	1.4 (0.1)	1.4 (0.1)	1.4 (0.1)	$p=0.611$
Relationship duration (years), M(SD)	25.3 (0.5)	29.3 (0.5)	17.6 (0.7)	$p<0.001$
Migration status (Migrant), %	30.0	27.5	34.7	$p=0.020$
Number of children, M(SD)	1.2 (0.0)	1.3 (0.0)	0.9 (0.0)	$p<0.001$

Comparison of IPV Outcomes between Cohabitors and Non-cohabitors

Table 2 shows substantial differences in the victimization and perpetration of IPV across cohabitation status using both measures of prevalence and chronicity.

As shown in Table 2, gender asymmetries in IPV intensify with increasing severity of violence. Although women are more likely than men to perpetrate psychological aggression and minor physical aggression, they are disproportionately more likely to be victims of severe forms of violence resulting in injury. Cohabitors reported elevated rates of suffering severe IPV compared to those who did not cohabit prior to marriage, with the difference growing as the severity of violence escalates. Specifically, among women who cohabited, 27.6% experienced severe psychological aggression, 29.8% endured severe physical assault, and 21.3% suffered injuries inflicted by their husbands. In contrast, the corresponding figures for women who did not cohabit are markedly lower, namely, 22.1%, 24.0%, and 9.7%, respectively.

Notably, premarital cohabitation confers some practical benefits for improving spousal compatibility, as evidenced by a lower prevalence of minor psychological aggression and physical assault among cohabitors than non-cohabitors. However, these experiential advantages appeared to be limited, as reflected in the higher incidence of minor IPV

according to the chronicity measure. In other words, while cohabiters may experience fewer instances of violence overall, when conflict does occur, it tends to be more frequent.

Table 2. Prevalence and chronicity based on the CTS2 Scales, by women as victims or perpetrators

Variables	Mean (S.E.)/ Percentage			T/ χ^2 tests
	Total	Married w/o cohabitation	Married w/ cohabitation	
Panel A: Women as Victims				
Minor psychological aggression				
Prevalence	56.0*	51.6*	58.3*	0.047
Chronicity	5.1 (0.4)	7.2 (0.7)	4.1 (0.4)	0.000
<i>N</i>	665	231	434	
Severe psychological aggression				
Prevalence	24.0*	27.6*	22.1*	0.056
Chronicity	8.9 (0.8)	12.6 (1.4)	6.5 (0.9)	0.000
<i>N</i>	283	119	164	
Minor physical assault				
Prevalence	49.2*	42.9	52.4	0.004
Chronicity	6.0 (0.5)	11.7 (1.2)	3.5 (0.4)	0.000
<i>N</i>	583	189	394	
Severe physical assault				
Prevalence	26.0	29.8	24.0	0.046
Chronicity	12.4 (1.2)	19.4 (2.3)	8.0 (1.3)	0.000
<i>N</i>	320	132	188	
Minor injury				
Prevalence	21.4*	26.6	18.7*	0.005
Chronicity	4.3 (0.4)	6.8 (0.8)	2.5 (0.4)	0.000
<i>N</i>	259	113	146	
Severe injury				
Prevalence	13.7*	21.3*	9.7*	0.000
Chronicity	9.0 (1.0)	10.6 (1.4)	7.2 (1.3)	0.076
<i>N</i>	168	93	75	
Panel B: Women as Perpetrators				
Minor psychological aggression				
Prevalence	63.1*	60.0*	64.7*	0.147
Chronicity	5.7 (0.3)	7.1 (0.6)	5.1 (0.3)	0.003

	<i>N</i>	745	265	480	
Severe psychological aggression					
Prevalence		27.5*	32.5*	24.9*	0.012
Chronicity		8.6 (0.8)	13.0 (1.6)	5.7 (0.8)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	331	144	187	
Minor physical assault					
Prevalence		51.2*	44.9	54.4	0.004
Chronicity		6.8 (0.5)	12.5 (1.4)	4.4 (0.4)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	612	202	410	
Severe physical assault					
Prevalence		25.3	28.4	23.8	0.106
Chronicity		13.3 (1.2)	20.6 (2.2)	8.9 (1.3)	0.000
	<i>N</i>	319	130	189	
Minor injury					
Prevalence		19.4*	27.3	15.3*	0.000
Chronicity		5.0 (0.6)	7.1 (1.0)	3.1 (0.6)	0.001
	<i>N</i>	233	115	118	
Severe injury					
Prevalence		11.5*	19.1*	7.6*	0.000
Chronicity		10.7 (1.0)	11.0 (1.4)	10.3 (1.5)	0.701
	<i>N</i>	143	81	62	

Notes. Following Straus (1996), prevalence refers to the proportion of individuals who have experienced any form of IPV, while chronicity captures the frequency of IPV incidents among those who report having experienced it. *N* denotes the number of individuals reporting IPV experience. * indicates a statistically significant difference between self-reported IPV victimization and perpetration.

Regression Results

Table 3 shows the results from multivariable logistic regression models predicting women's self-reported IPV victimization (see Supplementary Table A4 for the complete results). In the baseline models shown in Panel A, which controls for sociodemographic characteristics, the differences between women who cohabited before marriage and those who did not are not significant for the two most prevalent types of IPV, i.e., minor psychological and physical

aggression. However, the positive associations between premarital cohabitation and the four more severe types of IPV remain statistically significant.

Specifically, women who cohabited prior to marriage reported 49%, 95%, 138%, and 240% higher odds of experiencing severe psychological aggression, severe physical assault, minor injury, and severe injury, respectively, compared to their non-cohabiting counterparts. These findings are fully consistent with the patterns observed in women's self-reported IPV perpetration (see Panel A of Table S5 in the online supplementary material).

Taken together, these results provide partial support for **Hypothesis 1A**, suggesting that cohabitation is positively associated with the risk of IPV, especially severe IPV. Meanwhile, the absence of significant associations in minor forms of IPV partially supports **Hypothesis 1B**, indicating that cohabitation may not increase the likelihood of less severe IPV.

Table 3. Binary logistic regression models predicting women's self-reported victimization of psychological aggression, physical assault, and injury ($N=1,200$)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	M Psy A	S Psy A	M Phy A	S Phy A	M Inj	S Inj
<i>(1) Panel A (only include sociodemographic characteristics)</i>						
Premarital cohabitation (ref. = not)	1.08	1.49*	0.94	1.95***	2.38***	3.40***
	(0.17)	(0.29)	(0.15)	(0.35)	(0.49)	(0.96)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>(2) Panel B (include both indicators of selection perspective and sociodemographic characteristics)</i>						
Premarital cohabitation (ref. = not)	0.95	0.86	0.73	1.10	1.22	1.40
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.23)	(0.27)	(0.45)
Previously dated with a partner other than husband (ref. = not)	0.99	2.17***	1.44	2.42***	3.19***	3.54***
	(0.19)	(0.48)	(0.28)	(0.51)	(0.69)	(1.10)
Previously cohabited with a partner other than husband (ref. = not)	1.13	1.06	0.85	1.31	1.09	1.08
	(0.46)	(0.42)	(0.34)	(0.52)	(0.52)	(0.50)

Interparental violence (ref. = not)	0.99	2.25**	1.26	2.37***	2.17**	4.88***
	(0.29)	(0.57)	(0.36)	(0.60)	(0.59)	(1.42)
History of child abuse or neglect	3.79***	3.12***	3.59***	2.70***	2.29***	3.47***
(ref. = not)	(0.84)	(0.64)	(0.78)	(0.55)	(0.48)	(0.87)
Parental separation or divorce	1.25	2.99***	1.74*	2.43***	2.46***	3.59***
(ref. = not)	(0.31)	(0.80)	(0.43)	(0.61)	(0.63)	(1.27)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(3) Panel C (include both indicators of <i>experience perspective</i> and <i>sociodemographic characteristics</i>)						
Premarital cohabitation (ref. = not)	0.69*	0.93	0.62**	1.11	1.41	1.83
	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.11)	(0.24)	(0.33)	(0.59)
Love for spouse at the time of marriage	0.73***	0.53***	0.76***	0.48***	0.59***	0.51***
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Autonomy in marital decision	0.86	0.81*	0.96	1.04	0.94	0.91
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.10)
Perceived uncertainty about marriage	4.97***	1.28	4.07***	1.72*	1.41	1.28
	(1.07)	(0.31)	(0.90)	(0.39)	(0.32)	(0.39)
Parental disapproval	3.22**	1.73	3.45***	4.22***	5.18***	3.61***
	(1.17)	(0.55)	(1.19)	(1.47)	(1.75)	(1.33)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200

Notes. Weighted odds ratios are reported with standard errors presented in parentheses. M Psy A=Minor Psychological Aggression, S Psy A=Severe Psychological Aggression, M Phy A=Minor Physical Assault, S Phy A=Severe Physical Assault, M Inj=Minor Injury, S Inj=Severe Injury. These abbreviations are used consistently throughout the paper.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Examining the Selection Perspective

Next, we examine the extent to which the association between premarital cohabitation and intramarital IPV is explained by adverse childhood experiences and complicated romantic histories, factors that may predispose individuals to enter cohabiting relationships characterized by weak commitment and, subsequently, abusive marital dynamics.

As shown in Panel B of Table 3, once variables capturing the selection perspective are introduced into the model, the previously significant associations between premarital cohabitation and all types of IPV victimization become statistically insignificant. A parallel pattern is observed in women's self-reported IPV perpetration (see Panel B of Table S5 in the online supplementary material). These results support **Hypothesis 2**, indicating that the elevated IPV risks associated with cohabitation are largely attributable to prior adverse life experiences. Among these factors, a history of premarital dating with partners other than the husband significantly increases the risk of IPV, except for minor psychological aggression and minor physical assault, with odds ratios ranging from 2.17 to 3.54. The findings also substantiate the intergenerational transmission of violence. For example, women who witnessed interparental violence or experienced childhood abuse or neglect were 3.88 and 2.47 times more likely, respectively, to report severe injury victimization than women who reported a functional childhood environment. Additionally, those whose parents divorced or separated were between 1.43 and 2.59 times more likely to experience various forms of IPV compared to women from intact families.

To further identify the primary contributors to the explanatory power of the selection perspective, we employ the Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) decomposition method (Kohler et al., 2011). The results reveal whether, and to what extent, the association between premarital cohabitation and IPV is mediated by factors indicative of the selection perspective. As shown in Panel A of Table 4, premarital dating history emerges as the most influential factor. In the case of severe injury victimization, it accounts for 45.50% of the explained association. Childhood abuse or neglect explains between 14.08% and 20.96%, while witnessing

interparental violence contributes between 13.50% and 22.25% of the association between cohabitation and IPV.

Examining the Experience Perspective

The results also lend support to the experience perspective (**Hypothesis 3**), suggesting that the so-called “cohabitation effect” is not a matter of one explanatory mechanism displacing the other, but rather a question of the relative contribution of each. As shown in Panel C of Table 3, once variables capturing the dynamics of cohabitation experience are introduced, the previously significant associations between premarital cohabitation and the four severe types of IPV become statistically insignificant. Moreover, for the two most common forms of IPV, i.e., minor psychological aggression and minor physical assault, the associations become significantly negative. This suggests that cohabitation may function as an effective trial marriage, helping to mitigate minor intramarital conflict. These findings align with the patterns observed in the descriptive statistics.

Turning to the specific cohabitation experience variables, greater love toward the husband at the time of marriage is consistently associated with lower odds of IPV across all types. For example, an odds ratio of 0.51 for severe injury indicates that a one-point increase in the reported level of love corresponds to a 49% reduction in the predicted risk of experiencing severe injury. By contrast, parental disapproval is positively associated with odds of most IPV outcomes, except for severe psychological aggression. Similarly, women who expressed uncertainty about marriage back then reported significantly greater risks of IPV, namely, 3.97 times higher for minor psychological aggression, 3.07 times higher for

minor physical assault, and 72% higher for severe physical assault. These findings highlight the importance of cohabitation experience, as evidenced by emotional and social readiness before entering marriage, in mitigating marital violence. Comparable patterns are observed for IPV perpetrated by women against their husbands (see Panel C of Table S5 in the online supplementary material).

We conduct KHB decomposition to further unpack the explanatory power of each variable capturing the experience perspective. As shown in Panel B of Table 4, love for husband at the time of marriage emerges as the strongest mediator, accounting for 74.07%, 58.98%, 54.11%, and 65.18%, of the total explanation based on the experience perspective for women's self-reported IPV victimization, across the four types of severe IPV. These results imply that if cohabiters and non-cohabiters did not differ in their levels of affective commitment to their husbands, the observed disparities in IPV outcomes would largely disappear.

Table 4. KHB decomposition of the relative contributions of the *selection* and *experience* perspectives to the association between cohabitation and women's self-reported IPV victimization (%)

	S Psy A	S Phy A	M Inj	S Inj
(1) Panel A (Relative Contribution of Selection Perspective to the Cohabitation Effect)				
	151.05	95.64	92.48	71.07
<i>Relative Contribution of Each Mediator</i>				
Previously dated with a partner other than husband	36.96	47.79	60.76	45.50
Previously cohabited with a partner other than husband	13.80	12.14	4.61	8.23
Interparental violence	16.63	16.02	13.50	22.25
History of child abuse or neglect	20.96	15.77	14.08	16.02
Parental separation or divorce	11.65	8.28	7.05	7.99
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
(2) Panel B (Relative Contribution of Experience Perspective to the Cohabitation Effect)				
	113.62	83.76	61.93	40.93

Relative Contribution of Each Mediator

Love for spouse at the time of marriage	74.07	58.98	54.11	65.18
Autonomy in marital decision	5.17	0.51	1.79	3.34
Perceived uncertainty about marriage	10.06	16.80	11.60	5.05
Parental disapproval	10.69	23.71	32.50	26.43
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Note. For KHB decomposition, a confounding percentage exceeding 100% indicates that, after accounting for the indirect (mediated) effects, the direction of the direct effect reverses. In this context, it suggests that when the selection or experience perspective is taken into account, premarital cohabitation is associated with a reduced, rather than increased, risk of experiencing severe psychological aggression in marriage.

Lastly, a comparison of Panels A and B in Table 4 presents the proportion of the “cohabitation effect” accounted for by the selection and experience perspectives, respectively, based on the KHB decomposition. Consistent with the regression results, both perspectives contribute to explaining the association between premarital cohabitation and post-marital IPV, with the selection perspective emerging as the more influential explanatory pathway. For example, in the case of severe injury, 71.07 % of the observed association between cohabitation and IPV victimization is explained by selection-related factors, compared to 40.93% explained by experience-related variables. A parallel KHB analysis of women’s self-reported IPV perpetration yields similar results, corroborating the dominance of the selection perspective (see Table S6 in the online supplementary material).

Cohort Variations

Panel A of Table 5 shows results from models including interaction terms between birth cohorts and cohabitation. The findings support **Hypothesis 4**, indicating that the association between cohabitation and IPV weakens among younger cohorts. Consistent with the main effects, premarital cohabitation is significantly associated with increased risks of four severe

types of IPV, namely, severe psychological aggression, severe physical assault, minor or severe injury, particularly among women born before 1980.

Table 5. Binary logistic regression models predicting women's self-reported victimization, with interactions between premarital cohabitation and birth cohort, ($N=1,200$)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	M Psy A	S Psy A	M Phy A	S Phy A	M Inj	S Inj
(1) Panel A (Interaction between Cohort and Cohabitation)						
Premarital cohabitation	0.60 (0.22)	4.33*** (1.80)	0.97 (0.37)	3.08** (1.15)	4.18*** (1.71)	7.49*** (3.47)
Birth cohort (ref.=1920-1960)						
1960-1980	1.14 (0.31)	0.90 (0.28)	1.20 (0.33)	1.13 (0.34)	1.49 (0.48)	0.77 (0.32)
1980-2000	1.42 (0.75)	0.95 (0.57)	1.31 (0.70)	1.12 (0.65)	1.07 (0.69)	0.94 (0.80)
Cohabitation × Cohort						
Yes × 1960-1980	2.06 (0.89)	0.40 (0.19)	1.43 (0.62)	0.75 (0.32)	0.61 (0.29)	0.44 (0.24)
Yes × 1980-2000	1.99 (0.89)	0.15*** (0.08)	0.68 (0.31)	0.38* (0.19)	0.33* (0.19)	0.19** (0.12)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(2) Panel B (Interaction between Cohort, Cohabitation, and Education)						
Premarital cohabitation × Birth cohort × Education						
Cohabitation × 1920-1959 × College/above	0.30 (0.32)	0.76 (1.16)	0.95 (0.96)	1.38 (1.86)	0.89 (1.27)	0.23 (0.40)
Cohabitation × 1960-1979 × College/above	1.41 (0.65)	0.41 (0.21)	1.93 (0.90)	0.65 (0.30)	0.91 (0.45)	0.29 (0.19)
Cohabitation × 1980-2000 × College/above	0.62 (0.35)	0.40 (0.26)	0.33 (0.19)	0.12** (0.08)	0.80 (0.63)	0.04** (0.04)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Weighted odds ratios are reported with standard errors shown in parentheses. For additional details, see Table S11 in the online supplementary material. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

For effective presentation, in Figure 2, we visualize the cohort variations in the link between cohabitation and IPV. As shown, the association between cohabitation and the four severe types of IPV victimization gradually weakens among more recent birth cohorts. Specifically, among women born before 1959, those who cohabited prior to marriage had a

29% higher likelihood of reporting severe injury ($p < 0.001$), compared to their non-cohabiting counterparts. This risk declined to 12% among those born between 1960 and 1979 ($p < 0.001$). For women born between 1980 and 2000, the association between premarital cohabitation and any form of IPV victimization was no longer statistically significant.

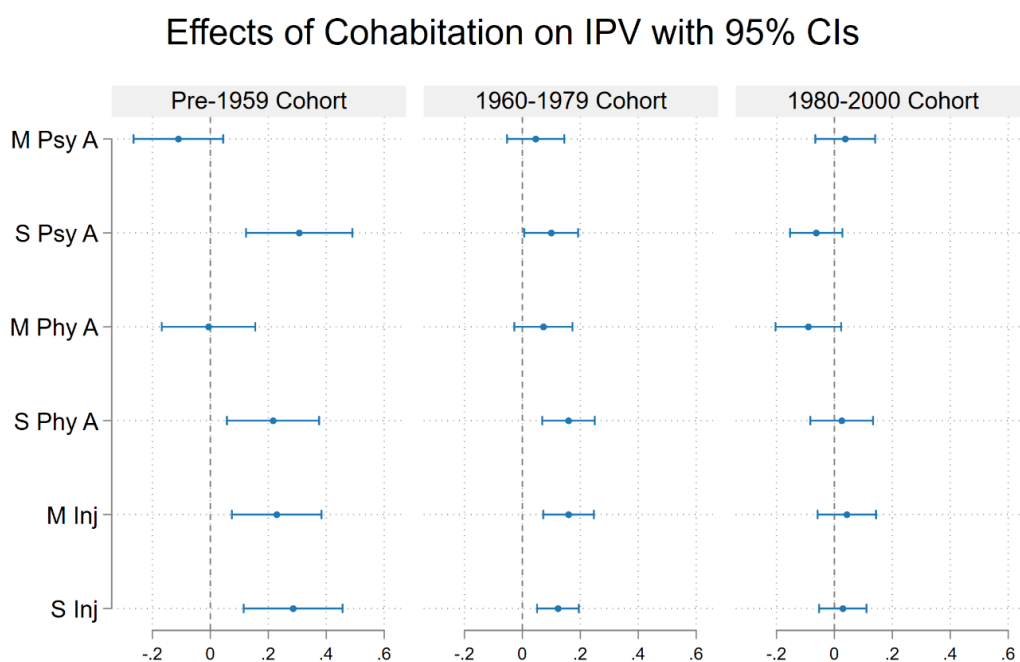


Figure 2. Effects of Premarital Cohabitation on Women’s Self-Reported IPV Victimization by Birth Cohort
 Notes. For more details, please refer to Panel A of Table S7 in the online supplementary material.

Panel B of Table 5 (see Supplementary Table A3 for full model results) examines the interaction between premarital cohabitation, education, and birth cohorts. Notably, for the 1980-2000 cohort, education significantly attenuates the risk of IPV associated with cohabitation. Specifically, the interaction term is negative and statistically significant for both severe physical assault (OR = 0.12, $p < .01$) and severe injury (OR = 0.04, $p < .01$), although these interaction effects were not consistently significant across cohorts.

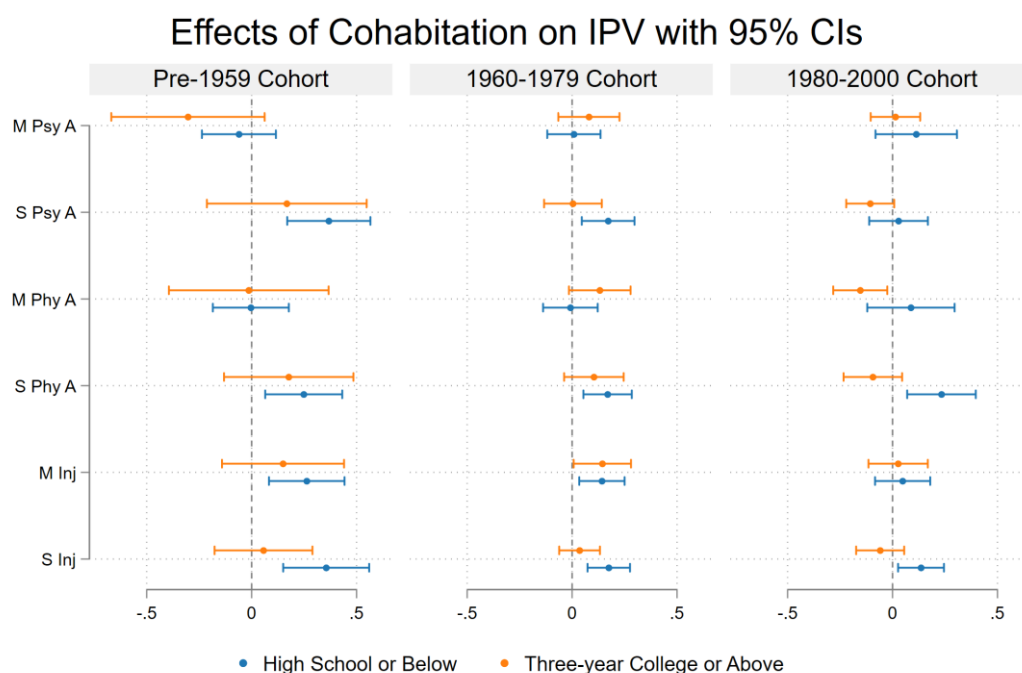


Figure 3. Effects of Premarital Cohabitation on Women’s Self-Reported IPV Victimization by Education and Cohort
 Notes. For more details, please refer to Panel B of Table S7 in the online supplementary material.

Figure 3 illustrates the predicted probabilities of IPV victimization across educational levels and birth cohorts. As shown, among women with a high school education or less, premarital cohabitation remained significantly associated with increased risk of severe physical assault and injury in the 1980-2000 cohort. Specifically, cohabiting women in this group were 23% more likely to experience severe physical assault ($p = .005$) and 14% more likely to report severe injury ($p = .015$), relative to their non-cohabiting counterparts. In contrast, no significant association was found among women with three or more years of college education, highlighting a protective effect of higher education against the IPV risks typically linked to cohabitation. We replicated this analysis using women’s self-reported IPV perpetration as the outcome variable, and the findings were nearly identical (see Table S8 for results and Figures S1 and S2 for visualization in the online supplementary material).

Robustness Analyses

To assess the consistency and validity of our findings under alternative specifications and assumptions, we conducted a series of robustness checks. These included re-estimating the models using women's reported IPV perpetration as an alternative dependent variable, in addition to a broader set of tests addressing potential sources of bias and model sensitivity.

First, to assess whether the observed associations between premarital cohabitation and IPV are consistent across women as victims and perpetrators, we re-estimated the full set of models using women's self-reported perpetration of IPV instead of victimization. The observed patterns were notably consistent with those based on victimization outcomes. While we acknowledge potential biases in self-reported perpetration due to underreporting and social desirability bias, the findings suggest that the mechanisms linking cohabitation to IPV are robust, irrespective of whether IPV is reported as experienced or perpetrated by women (see Table S12 in the online supplementary material for detailed results).

Second, to account for possible selection bias into cohabitation, we employed the Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW) method. This propensity score-based approach adjusts for pretreatment confounding by generating a pseudo-population in which covariates are balanced across treatment groups and excluding observations that fall outside the region of common support (Austin, 2011). Logistic regression models were then used to re-estimate the relationship between premarital cohabitation and post-marital IPV. The results remained consistent with those from the main analyses (see Table S9 in the online supplementary material).

Third, given the importance of the selection perspective in explaining the cohabitation

effect, we tested the robustness of the main results with different measures to capture the selection mechanism. In the main analysis, in order to avoid over-specification, collinearity, and functional form misspecification, we can only include a limited set of variables to measure pre-cohabitation experience. As a robustness check, we constructed a propensity score to capture the selection perspective, using a broad set of predictors including individual and partner demographic characteristics, family background, adverse childhood experiences, and relationship histories. Drawing on James and Beattie (2012), alongside the binary indicator of cohabitation, this score was included in the regression to represent the selection perspective. Additionally, we included the residuals from the propensity score model as an indicator of the experience perspective, alongside the propensity score of cohabitation, to directly test the two mechanisms. All results were consistent and confirmed the importance of the selection perspective in explaining the relationship between cohabitation and four types of severe IPV (see Tables S10-S11 in the online supplementary material for detailed results).

Fourth, due to the potential bidirectionality of violence between spouses, women's self-reported IPV victimization and perpetration may be correlated, which may bias the results. To address this issue, we conducted seemingly unrelated bivariate probit regressions, which allow for the simultaneous estimation of two binary outcomes while adjusting for correlated error terms (Greene, 2018). The results from these models aligned with those of the main analyses (see Table S12 in the online supplementary material for detailed results).

Fifth, in examining cohort differences, we tested alternative specifications for cohort classification. Across these specifications, we consistently found that the association between premarital cohabitation and post-marital IPV was weaker among younger cohorts (see Table

S13 in the online supplementary material for detailed results).

Lastly, to address limitations in the CTS2's measurement of IPV, we explored an alternative dependent variable, namely, marital relationship quality, measured by the respondent's agreement with the statement, "Does your spouse's love and affection in the marriage make you happy?" Results using this alternative measure were consistent with those from the IPV models (results available upon request).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on detailed retrospective data on life course trajectories and relationship dynamics collected in 2020, this study examines the association between premarital cohabitation and IPV, a critical yet underexplored post-marital outcome within the literature on the cohabitation effect. Our findings show that intramarital IPV, one of the most severe and destructive experiences in a romantic relationship, is significantly associated with premarital cohabitation, especially for the four most severe types of violence, which are predominantly perpetrated by men. In contrast, the association is weak or negligible for less severe types of psychological and physical aggression, which account for more than 60% of IPV incidents. Between the selection and experience perspectives, while both contribute to these associations, selection factors, characterized by childhood adversity and complex premarital relationship histories, offer a more powerful explanation.

The findings shed light on how adverse family experiences can accumulate across the life course to create enduring vulnerabilities. Although premarital cohabitation is becoming increasingly normalized in China, women who cohabit before marriage continue to constitute

a distinct and selectively disadvantaged group. They are disproportionately likely to have grown up in families marked by parental divorce or childhood exposure to violence, and to have navigated emotionally complex romantic relationships prior to marriage. These formative experiences foster their skepticism about marital commitment and heighten anxieties over emotional and financial dependence on a spouse. Such accumulated disadvantages not only shape their decision to cohabit but also increase their susceptibility to experiencing IPV within marriage. Through multiple analytic approaches, this study consistently finds that selection into cohabitation, rooted in early life adversities, serves as a key explanatory mechanism linking cohabitation to heightened IPV risk.

Women who cohabit also tend to exhibit lower commitment to romantic relationships and more frequently subjected to parental interference in marital decision-making. This dynamic can serve as a potential source of marital conflict, particularly given the persistent importance of intergenerational influence in China (Ji et al., 2024; Yan, 2018). Furthermore, moral stigmas, legal ambiguities, and relational inertia continue to shape the cohabitation experience in China. Consequently, many women may feel compelled to marry despite relational incompatibility or even the presence of abuse, increasing their vulnerability to IPV after marriage.

Notably, the meanings and consequences of cohabitation have evolved alongside countervailing demographic and cultural shifts. On the one hand, cohabitation has become more widely accepted as a pragmatic mechanism for testing compatibility and deepening relational bonds. This is reflected in lower incidences of minor psychological and physical aggression among cohabiters and a general weakening of the cohabitation-IPV association

across younger cohorts. On the other hand, enduring cultural stigmas and gendered moral codes continue to disproportionately disadvantage women with lower levels of education. For these women, premarital cohabitation remains strongly associated with the most severe types of IPV, suggesting an uneven distribution of the risks and meanings attached to cohabitation.

This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the cohabitation effect on marital quality by focusing on IPV, a particularly detrimental marital outcome, and by contextualizing this association within the broader sociocultural transformations underway in China. To begin with, our findings highlight how early relationship experiences and life course disadvantages can entail lasting consequences for marital outcomes. To our knowledge, while earlier studies have linked various relationship characteristics to IPV during cohabitation (Giordano et al., 2022), this is the first study extends this analysis to their long-term implications. Second, by foregrounding IPV, we disentangled and delineated the relative explanatory power of the two mechanisms, namely, selection and experience perspectives, through which cohabitation may shape marital dynamics. Lastly, we provide evidence that the positive association between cohabitation and IPV attenuates across birth cohorts, varies by educational background, and remains mediated by intersecting forces of tradition and modernity, and in turn, reflects the evolving social meaning and lived experiences of cohabitation in China.

This study is not without limitations. First, our reliance on self-reported measures of IPV introduces potential biases, including underreporting and discrepancies between subjective experiences and IPV severity captured based on the CTS2 classifications. Although this approach avoids inconsistencies arising from dual-partner reporting, it may compromise the

precision of IPV measurement. Second, the CTS2 scale, while widely adopted, has known limitations, particularly in addressing debates around gender symmetry in IPV. Third, our focus on Beijing, an urban context marked by comparatively liberal gender norms and higher awareness of feminist issues, may limit the generalizability of the descriptive statistics to other regions in China. These limitations highlight fruitful directions for future research as more comprehensive and nationally representative data become available.

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