

**Cultural Expectations, Market Mismatch and Individual Choices:
-- the Making of “Shengnu” in China**

Yong Cai caiyong@unc.edu

Felicia Tian ft16@duke.edu

Short Abstract

“Shengnu” is a new social and culture phenomenon in China. Literally meaning “leftover woman”, it is a snazzy and demeaning word to describe unmarried women at age 28 or 30. How did a country that was characteristic for universal female marriage and known to have a huge army of surplus-man produces a group of un-marriageable women? This paper argues that the conflict of two competing cultural expectations of hypergamy: female age hypergamy and female status hypergamy creates a marriage market mismatch that puts females with highly educated women at a disadvantage place. Using the 2005 mini census data, we examine the emergence of “Shengnu” phenomenon in China over the last two decades. We decompose the observed decline in marriage rates to study the contribution of marriage market mismatch, and compare with what has observed in the United States and Japan. We further examine individual’s coping strategy facing the market squeeze.

Extended Abstract

1. The Rise of “Shengnu” Phenomenon

According to the 2010 census, close to 9% of all women of 30 years old remained single; among those with a college degree, the rate is 15%. Those two rates were only 2% and 6% only 10 years ago in the 2000 census. Such a dramatic rise of proportion of unmarried is what popular culture in China refers as the “Shengnu” Phenomenon.

Literally meaning “leftover woman”, “Shengnu” is a snazzy and demeaning word to describe unmarried women at a culturally defined high age, often 28 or 30. How did a country that was characteristic for universal female marriage and known to have a huge army of surplus-man produces a group of un-marriageable women?

For females in China, for long, marriage was both as the destiny and an opportunity for social mobility. Virtually every female would get married at a young age, marrying someone about few years older, hopefully someone with better socioeconomic status. Moreover, marriage in traditional Chinese society was often arranged by the elders, and for the purpose of continuing the family lineage line and for building economic, social and political alliances. Early, universal, and arranged marriages are among the defining features of Chinese family and Chinese demographic system (Hajnal 1953, 1982; Lee and Wang 1999). Female age hypergamy and female status hypergamy have been the most prominent characteristics of Chinese marriage.

Over the last century, the traditional Chinese marriage has experience major changes, both as a result of social revolution in aiming for women’s emancipation and gender equality, and as a by-product of other major socioeconomic transformations, such as urbanization and industrialization, as well as social policy targeting population control. China’s marriage and family traditions were among the main targets of Chinese social revolutions in the last century. Women’s emancipation, freedom of marriage, and liberation from patriarchal control were among the important tenets of China’s modernization. The founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 overthrew the old marriage regime by taking away the power of marriage arrangement from the Chinese family, and at the same time injected its own authority in people’s daily life. The government’s role was not only seen in the new Law of Marriage that mandates legal minimum age, and provides legal protection for marriage freedom, but also in its directly initiation and participation of social campaigns, especially when time of marriage becomes a main population control mechanism.

One of the most prominent features in the change of China’s marriage system is the rise of age at marriage. Over the last half century, there were three waves of rise in female mean age at first marriage. It first rose from 18 to 20 in the 1950s and 1960s as the communist government pushed for women’s new role in Chinese society. Then there was a swift rise from 20 to 23 in the 1970s when “late marriage” was a key part of China’s population control campaign called “later (marriage), longer (birth interval) and few (births)”. The economic and social liberalization starting from late 1970s and 1980s first saw a dramatic decline at female’s marriage age, followed with a slow but steady increase in the years since.

However, even with rapid change in marriage institution and quick rise of mean age at first marriage, little has change in the universality of female marriage, and female age/status hypergamy, until recent. According to the 1990/2000 censuses, vast majority of women had been married by age 30. The rise of marriage age had been only for delay of marriage, not forgoing of marriage. Same is true for female

hypergamy. The proportion of females marrying someone older than themselves has been at 20% for the last 5 decades, and the age difference between wife and husband stays at about 2 years.

The rise of “Shengnu” phenomenon is a sign of sea-change. It is for the first time that more women could stay unmarried, despite there is a huge army of so-called surplus due to unbalanced sex ratio. However, the term “Shengnu” still signals a strong culture preference marriage age: women should get married before a culturally defined age, otherwise their marriageability plunges. Facing such a squeeze, what strategy women should employ in the marriage market is interesting in itself, as they would compromise different priorities in looking for a suitable partner. This study put China’s “Shengnu” phenomenon in a comparative context, to examine how cultural expectation, marriage market condition influence their personal choice.

2. Data and Research Design

We use data from the 2005 mini-census to examine changes in marriage age since 1950. The survey not only contains information on the current marital status, but also year and month of the first marriage. Computer algorithm is used to match marriage partners within a household according to their relationship with the household head, for generating data needed for spousal information. Because marriage might have a selective effect on or through mortality, for example, people in urban areas tend to marry later and live longer than people in rural areas, age at marriage for early years calculated from the survey might present some bias. However, data examination indicates such a bias is minimal and does not change the trend of marriage changes as we shall describe below.

We will follow the classic studies of Qian and Preston (1993) and Raymo and Iwasawa (2005) to decompose the observed decline in marriage rates in China into changes in the propensity to marry and changes in the educational composition of the marriage market. In addition, we will further decompose the marriage market condition by age decomposition to examine the squeezing effect of age hypergamy. To understand individual action in a squeeze market, we also use cut-point regression to examine if women shift their seeking strategy in different market condition.

3. Discussion