

The Determinants of Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages in Gansu, China

I. Brief introduction to the motivations of this study

Family harmony and marriage maintenance have both been highly valued in Chinese society. Especially for traditional Chinese families, to maintain the intactness and seeming harmony of the family, couples in an unharmonious relationship have often been encouraged to stay in the unhappy marriages rather than choosing a divorce, which is even considered humiliating under extremely conservative social contexts. This is especially true for western China which is less developed and for some minority ethnic groups which are restricted by their religions. Gansu, as both a western and a multi-ethnicity province,¹ is a crucial context to investigate the determinants of the attitudes toward unhappy marriages. Moreover, to examine the demographic, socioeconomic and ideational determinants of the attitudes toward unhappy marriages is a critical step to further understand how people's values of the familial attributes and marital patterns are associated with their respective socioeconomic status and the process of modernization in China.

II. Data and variables used in the analysis

(1) Data: Collected in 2007, the Developmental Idealism in China Survey is a cross-sectional survey of individuals who reside in the rural or industrial areas of seven counties in Gansu with three villages or communities in each county. Using the multistage and clustered area probability sampling, the survey interviewed 633 respondents during

¹ Gansu has 54 minority ethnic groups out of the total 56 ethnic groups in China. The total population of the minority ethnic groups is about 2,199,000, dominating 8.7% of the total population of Gansu. In terms of the fact that minority ethnic groups dominate about 9% of the total population in China, Gansu is very representative.

November and December of 2007. This survey mainly includes questions about respondent's basic demographic information and idealism on development, family and marriage.

(2) Dependent variable: The dependent variable in this study is based on the answers to the question "Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – choosing divorce or staying in an unhappy marriage?" The answers are treated as a dichotomous variable consisting of "divorce (=1)" and "unhappy marriage (=0)".²

(3) Independent variables

Three types of independent variables are used for this study – demographic characteristics, socioeconomic characteristics and modernity factors. Firstly, a group of demographic characteristics variables are used including respondents' **sex** ("1" male and "0" female) and **age**. Including sex in the analysis is because there has been severe gender inequality in traditional China and women's marriage selections have been restricted more strictly. It might be crucial to investigate the gender disparities of the attitudes toward unhappy marriages. To include age in the analysis is because when people get older, their related social networks are becoming more complicated and widespread and it is more likely that their marriage selections may be restricted by a "dual pressure" – not only pressures from the parents, but also pressures from the children. Therefore, it may also be important to examine the age evolution of the attitudes toward unhappy marriages.

Secondly, a group of socioeconomic characteristics variables are included. Respondents' **education** (below elementary: reference group; "1" elementary and "0" otherwise; "1" junior

² Since after the question, there is an interview instruction that "if respondents answers 'don't know' ask 'but if you had to choose, which is better?'" , the answers are strictly dichotomous.

high and “0” otherwise; “1” senior high and “0” otherwise; “1” vocational/technical and “0” otherwise; “1” associate and “0” otherwise; “1” bachelor/above and “0” otherwise) is included because with higher education, people may become more modernized and tolerant of diversified personal selections including marriage selections. Respondents’ **marital status** (“1” ever married and “0” never married) is included since these two groups may respectively hold insider and outsider perspectives which may result in their different attitudes toward unhappy marriage. Respondents’ **religion** (“1” with religion and “0” without religion) is included because the marriage attitudes of religious people may be restricted by their beliefs. **Income** (less than 1000 Yuan: reference group; “1” 1001-4000 Yuan and “0” otherwise; “1” 4001-15000 Yuan and “0” otherwise; “1” more than 15001 Yuan and “0” otherwise) and **self-assigned social class**³ (0-2: reference group; “1” 3-7 and “0” otherwise; “1” 8-10 and “0” otherwise) are included since people with higher income and social class may tend to have more pressure from within family which is highly likely to be locally prestigious as well as local society when making marriage decisions. The ease of interpretation as a variable with fewer categories in a logit analysis is also considered.

Thirdly, a set of ideational variables indicating modernity factors are included based on the assumption that modernity is consistent with more tolerant and diversified attitudes, as well as more respect for personal freedom and equality. These variables are included to test whether the more modern and tolerant the respondent is, the more likely a divorce would be preferred in an unhappy marriage. This measure of modernity includes six variables: **living with parents** (“1” living separately and “0” living with parents), **unmarried mother** (“1”

³ This variable is based on the answers to the question “If we divide our society into eleven social classes, 0-10, where would you put yourself on this social class scale?”

acceptable and “0” unacceptable), **cohabitation** (“1” premarital cohabitation and “0” no premarital cohabitation), **elderly parents living alone** (“1” living alone and “0” living with adult children), **arranged marriage** (“1” choose own spouse and “0” parents choose spouse) and **female premarital sex** (“1” premarital sex and “0” waiting until marriage).⁴

III. Results

(1) Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the summary statistics of key variables of interest in the study and Table 2 demonstrates the distributions of attitudes toward unhappy marriages across different demographic and socioeconomic variables. As can be seen in Table 2, generally males, those ever married and those having no religions are more likely to prefer choosing a divorce. Moreover, although below the education of senior high diploma and vocational/tech diploma people are more likely to prefer staying in unhappy marriages, above that level people are generally more likely to prefer choosing a divorce. Especially, there is a consistent trend for income and social class that the higher income people have and the higher social class people assign to themselves, the less likely they prefer choosing a divorce in unhappy marriages. Therefore, several of my above interpretations are primarily supported by these descriptive

⁴ This set of modernity factors variables are based on the answers to the following six questions: 1. “Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – married children living with their parents, or married children living separately?” 2. “Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – a society in which it is not acceptable for an unmarried 25-year-old woman to have a baby, or a society in which it is acceptable?” 3. “Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – living together before getting married or getting married without living together first?” 4. “Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – elderly parents living alone or living with their adult children?” 5. “Overall, which do you think is better for most people around the world today – young people choosing their own spouses, or parents choosing their spouses for them?” 6. “Overall, which do you think is better for a woman – waiting until marriage to have sex or having sex before marriage?”

statistics. However, rigorous regression analysis is quite necessary to provide more reliable examinations.

(2) Binary logistic regression analysis

In order to further investigate the determinants of attitudes toward unhappy marriages, I conduct three binary logit analyses. Model 1 only includes respondents' demographic characteristics, Model 2 further includes respondents' socioeconomic characteristics and Model 3 includes respondents' modernity factors besides variables included in Model 2. As can be seen in the log-likelihood ratio tests shown in Table 3, Model 2 is a significant improvement to Model 1 and Model 3 is a significant improvement to Model 2. Therefore, aside from demographic characteristics, both respondents' socioeconomic characteristics and modernity factors are crucial determinants of their attitudes toward unhappy marriages.

As can be seen in both Table 3 and Table 4, different from what is shown by descriptive statistics, the odds of preferring for a divorce are only about 0.696 as large for males as they are for females. If respondent's age increases by one year, the odds of preferring for a divorce decrease by 2%. In terms of education, below senior high diploma and vocational/tech diploma, the odds of preferring for a divorce has been increasing from 2.193, 2.589, 3.216 to 3.354 compared to that of a education lower than elementary school; however, above senior high diploma and vocational/tech diploma, the odds starts to decline from 3.354, 2.152 to 1.035, but these later effects are found insignificant in this study. In addition, the odds of preferring for a divorce are only about 0.265 as large for those ever married as they are for those never married. Both the religion and income effects are found to be insignificant in the regression results. Interestingly, self-assigned social class plays a significant role in

deciding the respondents' preference in an unhappy marriage, but its estimated effect is converse to the results of descriptive statistics. The odds of preferring for a divorce are about 1.724 times as large for those middle-class respondents (self-assigned social class between 3 and 7) and 2.933 times as large for those high-class respondents (self-assigned social class between 8-10) as they are for those low-class respondents (self-assigned social class between 0 and 2). Moreover, among the six modernity factors, only the effect of the variable indicating whether married children live separately or with their parents is statistically significant. The odds of preferring for a divorce are about 1.908 times as large for those preferring living separately as they are for those preferring living with parents.

IV. Conclusions

In this study, I investigated how one's demographic, socioeconomic and modernity factors influence his/her likelihood of preferring a divorce to staying in an unhappy marriage. The results of this preliminary study indicate that: 1) women are more likely to prefer a divorce in an unhappy marriage; 2) the older one is, the less likely he/she would prefer a divorce; 3) for educational levels below college education, the higher education one has, the more likely he/she would prefer a divorce under an increasing likelihood; 4) those ever married are very less likely to prefer a divorce; 5) the higher one's social class is, the more likely he/she would prefer a divorce under an increasing likelihood; 6) the more modern one's values are, the more likely he/she would prefer a divorce in an unhappy marriage. Therefore, all of the demographic, socioeconomic and modernity factors affect one's attitudes toward an unhappy marriage.

Appendix

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used, Gansu China 2007

Variables	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages	632	0.574	0.495	0	1
Sex	633	0.447	0.498	0	1
Age	633	43.100	13.769	17	84
Elementary Diploma	633	0.239	0.427	0	1
Junior High Diploma	633	0.310	0.463	0	1
Senior High Diploma	633	0.098	0.297	0	1
Vocational or Tech Diploma	633	0.036	0.187	0	1
Associate Degree	633	0.027	0.162	0	1
Bachelor Degree or Above	633	0.013	0.112	0	1
Marital Status	633	0.937	0.243	0	1
Religion	633	0.744	0.437	0	1
Income:1001-4000 Yuan	633	0.422	0.494	0	1
Income:4001-15000 Yuan	633	0.226	0.419	0	1
Income: More than 15001 Yuan	633	0.017	0.131	0	1
Social class: 3-7	633	0.667	0.472	0	1
Social class: 8-10	633	0.033	0.179	0	1
Married Children Living Separately	633	0.458	0.499	0	1
Unmarried 25-Year-Old Mother	631	0.648	0.478	0	1
Living Together before Marriage	633	0.041	0.199	0	1
Elderly Parents Living Alone	625	0.198	0.399	0	1
Choose Own Spouse	629	0.951	0.217	0	1
Sex before Marriage	633	0.028	0.166	0	1

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey. The variable “attitudes toward unhappy marriages” has two values “0, 1” to indicate “stay in unhappy marriage” and “divorce”. The variable “sex” has two values “0, 1” to indicate “female” and “male”. The six dummy variables “elementary diploma”, “junior high diploma”, “senior high diploma”, “vocational or tech diploma”, “associate degree” and “bachelor degree or above” are a set variables indicating educational levels with “below elementary diploma” as the reference level. The variable “marital status” has two values “0, 1” to indicate “never married” and “ever married”. “Religion” has two values “0, 1” to indicate “have no religion” and “have some religion”. The three dummy variables “income: 1001-4000 Yuan”, “income: 4001-15000 Yuan” and “income: more than 15001 Yuan” are a set of variables indicating income levels with “less than 1000 Yuan” as the reference level. The two dummy variables “social class: 3-7”, and “social class: 8-10” are a set of variables indicating self-assigned social class with “social class: 0-2” as the reference level. The last six variables are a set of ideational variables indicating the modernity level.

Table 2

Distribution of Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages according to Their Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics, Gansu China 2007

Independent Variable	Divorce	Unhappy Marriage	Total
Female	141 (40.40)	208 (59.60)	349 (100%)
Male	128 (45.23)	155 (54.77)	283 (100%)
Below Elementary	115 (66.47)	58 (33.53)	173(100%)
Elementary Diploma	61 (40.40)	90 (59.60)	151 (100%)
Junior High Diploma	66 (33.67)	130 (66.33)	196 (100%)
Senior High Diploma	15 (24.19)	47 (75.81)	62 (100%)
Vocational or Tech Diploma	4 (17.39)	19 (82.61)	23 (100%)
Associate Degree	4 (23.53)	13 (76.47)	17 (100%)
Bachelor Degree or Above	4 (50.00)	4 (50.00)	8 (100%)
Ever Married	263 (44.43)	329 (55.57)	592 (100%)
Never Married	6 (15.00)	34 (85.00)	40 (100%)
No Religion	81 (50.00)	81 (50.00)	162 (100%)
Have Religion	188 (40.00)	282 (60.00)	470 (100%)
Income: Less than 1000 Yuan	105 (50.24)	104 (49.76)	209 (100%)
Income:1001-4000 Yuan	111 (41.57)	156 (58.43)	267 (100%)
Income:4001-15000 Yuan	48 (33.57)	95 (66.43)	143 (100%)
Income: More than 15001 Yuan	3 (27.27)	8 (72.73)	11 (100%)
Social class: 0-2	102 (53.68)	88 (46.32)	190 (100%)
Social class: 3-7	160 (38.00)	261 (62.00)	421 (100%)
Social class: 8-10	7 (33.33)	14 (66.67)	21 (100%)

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey.

Table 3

Binary Logit Regressions, Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages, Demographic Characteristics, Socioeconomic Characteristics and Modernity Factors, Gansu China 2007

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
COEFFICIENT	Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages		
Sex	-0.021[0.17]	-0.364*[0.20]	-0.362*[0.20]
Age	-0.042***[0.007]	0.022***[0.008]	-0.019**[0.008]
Elementary Diploma		0.858***[0.260]	0.785***[0.260]
Junior High Diploma		1.060***[0.250]	0.951***[0.260]
Senior High Diploma		1.360***[0.380]	1.168***[0.380]
Vocational/Tech Diploma		1.587***[0.610]	1.210*[0.630]
Associate Degree		1.166*[0.660]	0.766[0.670]
Bachelor Degree/Above		0.22[0.900]	0.035[0.940]
Marital Status		-1.226**[0.570]	-1.326**[0.580]
Religion		0.213[0.210]	0.111[0.210]
Income:1001-4000 Yuan		0.124[0.220]	0.109[0.220]
Income:4001-15000 Yuan		0.195[0.270]	0.082[0.270]
Income: >=15001 Yuan		0.459[0.800]	0.213[0.830]
Social class: 3-7		0.432**[0.200]	0.545***[0.210]
Social class: 8-10		0.923*[0.530]	1.076**[0.540]
Married Children Living Separately			0.646***[0.210]
Unmarried 25-Year-Old Mother			-0.319[0.200]
Living Together before Marriage			-0.007[0.610]
Elderly Parents Living Alone			-0.194[0.260]
Choose Own Spouse			0.459[0.420]
Sex before Marriage			1.044[0.800]
Constant	2.148***[0.30]	1.258*[0.65]	0.878[0.740]
Observations	618	618	618
L ²	795.998	745.006	727.953
DF	615	602	596
LR test	-----	50.99	17.05
Pro>Chi2	-----	0.0000	0.0091
Standard errors in brackets			
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.1			

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey.

Table 4

Binary Logit Regressions, Model 3, Odds Ratios, Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages, Demographic Characteristics, Socioeconomic Characteristics and Modernity Factors, Gansu China 2007

Attitudes toward Unhappy Marriages: Model 3	Odds Ratio	Standard Error
Sex	0.696*	0.140
Age	0.981**	0.008
Elementary Diploma	2.193***	0.570
Junior High Diploma	2.589***	0.673
Senior High Diploma	3.216***	1.232
Vocational or Tech Diploma	3.354*	2.126
Associate Degree	2.152	1.443
Bachelor Degree or Above	1.035	0.976
Marital Status	0.265**	0.154
Religion	1.117	0.238
Income:1001-4000 Yuan	1.116	0.244
Income:4001-15000 Yuan	1.085	0.296
Income: More than 15001 Yuan	1.237	1.024
Social class: 3-7	1.724***	0.356
Social class: 8-10	2.933**	1.595
Married Children Living Separately	1.908***	0.394
Unmarried 25-Year-Old Mother	0.727	0.145
Living Together before Marriage	0.993	0.605
Elderly Parents Living Alone	0.824	0.210
Choose Own Spouse	1.583	0.668
Sex before Marriage	2.842	2.268

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, *p<0.1.