Portraits of Same-sex Marriages in Taiwan

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As of 2024, same-sex marriages have been legalized in 36 countries worldwide. This covers about 20% of global population (about 1.5 billion), which is a rapid expansion from only 1.5% of world population about two decades ago. Although countries granting marriage rights to homosexual couples have spread across six continents, the great majority of them are Western democracies. Existing research on the characteristics and outcomes of same-sex marriages thus focus mainly on Western experiences, particularly those from Europe. As Taiwan becomes the first Asian country to legally recognize same-sex marriages in 2019, it becomes clear that a non-Western context like Taiwan offers a unique lens for exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian married couples. This study aims to offer a portrait of the first wave of same-sex marriages formed during 2019–2022, using the complete marriage register data released by the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan. This study will explore a number of key socio-demographic traits of these marriages. In addition to comparisons between gay and lesbian marriages, how these unions differ from heterosexual marriages will also be examined. In particular, this study will focus on these couples' assortative matching patterns along age and education lines, as mating practices bears implications for couple dynamics, social mobility, and potential emerging inequalities.

Conceptual Framework

Relationships and unions are usually formed through non-random pairings of individuals. Prior research has found that couples in heterosexual romantic relationships often exhibit positive assortative matching pattern—that is, they often share similar ascribed or achieved characteristics, such as age and education (Ciscato et al., 2020; Lichter & Qian, 2019). Assortative matching has profound social implications. It shows the status or power dynamics among couples, which impacts the division of labor, income distribution, and social inequalities (Becker, 1973; Eika et al., 2019; Lichter & Qian, 2019).

There are reasons for assortative matching of same-sex couples to differ from that of different-sex couples. In theory, same-sex partners are drawn from the same population with similar distribution of characteristics, and thus they may be more alike compared to different-sex couples (Ciscato et al., 2020). However, given that same-sex couples lack the gender dynamics commonly observed between different-sex couples and the more restricted choices of potential partners for homosexual individuals, their pairing patterns could likely differ from

heterosexual adults. This study will start out by examining spousal pairing patterns by age and education among gays and lesbians couples in Taiwan, for these two traits are the most crucial and frequently analyzed criteria for partner selection (Blossfeld, 2009; Schwartz & Mare, 2005). Then, the analyses will proceed to investigate how prior marital history and other traits interact with age and education to shape matching patterns among same-sex married couples.

Spousal Pairings of Same-sex Marriages in the West

Existing empirical evidences showed that mating patterns among homosexual couples seem to be the opposite from their heterosexual peers—same-sex couples exhibit weaker assortative matching than different-sex couples (Jepsen & Jepsen, 2002; Schwartz & Graf, 2009). For instance, research from the U.S., Europe, and Australia indicates that same-sex couples generally exhibit weaker assortative matching by age compared to different-sex couples (Ciscato et al., 2020; Lichter & Qian, 2019; Andersson et al., 2006; Verbakel and Kalmijn 2014; Meslay & Tovey, 2019; Lengerer & Schroedter, 2022; Shalley & Wilson, 2021). In addition, studies concerning same-sex couples' assortative matching by education found more mixed and different results: homosexual married couples are less alike in terms of educational attainment than heterosexual ones in the U.S. and Germany, but in Sweden (Aldén et al. 2015) and the Netherlands (Verbakel and Kalmijn 2014) lesbian couples seem to exhibit similar assortative mating patterns by education as heterosexual couples, which is stronger than gay couples .

The research questions of this study are: (1) What are the key characteristics of same-sex marriages in Taiwan? (2) How do gay and lesbian marriages differ from heterosexual ones? (3) Do gay and lesbian marriages show different patterns of assortative mating?

Data and Methods

This study makes use of the digitalized marriage register data for same-sex unions from May 2019 till the end of 2022. This data file includes nearly 10,000 marriages registered by gay and lesbian couples. The marriage registration file contains information about couples' sex, birth date, marriage date, education, marriage history, nationality, aboriginal status, and birth order. This study will offer descriptive statistics on the characteristics of same-sex marriages.

Preliminary Findings

Initial analyses using data from the first 1.5 years since May 2019 till the end of 2020, same-sex marriages make up about 2% of all marriages. In addition, roughly two-thirds of the same-sex marriages observed were between lesbians and one-third between gays. While gay marriages are predominantly first marriages for both parties (93.5%), lesbian marriages are less likely to be first marriages (80.5%) and involve more remarriages. Mean age at marriage is

older for gay unions at 36.7 years than for lesbian unions (33.8 years), and both are older than heterosexual marriages.

As for spousal pairing patterns, same-sex married couples are less homogamous in age and education when compared to heterosexual marriages in Taiwan (see Figure 1). In addition, lesbian marriages are more homogamous in age and education than gay marriages, and both groups show weaker assortative matching than heterosexual marriages. These findings are in line with a number of studies on same-sex marriages in the United States, Australia, and in Europe (Jepsen & Jepsen, 2002; Schwartz & Graf, 2009; Andersson et al., 2006; Shalley & Wilson, 2021). However, they are somehow in contrast to the higher age and educational homogamy reported for same-sex than romantic relationships in Taiwan, when compared to different-sex dating couples (Lin et al., 2019). This warrants more future investigations into why marital unions that require higher commitment tend to be less homogamous among homosexual couples than among heterosexual ones in Taiwan. What would be the key mechanisms that shape this observed difference?

Once the 2021–2022 marriage register data are acquired, this paper will combine data from 2019 to 2022 to gain a more comprehensive portrait of same-sex marriages formed in the initial years in the first non-Western context. In addition to age and education, more analyses regarding assortative matching by other traits, such as prior marital history, nationality, and birth order will be explored. This line of research will contribute to better understandings of the well-being and adjustments of same-sex couples in legalized unions in Confucian Asia, which is still lacking in existing literature.

All in all, even though same-sex marriages only compose a very small fraction (~2%) of all marriages formed in 2019–2020 and still await more social acceptance, they nonetheless expand family diversity in Taiwan and prompt more changes towards marriage equality in the larger Asian region.
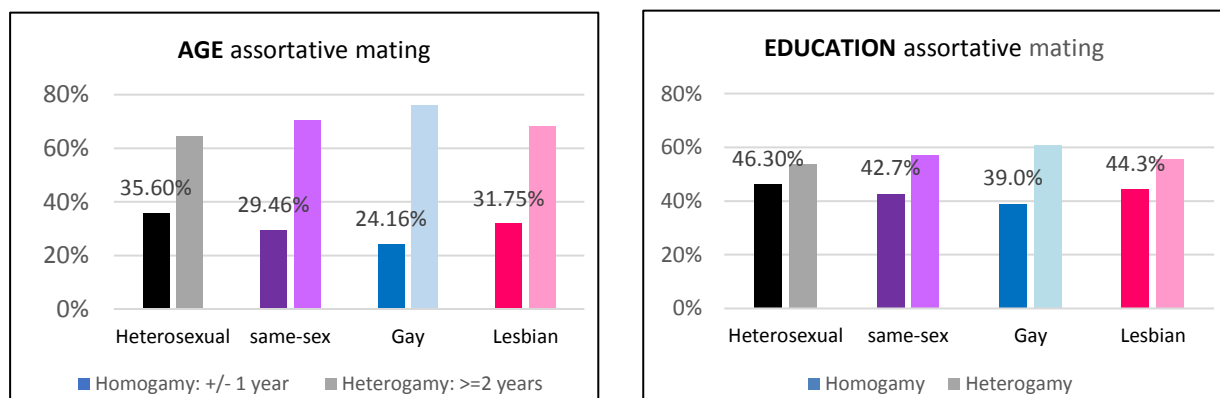

Figure 1. Age and education assortative mating by marriage type, 2019–2020