

Divorce trends in China – Contrasting adults’, sons’ and daughters’ perspectives

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Abstract

We analyse divorce in China from adults’, sons’ and daughters’ perspectives. Recent findings from Europe (Kalmijn and Leopold, 2021) have highlighted adults’ and children’s different experiences of the separation surge: separations experienced by adults have increased much more than parental separations experienced by children. To analyze whether similar patterns can be found in China, which has experienced a huge increase in divorce rates since the 1980s, we used data from China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). In addition to adults and children’s perspectives, we contrast sons’ and daughters’ perspectives, given Chinese families’ son preferences that show in sex-selective abortion, parity progression depending on the sex of the previous child, and a suppression of divorce rates among families with sons. Using event history regressions, we find that similarly to many European countries, adults’ divorce rates are higher and have increased more than children’s rates of experiencing parental divorce. These differences are particularly visible in less educated families. We also find that conditional on family size, sons experience less parental divorce than daughters. However, this sex difference is countered by daughters’ larger sibship sizes, which dampen divorce rates, so that the average son and daughter are equally likely to experience parental divorce.

Introduction

In the world’s second most populous country, China, the crude divorce rate has soared from the extremely low 0.2‰ in 1978 to 3.4‰ in 2019 (China Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook 2020), which is comparable to the United States (2.7‰ in 2019, National Center for Health Statistics) and many other Western countries. Such an increase would lead to expect to similarly surging experience of parental divorce among Chinese children. Yet recent analyses (Kalmijn and Leopold, 2021) from Europe have demonstrated how trends in union dissolution among adults do not always translate into corresponding rates of change among children’s experiences. Having children suppresses the risk of separation and divorce, and a large share of family dissolution occur in childless couples. Consequently, the increases in the experience of (parental) separation have been much larger among adults than among children.

Following Kalmijn’s and Leopold’s (2021) lead, we estimate trends in the experience of (parental) divorce among Chinese adults and children from the marriage cohort of 1980 to 2015. Besides being the world’s second most populous country with a surging divorce rate, China presents other reasons for analysing adults’ and children’s perspectives on divorce.

First, despite a recent emergence of pre-marital cohabitation (Yu and Xie 2015), marriage remains the primary relationship context for coresidential partnerships and childbearing, with a close temporal spacing between marriage and having a first child. Having children suppresses the divorce rate in China as well as elsewhere, but the close spacing between marriage and childbearing reduces the childless marital years when a couple has an elevated divorce risk. Furthermore, China’s former one-child policy resulted in many Chinese families with only one child, which not only suppresses the divorce rate less than having more children but also means that a larger share of children face relatively higher parental separation rates. Together these factors would lead to expect a smaller difference in the (parental) divorce experiences of adults and children than reported by Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) in Europe, with its widespread cohabitation and (formerly) larger families.

Second, compared to Europe, Chinese families show a preference for having boys over girls, which has been reflected in the high rates of sex-selective abortions, selective

fertility progression depending on the sex of the previous child, as well as a strong suppressing effect on divorce of having sons (rather than only daughters) (Ma, Rizzi, & Turunen, 2019). Therefore, we expect not only a difference in experienced (parental) divorce rates between adults and children, but also between sons and daughters.

Finally, similarly to Kalmijn and Leopold (2021), we assess educational differences in divorce among adults, sons and daughters.

Data

We used data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The CFPS is a nationally representative, longitudinal social survey launched by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Peking University. Its detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics, marriage and family allows us to study the association between children's sex and marital stability and its educational differentials. We use all five waves, 2010, 12, 14, 16, 18 respectively. We record respondents' first marriage history in the baseline 2010 wave and trace follow-ups and new respondents through the 2018 wave. Despite the possibility of revisit in later waves, drop-outs are ceased the trace for the loss of marriage history information in between. We restrict our sample to those got married after year 1980. We further exclude respondents whose divorce year preceding the first marriage year, who entered first marriage before age 15 or after age 50, and those began and ended first marriage in the same calendar year.

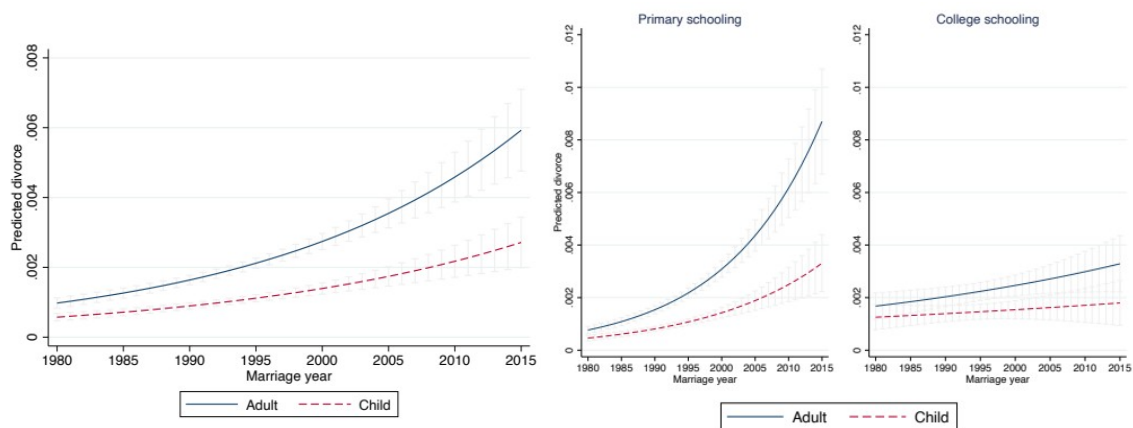
We conducted discrete-time event history analysis to compare divorce trends from adult and child perspectives. Following Kalmijn and Leopold (2021), we created a pooled file of adult-years and child-years based on the above 23,615 ever-married adults. The construct of adult-years was similar to other studies on dissolution, with the observation starting at the year of first marriage, and stopping at year of divorce, widowhood, 25 years after first marriage, or the last interview, whichever came first. To examine children's likelihood of experiencing parental divorce, we first created a file with all children (N=38,282) born to our sample of ever-married adults and then transformed the file into child-years. The observation of child-year started with the child's year of birth, and ended with the year of parental divorce, parental death, 25 years of parental marriage, or the survey year, whichever came first. In the end, we obtained a pooled file of 991480 person-years, including 419,767 adult-years, and 571,713 child-years.

The dependent variable "(parental) divorce" is coded 1 at the year of marital dissolution and 0 otherwise. Within our observation, 844 adults (3.57%) ended their marriages in divorce, and 566 children (1.48%) experienced parental divorce, preliminarily showing an adult-child difference in divorce risks. The independent variables in the event history regressions included sex of the child, education, linear and squared terms of marital duration, gender, ethnicity (Han Chinese, or other ethnic groups), and if cohabitated before marriage. Given China's urban/rural contrast and regional differences, we also control for hukou status (household registration at age 12, urban/rural) and region (West/Middle/East by National Statistics Bureau standard, with East being most prosperous).

Results

The three panels in Figure 1 shows predicted annual rates of experiencing (parental) divorce (based on average marginal effects) among adults and children over marriage cohorts from 1980 to 2015. The panel on the left shows the overall trend whereas the two panels to the right distinguish them between respondents with primary versus college education, respectively. The predicted rates are based on event history regressions.

Figure 1. Trends in divorce rates among adults and children (left panel), broken down by (parental) education (two panels to the right). Marriage cohorts 1980-2015, predicted divorce rates.



The figure shows that similar to many European countries, adults are more likely to experience divorce than children are to experience parental divorce, and the gap has grown over time as the divorce rate as experienced by adults has increased faster than that of children. These gaps are furthermore clearer in less educated families, while the divorce rates and their generational gaps have remained more stable in highly-educated families.

Table 1. Son and daughter experience of parental divorce

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Perspective (ref. Daughter perspective)				
Son perspective	-0.044	0.085	-0.210*	0.087
Number of children (ref. 1 child)				
2 children			-1.621***	0.142
3+ children			-3.165***	0.458
Marriage year	0.045***	0.007	0.044***	0.007
Education in years	0.028*	0.012	-0.009	0.012
Marriage duration	0.181***	0.032	0.284***	0.032
Marriage duration (sq.)	-0.007***	0.001	-0.010***	0.001
Male	0.285**	0.097	0.330***	0.096
Cohabited before marriage	0.619***	0.133	0.571***	0.129
Ethnicity (ref. other ethnic groups)				
Han Chinese	-0.392*	0.171	-0.490**	0.165
Hukou origin (ref. rural)				
Urban	1.142***	0.107	0.559***	0.109
Region (ref. West)				
Middle	0.220	0.134	0.082	0.130
East	0.104	0.128	-0.149	0.125
Observations (child-years)	571,713		571,713	

Note: P-values corrected for clustering within persons; *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

Table 1 shows results from an event history regression of the risk of parental divorce, by the child's sex. The first model suggests that boys and girls have a similar risk of parental divorce. However, Model 2 suggests that boys are more sheltered from parental divorce than girls, once we adjust for the family's number of children. This maybe counterintuitive finding reflects the selective parity progression rates depending on the sex of the previous child as well as the negative effect of the number of children as well as of having a son (Ma, Rizzi, & Turunen, 2019) on divorce.

Table 2. Sibship size by children’s gender (left) and event history analysis of the effect of the couples’ number of children on divorce

	Daughter		Son		Effect of N children on divorce*	
	N	%	N	%		
Number of siblings					Number of children	
No sibling	4,046	22.69	6,135	30.00	None	
1 sibling	8,653	48.52	10,245	50.11	1 sibling	-1.370***
2 siblings	3,651	20.47	3,105	15.19	2 siblings	-2.618***
3+ siblings	1,485	8.33	962	4.71	3+ siblings	-3.775***
Total	17,835	100.00	20,447	100.00		

* Controlled for marital duration, education, Hukou status, year of marriage, cohabitation before marriage, region and ethnicity.

This is further explored in Table 2 which, on the left hand side, shows the number of siblings among daughters and sons and on the right hand side, the effect of the couples’ number of children on divorce. Boys are more likely than girls to grow up without siblings or have one siblings; girls, on the other hand, are more likely to grow up in larger families. Larger families, on the other hand, have lower divorce rates, as shown in the right-hand side panel.

Conclusions

Similar to many European countries, the surge in Chinese divorce rates has not been experienced similarly by adults and children: adults’ likelihood of experiencing divorce has increased much more rapidly than children’s experience. This can be considered somewhat surprising given the tighter temporal coupling between marriage and childbearing in China and China’s small families. As a novel finding, we also report that, conditional on family size, boys’ and girls’ experiences of parental divorce differ. When raised in a family of similar size, boys are less likely than girls to experience parental divorce. However, because boys grow up in smaller families, and having more children suppresses the divorce rate, the average boy and girl face similar parental divorce rates.

References

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