

Impact of Higher Education Expansion (1999-2004) on Age at First Marriage in China

(Extended Abstract)

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Topic

As part of a larger project that aims to provide comprehensive assessment of the impact of China's higher education expansion from 1999 to 2004, the proposed study focuses on how this expansion has affected the timing of entry into family formation for those who attended college during the expansion period.

Although higher education was once a privilege for the elite during the Republican era (1912-1949), the People's Republic of China (PRC) government has successfully made it more available to children of peasants and blue-collar workers in the past several decades (Liang, et al. 2012). The recent expansion of higher education launched in 1999 was phenomenal in terms of scale. The college attendance rate of high school graduates was 46.1 in 1998. It soared to 63.8% in 1999, culminated at an unprecedented level of 83.5% in 2002, and remained equally high for the next two years. Universities in China have seen a dramatic and continuing increase in enrollment, which was tripled from 3.41 million in 1998 to 13.3 million in 2004.

A growing body of research on the impact of this remarkable development has so far focused on educational inequality and labor market outcomes (Guo and Wu 2008, C. Li 2010, Li and Xing 2010), alongside the existing literature on educational expansions in other societies (Breen 2010, Hout and DiPrete 2010, Lucas 2001, Raftery and Hout 1993, Bratti, Checchi and de Blasio 2008). The overall observation is that the expansion did not have a cross-board positive impact access to higher education; rather, its impact tended to differ along social lines, such as family background and ethnicity, in favor of existing privileged groups. However, discussions on other potential consequences of higher education expansion remain void.

Taking a different direction, the proposed study addresses the impact of China's higher education expansion from 1999 onwards on the marital behavior of those who attended college during the expansion period (1999-2004). Specifically, this study

examines both cohort and group variations in age at first marriage in China in light of the higher education expansion.

Theoretical Focus

This study is expected to enrich the established literature on determinants of the timing of entry into first marriage. Most sociological and economic studies take an essentially individual perspective on this issue with inadequate attention to structural factors, such as cohort size (But see work by demographers, e.g. Coale and McNeil (1972), Hernes (1972), and Goldstein and Kenney (2001)).

There are multiple mechanisms through which higher education expansion may affect average age at first marriage through multiple mechanisms. First of all, expansion of higher education is likely to delay the timing of entry into first marriage since, for recent cohorts, a larger proportion of people will stay longer in school and postpone family formation due to time conflict between schooling and marriage. Second, a significant shift in educational composition of recent cohorts changes the structure of marriage market. It is well known that marriage market is segmented along social lines, including educational attainment. Third and closely related, the expansion of higher education also reshuffles the pool of potential mates from an individual point of view. In particular, many who otherwise would not be able to make it to postsecondary stage on the educational ladder now attend college simply because of school expansion. Not only they will bring “new blood” to the pool of highly-educated people, a segregated group in the marriage market, but also their own attitudes towards marriage are likely to be reshaped. The net effect of the last two mechanisms on average age of first marriage is unclear given their mixed effects on assortative mating. Of course, educational expansion also affects people’s economic perspectives, a crucial determinant of the timing of entry into family formation.

All the aforementioned mechanisms are further complicated by the fact that, as the sociological literature suggests, the effect of higher educational expansion on access to higher education is also differentiated by gender, ethnicity, region, and family background. Therefore, a refined analysis of the impact of higher education expansion on age at first marriage entails accounting for cohort and group variations simultaneously.

Data and Research Methods

The proposed study will use pooled cross-sectional data from the 2005, 2006, and 2008 China General Social Survey (CGSS). The CGSS contains detailed schooling histories of individuals, alongside other necessary information. Considering that the cohort of key interest, i.e. people who attended college during the expansion period, were still relatively young by 2008, this study also plans to draw on more recent data sources, e.g. Beijing College Students Panel Survey (BCSPS).

The prospective analysis consists of an array of non-parametric and parametric survival models. The first part of the analysis estimates Kaplan-Meier survival curves of the first marriage by cohorts and groups. In particular, those who attended college during the heyday of the higher education expansion (1999-2004) will be compared to their peers from the same birth cohorts who did not attend college, as well as to their counterparts who attended college before 1999 and after 2004, conditional on such factors as gender, urbanicity/*hukou*, and family background.

Parametric survival models will further account for more individual, family, and other variables (e.g. period effects) that may affect age at first marriage.

Expected Findings

Preliminary comparisons of the cohort that attended colleges during 1999-2002 with old and younger college-educated cohorts did not reveal any appreciable impact of the rapid expansion of higher education on age pattern of first marriage. In fact, a secular trend of rising marriage age across cohorts emerged despite the educational expansion and seemed robust.

However, this finding might be driven by relatively small sample sizes. I expect to obtain more interesting results by analyzing the pooled data.

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