

Do Egalitarian Gender Roles Hold Significance in China?

The Impact of Gender Role Attitudes on Divorce Risk

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of gender-role attitudes on the risk of divorce in China, highlighting significant differences between men and women. Utilizing longitudinal data from the China Family Panel Studies (2014-2020), we employ a Cox proportional hazards model to analyze how individual-level gender-role attitudes and socio-demographic factors influence divorce risk in first marital unions, with a sample size of 11,617. The findings reveal that egalitarian attitudes decrease the risk of divorce for men but increase the risk for women. Additionally, younger cohorts, urban household registration (*hukou*), higher age at first marriage, educational attainment and having children significantly affect divorce risk. The study underscores the necessity of promoting gender equality to foster stable and high-quality marriages in modern Chinese society. This research provides a valuable basis for policy formulation aimed at enhancing family stability and advancing gender equality. Future research should incorporate variables that more accurately reflect role performance and further investigate the ongoing gender revolution in China.

Keywords: gender-role, divorce, China, family, gender equality

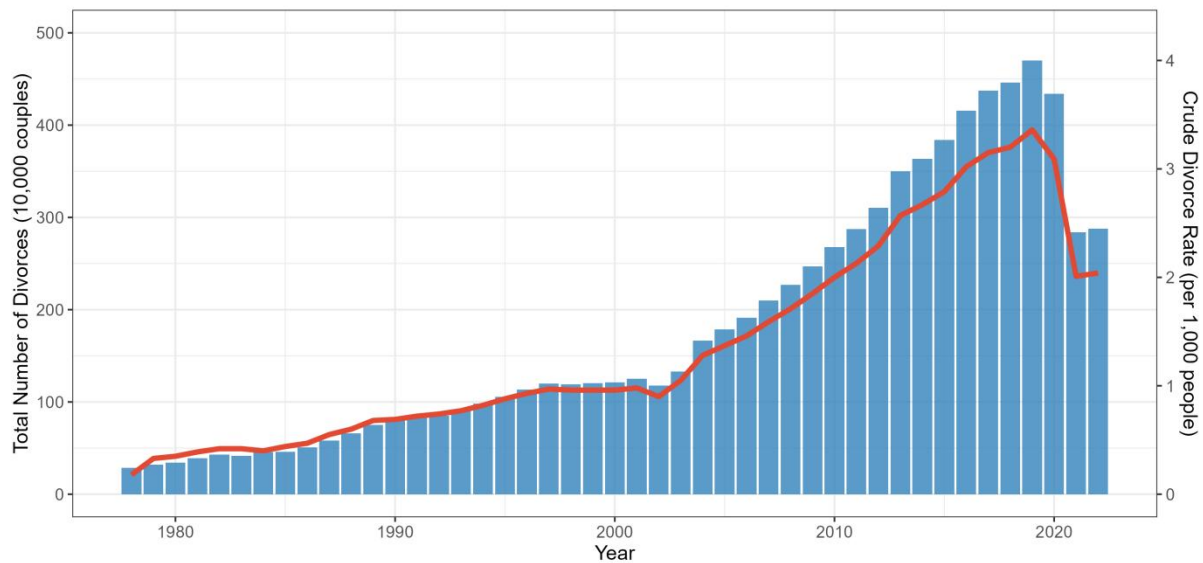
INTRODUCTION

The divorce is on the rise in China. The number of divorces was 285 thousand couples in 1978 but increased to 2,879 thousand couples in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistic of China, 2024). For the same period, crude divorce rate has increased from 0.18 to 2.04. The upward trend of divorce rate has been particularly steep since 2002, as showed in Figure 1. The number of divorce registrations peaked at 2019, with 4,701 thousand couples, which is a record high in Chinese history. The sudden rise in divorce resulted in enacting ‘cooling-off period’ in 2020 which is designed to prevent hasty and impulsive decision for divorce; the divorce application can be withdrawn if any of parties does not wish proceed the divorce within 30 days. Since then, the rising trend of crude divorce rate has been reversed. It is not yet clear whether the reversal of crude divorce rate is attributed to either the introduction of the cooling-off period, the COVID-19 pandemics, or both. However, the rise in divorce and introduction of cooling-off period reflects a rapid change in marriage and family relationships in China and also highlight the significance of this topic in Chinese society.

The increase in divorces can lead to various social problems. What we cannot ignore is that prejudices against divorced individuals or families still exist in Chinese society, and adolescents from divorced families tend to engage in more delinquent behaviors and experience decreased happiness and adaptability (Amato, 2000; Gustavsen, Nayga & Wu, 2016; Xu, Zhang & Xia, 2008; Lan, Marci & Moscardino, 2019; Lan & Sun, 2022). Additionally, divorced adults are more susceptible to depressive symptoms on a personal level (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006), from a societal perspective, single-parent family

poverty (McLanahan, 2004), and divorced individuals' weakening of the ability to support elderly parents (Cong, Pei, Silverstein, Li & Wu, 2023) have also emerged as social issues.

Figure 1. Crude Divorce Rate and Total Number of Divorces, China, 1978 - 2022



Data: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024)

Some studies have examined the determinants of divorce rate in China (e.g., Zhang, Wang & Zhang, 2014; Xu & Feng, 2016; Zheng, Chen, Feng, Wen & Chang, 2018; Chai, Sun & Zhang, 2024). However, the crude divorce rate, as a macro-level indicator, does not reflect population structure or the proportion of married individuals, making it essential to investigate from an individual perspective.

At the micro level, Zhang (2017) has found that the risk of divorce increases with higher levels of education, but Ma, Turunen, and Rizzi (2018) suggested that a college education reduces the risk of divorce. Urban household registration (*hukou*) holders face a higher risk of divorce (Yi, Schultz & Deming, 1992; Ma, Turunen, and Rizzi, 2018). Marrying at a younger

age (before 25) is associated with a higher risk of divorce (Yi, Schultz & Deming, 1992), but Ma, Rizzi & Turunen (2019) found that those who marry after the age of 30 have a higher risk of divorce. Cohabitation before marriage was linked to a higher risk of divorce, but this association has weakened or even disappeared since the late 20th century (Zhang, 2017; Ma, Turunen, and Rizzi, 2018). People with children have a lower risk of divorce compared to those without children (Xu, Yu & Qiu, 2015; Ma, Rizzi & Turunen, 2019). Despite extensive research, we found that few studies regard the impact of ideational change on marital stability, except for Cao et al. (2019).

In this paper, we argue that changing attitudes among Chinese people may also lead to increased divorce rates, supported by various evidence. In feudal society, marriage was undertaken with the aim of inheriting and expanding the family business left by ancestors, and divorce signified the collapse of the family business (Ji, 2023). Before the 1911 Revolution, divorce was rare in Chinese society and only men had the right to initiate it, “freedom to divorce” was not recognized. The new marriage law of 1950 abolished the feudal marriage system (Platte, 1988), leading to a brief period of liberalized divorce. This marked the first shift in attitudes towards marriage, with many women seeking divorces to escape arranged and forced marriages. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, divorce rates remained low. However, with the enactment of a new marriage law in 1981, some women began to pursue divorces in search of equality and love-based marriages (Platte, 1988). We consider this another significant shift in marital attitudes, as evidenced by conflicts over household responsibilities accounting for more than a quarter of divorces in Beijing during this period (Whyte & Parish, 1985). Since the late 1990s, China has experienced the

demographic characteristics of the second demographic transition (Yu & Xie, 2019), with individualism and the pursuit of self-fulfillment challenging traditional family values.

This article aims to explore the impact of changes in attitudes towards gender roles on marital dissolution in Chinese society. China is also undergoing the Second Demographic Transition, which emphasizes the rise of individualism, changing perceptions of women's social roles, transformations in gender and family concepts, and an emphasis on self-realization (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), all of which may contribute to divorce. Moreover, evidence from China indicates that individual-level attitudes towards gender roles can impact marital satisfaction (Cao et al., 2019). Therefore, the article hypothesizes that attitudes towards gender roles may also influence marital dissolution.

From both an analytical perspective and methodological standpoint, this approach is also necessary. This paper utilizes individual-level panel data and conducts research through event-history analysis. Traditional regression analysis does not account for right-censored cases, which provide survival times of events; thus, event-history analysis offers greater accuracy. Although some previously mentioned studies (e.g., Yi, Schultz & Deming, 1992; Xu, Yu & Qiu, 2015) employed event-history analysis, most studies still use cross-sectional data. However, using panel data rather than cross-sectional data is more scientifically rigorous in causal analysis. This article aims to use data from the China Family Panel Studies conducted between 2014 and 2020 to analyze how individual attitudes towards gender roles influence the duration of marriage.

Investigating how Chinese people's attitudes towards gender roles affect divorce in modern Chinese society would be helpful for understanding family dynamics in China.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Second Demographic Transition Theory

The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory describes significant changes in family structures and demographic behaviors in developed countries since the mid-20th century. These changes include smaller family sizes, a decline in traditional marriage, and evolving attitudes towards childbearing and family life (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Since the 1960s, more women in Western countries have attained higher education and actively participated in social activities. This societal shift has led to increased individualism and a decrease in the preference for marriage and children. Concurrently, there has been a rise in cohabitation, single-parent families, and childbearing outside of marriage (van de Kaa, 2002). These social and demographic changes are associated with increased personal autonomy, gender equality, and changing gender roles, all of which influence family dynamics and reproductive behaviors.

The connection between the SDT and divorce trends is evident through several key factors. The weakening of traditional marriage institutions has led to an increase in cohabitation and non-marital relationships, which are generally less stable and more prone to dissolution than traditional marriages (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Furthermore, the rise in individualism and personal autonomy has made people more likely to leave unsatisfactory marriages, contributing to higher divorce rates (Mills & Blossfeld, 2013). These shifts in family behaviors and attitudes may contribute to increased divorce rates and a transformation of traditional family structures.

The SDT also promotes greater gender equality and changes in gender roles, which can create tension and instability in marriages as couples navigate new expectations and responsibilities. According to the Gender Equity Theory, fertility and the stability of family structures, including marriage, are influenced by gender equity in both public and private spheres. Higher levels of gender equity in society lead to more stable family environments because both partners can balance career aspirations and personal goals with family responsibilities (McDonald, 2000). The theory highlights the importance of achieving equity at home as well as in the workplace.

Although women increasingly attain higher levels of education, traditional gender roles and inequities in family and private affairs can create conflicts, stress, and dissatisfaction, potentially leading to higher levels of divorce and very low fertility. The link between gender equity and divorce trends becomes evident when considering the role of institutional support. Low fertility rates and high divorce rates may persist until policies that alleviate the conflict between work and family responsibilities are established (Thévenon, 2011). Additionally, when both partners perceive their relationship as equitable, with shared household duties and childcare responsibilities, marital satisfaction tends to be higher, correlating with lower divorce rates (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). In the United States and Germany, couples with similar divisions of labor have a lower risk of divorce (Bellani, & Esping-Andersen, 2020). Therefore, promoting gender equity in all aspects of life may be essential for fostering stable marriages and addressing rising divorce rates in many developed countries.

Gender Revolution Theory

The Gender Revolution Theory posits two distinct phases of gender evolution that significantly impact family dynamics. The first phase involves women entering the labor market in large numbers, seeking equality in public spheres such as employment and education (Esping-Andersen, 2009). This phase often leads to an increase in divorce rates as traditional family structures are challenged. As women achieve higher education and participate in economic activities, they gain financial independence, which enables them to leave unsatisfactory marriages. The disruption of traditional gender roles during this period can create tension within marriages, contributing to higher divorce rates.

The second phase of the gender revolution occurs when changes in the private sphere begin to emerge, with men increasingly participating in domestic and childcare duties. This shift reduces women's burdens and contributes to more stable marriages (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). However, the transition between these phases is marked by social and demographic instability, with traditional family structures evolving and new patterns of cohabitation and delayed marriage emerging (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). The completion of the gender revolution, where both public and private spheres achieve greater gender equality, is associated with lower divorce rates. Supportive policies, such as parental leave and childcare support, and cultural attitudes towards gender roles and family structures influence the success of this gender revolution.

As gender egalitarianism becomes more prevalent, a reversal of demographic changes may occur, improving fertility rates and marital stability (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt & Lappegård, 2015). For instance, higher levels of gender equity

were associated with lower levels of union stability in the 1980s, but this relationship became positive in the late 2000s (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). A macro-level analysis in the US confirms that female labor force participation strongly correlates with the rise in divorce and separation over time and across regions (Ruggles, 1997). However, as egalitarian norms and attitudes become prevalent, partnership instability is expected to decline (Goldscheider, Bernhardt & Lappegård, 2015).

Similar patterns are observed in European countries. For example, studies in Sweden find that father's involvement in childcare decreases the risk of divorce and that married men who take on more family responsibilities have more stable marriages and a lower risk of union dissolution than those who do not (Oláh, 2001; Oláh & Gähler, 2014). In countries with higher gender equity, increased male participation in domestic life enhances family satisfaction. Even in countries with traditional gender norms, policies that encourage and support husbands' participation in household duties can improve family satisfaction (Forste & Fox, 2012). However, each country has different values and attitudes towards gender roles and varying levels of progress in gender equality, which in turn affect their divorce rates differently.

Context in China

Families in East Asia are characterized by strong familial bonds and a deeply rooted gendered division of labor (Raymo, Park, Xie & Yeung, 2015). Patriarchal traditions and gendered social norms often place women in socially and economically disadvantaged positions (Raymo, Park, Xie & Yeung, 2015). A study in Korea suggests that the gendered division of

labor in the household, which is usually established before childbirth, is intensified further after the birth of the first child (Kim & Cheung, 2019).

China, as one of the few socialist countries, presents unique gender role dynamics in both public and private spheres influenced by state policies. Since its founding in 1949, China has maintained a high level of female labor force participation. Following the Soviet Union, China implemented a planned economy in 1953. The National Congress of Chinese Women in 1953 emphasized the importance of women's labor force participation in economic development, leading to policies significantly increasing women's participation in economic activities. As a result, China achieved substantial progress in gender equality.

However, beginning in the 1990s, China underwent economic reforms, transitioning from a planned to a market economy. This shift resulted in the cessation of government-supported care services, transferring the burden of child and elderly care back to families. Women started facing more challenges in the job market, causing some to return to their families. This led to significant changes in gender roles both at home and in public (Pan, 2002; Yu & Liu, 2021). Since the late 20th century, profound societal transformations have occurred in China, underscoring the need to consider China's unique social context when studying these changes from a sociological perspective (Xie & Hu, 2014).

In the US, the rise in women's participation in public life strongly correlates with increasing divorce rates from the late 19th century to the 1990s (Greenstein, 1990; Ruggles, 1997). However, this relationship is less clear in China. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a positive correlation, but from 1990 to 2018, it turned negative (Raymo, Park, Xie & Yeung, 2015; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024; Yu & Liu, 2021).

Compared to other countries, women's participation in public fields is relatively high in China, but there remains a significant gender equality gap, largely due to slow changes in household gender roles (Zhang & Shi, 2019). Women continue to shoulder most domestic responsibilities (Raymo, Park, Xie & Yeung, 2015; Zhang & Shi, 2019). Although gender equality in education and the labor force has made significant progress, gender norms in the private sphere have been slower to change, creating a complex interplay between professional and domestic roles for women. Consequently, China is considered still in the early stages of its gender revolution.

Nonetheless, literature on gender roles and divorce rates in China remains limited. As an exception, Xu (2022) finds that husbands' participation in household chores positively affects wives' marital satisfaction. The positive impacts of husbands' participation are more pronounced among women with modern characteristics, such as living in urban areas, residing in eastern or central regions, having higher education and income levels, and holding more egalitarian gender role attitudes.

The Impact of Gender-Role Attitudes on Divorce in China

Since the late 20th century, attitudes towards gender roles have undergone significant changes worldwide (Kaufman, 2000). For instance, in the US, the share of people who support the male-breadwinner model has significantly declined whereas the vast majority have expressed egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles in the 1980s and 1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). As more women achieve higher education and participate in the labor market, gender-egalitarian norms have become more widespread and prevalent.

Women's attitudes toward gender roles determine their perception of equality in sharing duties and responsibilities. Women with traditional norms might perceive caring for families and children as their inherent duty, thus feeling content with an unequal distribution of house chores. However, women with egalitarian gender roles are more likely to consider such inequalities as unreasonable, leading to conflicts with their partners. The gendered division of labor in the household can be a heavy burden for women who are also in the labor market. Consequently, gender inequalities in the household are detrimental to marital happiness and satisfaction (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). At the same time, egalitarian gender roles are associated with higher divorce rates (Blair, 1993) before the country achieves higher levels of gender equity.

In many cases, women are dissatisfied with their marriage or ask their husbands to spend more time on household chores (Oshio, Nozaki & Kobayashi, 2013; Raymo, Park, Xie & Yeung, 2015). Similarly, in China, women with egalitarian views report the lowest marital satisfaction (Cao et al., 2019). Compared to those with traditional gender norms, women with egalitarian norms are less likely to be satisfied with husbands' insufficient participation in household chores, contributing to a decline in marital satisfaction (Xu, 2022). It is reasonable to expect that gender-egalitarian attitudes contribute to an increase in marital dissolution in China.

We hypothesize that women's gender equity orientation is associated with a higher risk of divorce in China. Except for a few countries in Northern Europe that have achieved a relatively higher level of gender equity in both public and private spheres, women who support gender equality tend to exhibit lower levels of family satisfaction and marital stability.

As discussed above, China is considered in the early stages of the second demographic transition, suggesting that divorce rates will increase for a while. Simultaneously, the country is also in the middle of the first phase of the gender revolution—women with egalitarian norms face more stress and conflicts in marriage than others (Li, Cao, Curran, Fang & Zhou, 2020; Wang, Ma & Guo, 2020).

One might argue that a partner's norms on gender roles and the combination within couples might be more important than women's norms themselves. However, in a country where the majority of men hold traditional norms on gender equity, men's norms are less impactful than women's. First, there is little variation in gender equity orientation among men in China. Thus, classification of men's attitudes towards gender roles has limited practical implications. A prior study suggests that few couples share egalitarian views on gender roles in China (Cao et al., 2019). Moreover, men benefit from gender inequality in the household, making it more crucial to understand how women perceive and react to this imbalance. It's evident that a woman with egalitarian views on gender roles is more likely to divorce if married to a man with traditional views, compared to a woman with traditional views married to a man with egalitarian views. When both spouses share the same attitude on gender roles, whether traditional or egalitarian, the risk of divorce is not higher than those with harmonious attitudes. However, even when couples are harmonious in their gender role attitudes, those with egalitarian views may be more likely to resolve conflicts by ending the marriage.

In sum, given that the significant proportion of dual-income couples in China and the vast majority of men hold traditional gender role attitudes, the woman's attitude toward gender roles becomes more critical among divorce determinants. Considering that the greater

work-family conflict faced by women compared to men, the risk of divorce may vary depending on the woman's perspective on gender roles. Thus, focusing on women's attitudes towards gender roles, we hypothesize that gender-egalitarian views are associated with a higher risk of divorce in China (*Hypotheses 1*), even after controlling for other socio-demographic factors. Regarding men, those who with egalitarian gender role attitudes have a stronger perception of family responsibilities. This awareness can alleviate the burden on women within the household, thereby enhancing marital satisfaction. Consequently, we hypothesize that men with gender-egalitarian views are associated with a reduced risk of divorce (*Hypothesis 2*).

Hypotheses 1: Women with egalitarian gender role attitudes are more likely to face a higher risk of divorce.

Hypotheses 2: Men with egalitarian gender role attitudes are more likely to have a lower risk of divorce.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Data for this study come from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), which is one of the representative social surveys in China managed by the Institute of Social Science Survey (ISSS) at Peking University. The CFPS track and collect information on individuals, families, and local communities to study the livelihoods in China. It provides a range of information on the changes in Chinese society, such as economy, population, education, and health.

The CFPS was launched in 2010 and utilized the Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI). The 2010 survey covered 25 provinces/cities/autonomous regions in China, with a sample size of 16,000 households, these samples could represent 95% of China's population in mainland. All individuals aged 9 and above in sampled households were investigated and regarded as the gene members in the CFPS. Family members and any future blood relatives or adopted children are permanently tracked as gene members of the CFPS. The CFPS consists of four types of questionnaires on adult, child, household, and community. The survey covers various topics on Chinese families and society, with the data collected and managed in scientific ways.

We use the CFPS for several reasons. The CFPS is considered highly reliable. Studies on the change in demographic behaviors of China increasingly rely on the data (e.g., Ma, Turunen, & Rizzi, 2018; Chen, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2021; Bairoliya & Miller, 2021). The CFPS is also one of the few longitudinal data with a representative sample in China, which allow us test causal relationship between variables. Lastly, in 2014 and afterward, the CFPS questionnaire has included questions on gender role attitudes. The inclusion of such a question enables us to examine the impacts of gender role attitudes on the risk of divorce with a representative sample in China.

Our data are from the CFPS between 2014 and 2020 (<http://www.issp.pku.edu.cn/cfps/>). We analyze the impact of gender-role attitudes on the risk of divorce among the couples in marital union at the time of survey in 2014. As the survey repeats every other year, we have just four waves from 2014 and 2020, the latest available data. All women and men in their first marital union at the time of survey in 2014 becomes our research population. Being

interested in the marital disruption in relation to second demographic transition and also possibly to fertility, we focus only on those aged 16 and 49 at the time of 2014 survey and track their marital status. Corresponding birth cohorts are those born in and after 1965 and who were 15 years old or more at the time of first marriage.

Out of 28,265 married respondents in 2014, 12,460 people (aged between 16 and 49 in 2014 and married at age 15 or older) had not experienced divorce before 2014. Additionally, respondents who were interviewed by phone (about 5% of the total) were excluded from the questions on gender-role attitudes and thus were not included in the analysis. Consequently, after excluding all cases with missing on the variables used in the final analysis, 11,617 cases were used.

Measures

The dependent variable is the duration from 2014 to first divorce, whether or not they divorce between 2014 and 2020 waves. As we use event-history analysis (Cox proportional hazard model), the outcome variable turns into one when she or he divorce in a first marital union, zero otherwise. The outcome variable would be zero for those who remain in a first marital union by 2020. Thus, the time to first divorce will be analyzed in the models in relation to gender-role attitudes. Please note that separation is not considered in this study. Separation might affect ‘decision to divorce’ but it cannot be identified in the analytic data. However, we do consider cohabitation as a form of prior experience before first marriage. According to prior studies, an experience of cohabitation and whether cohabitation linked to marital union make difference in the divorce risk in China (e.g., Zhang, 2017; Ma, Turunen, & Rizzi, 2018).

Nonetheless, we do not consider separation from cohabited union because it is not yet considered as a legitimate form of marriage formation in China (People's Daily Online, 2021).

Firstly, as Cao et al., (2019) did, we assessed gender-role attitudes using three items: attitude towards gender roles—"Men should focus on career, while women should focus on family"; attitude towards the importance of marriage for women—"Marrying well is more important for women than doing well"; and attitude towards the importance of childbearing for women—"Women should have at least one child." Respondents provided their level of agreement with these three statements using five options: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. We averaged these three factors to create an independent variable, categorizing it into "Traditional," "Neutral," and "Egalitarian." Since the proportion of respondents with traditional gender role attitudes was relatively high, whereas those with egalitarian attitudes were still quite low, we used traditional gender role attitudes as the reference group. This allowed us to examine the impact of egalitarian gender role attitudes on divorce. Assuming that individuals' gender role attitudes do not change over time (or remain stable for at least a few years), we measured these attitudes from the 2014 survey.

Other than gender-role attitude, the control variables incorporated in this study encompass marriage duration, birth cohort, ethnicity, hukou (residence registration), education level, age at first marriage, premarital cohabitation status, how couples met, and the presence of children. Marriage duration was divided into eight categories: "0-1 year," "2-3 years," "4-6 years," "7-10 years," "11-15 years," "16-20 years," "21-25 years," and "26+ years" (Ma, Turunen, & Rizzi, 2018).

The birth cohort was segmented into five-year intervals, with those born after 1990 consolidated into a single cohort due to their relatively small sample size. To account for cultural differences affecting divorce rates, ethnicity was categorized as “Han ethnic group” and “Other ethnic group.” In China, the household registration (hukou) is divided into agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) categories. Hukou is closely tied to one’s place of birth and is also linked to social welfare. Generally speaking, urban hukou holders have a higher socio-economic status. Hukou status was classified as either “Rural” or “Urban” to reflect the potential influence of residential context on marital stability.

Education attainment, a crucial indicator of socio-economic status and a determinant of marriage and divorce, was divided into three categories: “Primary or below (Primary school or below),” “Secondary (Middle school or high school),” and “Tertiary (College or above),” with “Primary or below” serving as the reference group. Age at first marriage was categorized into four categories: “15-20 years,” “21-25 years,” “26-30 years,” and “30+ years,” with “21-25 years” set as the reference group.

Premarital cohabitation status was included to capture its increasing prevalence and potential impact on divorce risk, categorized as “Marriage without cohabitation” and “Marriage after cohabitation” (Zhang, 2017). Finally, the presence of children was categorized as “With child(ren)” and “Childless” recognizing the significant role that children play in marital stability within East Asian societies (Ma, Rizzi, & Turunen, 2019).

All of these variables are measured based on their values in the 2014 survey. This approach is justified as many of these variables are inherent characteristics that do not change over time, or their potential variation within the short study period is minimal. Thus, we treat

them as time-invariant and base our measurements on the 2014 survey, assuming these traits remain constant.

Methods and Strategy

We employ Cox proportional hazard models to analyze the impact of gender-egalitarian attitudes on the risk of divorce. The dependent variable is the time to divorce in a first marital union, as measured in person-year. Here, $T = 0$ is defined as the time of the 2014 survey. We track the duration from this point to the occurrence of a divorce event. Cases that did not experience divorce by 2020 are right-censored while those divorced before 2014 are left-truncated. The model is specified as follows;

$$h(t|X) = h_0(t)\exp (B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + \dots B_kX_k)$$

In this equation, $h(t|X)$ represents the hazard function at time t given the covariates X . The term $h_0(t)$ denotes the baseline hazard function. The variables X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k are the independent variables, which include gender role attitudes and the control variables, and $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_k$ are the regression coefficients associated with these variables.

To test the hypotheses of this study, separate analyses were conducted for women and men subjects. Descriptive statistics were first used to understand the characteristics of the analysis data, followed by event-history analysis using Cox proportional hazard model.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

First, we conducted descriptive statistics on the most important factor in this study, gender-role attitudes, as shown in Table 1. Nearly 77.0% of people hold traditional attitudes toward gender roles, only 18.3% have a neutral stance, and the remaining 4.8% hold egalitarian views on gender roles. The majority of people still hold conservative views on gender roles, with only a small minority embracing egalitarian perspectives.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on gender role attitudes for total cases

Variable	N	%
Gender-role attitude		
Traditional	8,938	76.9
Neutral	2,122	18.3
Egalitarian	557	4.8

Source: The China Family Panel Studies 2014.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for 6,338 female cases. Out of 6,338 women in a first marital union, 97 women divorced in the observed period between 2014 and 2020. The majority of women hold traditional attitudes, accounting for 78.6%. In contrast, a smaller proportion of women hold egalitarian views, with 4.3%. Furthermore, 17.1% of women expressed neutral views. Divorce rates are notably higher among women with neutral attitudes (32.0%) and egalitarian attitudes (6.2%) compared to those with very traditional (61.9%) attitudes. This indicates that women with less traditional attitudes may experience higher risk of marital dissolution.

Women with marriages of 2-3 years (3.1%), 4-6 year (20.6%), 7-10 (26.8%) and 11-15 years (17.5%) show higher divorce rates, suggesting that the risk of divorce decreases as marriage duration increases. The divorce rate is highest among women born between 1985

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Women

Variable	Total		Divorced		Variable	Total		Divorced	
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%
Total	6,338	100.0	97	100.0	Ethnicity				
Gender-role attitude					Han ethnic group	5,804	91.6	89	91.8
Traditional	4,981	78.6	60	61.9	Other ethnic groups	534	8.4	8	8.2
Neutral	1,084	17.1	31	32.0	Hukou origin				
Egalitarian	273	4.3	6	6.2	Rural	4,788	75.5	58	59.8
Duration of marriage					Urban	1,550	24.5	39	40.2
0-1 year	58	0.9	0	0.0	Education				
2-3 years	145	2.3	3	3.1	Primary or below	2,778	43.8	23	23.7
4-6 years	417	6.6	20	20.6	Secondary	2,899	45.7	61	62.9
7-10 years	899	14.2	26	26.8	Tertiary	661	10.4	13	13.4
11-15 years	897	14.2	17	17.5	Age at first marriage				
16-20 years	908	14.3	8	8.2	15-19 years	891	14.1	13	13.4
21-25 years	1,084	17.1	13	13.4	20-24 years	4,166	65.7	63	64.9
26 + years	1,930	30.5	10	10.3	25-29 years	1,149	18.1	16	16.5
Birth cohort					30+ years	132	2.1	5	5.2
1965-1969	1,487	23.5	8	8.2	Premarital cohabitation				
1970-1974	1,380	21.8	15	15.5	Direct marriage	5,234	82.6	72	74.2
1975-1979	947	14.9	13	13.4	Cohabitation marriage	1,104	17.4	25	25.8
1980-1984	957	15.1	13	13.4	Children				
1985-1989	1,078	17.0	31	32.0	Childless	429	6.8	8	8.2
1990-1998	489	7.7	17	17.5	With child(ren)	5,909	93.2	89	91.8

Source: The China Family Panel Studies 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

and 1989, at 32.0%. Divorce rate also differs by ethnicity; Han women experience a little higher divorce rate at 91.8%, compared to 8.2% for women from other ethnic groups. Women from urban areas have a divorce rate of 40.2%, which is higher compared to the 59.8% rate among women from rural areas. Those with secondary education exhibit the highest divorce rate (62.9%), in contrast, those with primary education or below have a lower divorce rate (23.7%). Women who married after 30 have a higher rate of divorce of 5.2%. Additionally, women who cohabit before marriage have a higher divorce rate of 25.8%, in contrast to the 74.2% rate for those who do not cohabit before marriage. The vast majority of women have children within their marriage, with a rate of 93.2%. Women with children have a lower

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Men

Variable	Total		Divorced		Variable	Total		Divorced	
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%
Total	5,279	100.0	136	100.0	Ethnicity				
Gender-role attitude					Han ethnic group	4,858	92.0	128	94.1
Traditional	3,957	75.0	100	73.5	Other ethnic groups	421	8.0	8	5.9
Neutral	1,038	19.7	35	25.7	Hukou origin				
Egalitarian	284	5.4	1	0.7	Rural	3,888	73.7	92	67.6
Duration of marriage					Urban	1,391	26.3	44	32.4
0-1 year	41	0.8	0	0.0	Education				
2-3 years	139	2.6	8	5.9	Primary or below	1,966	37.2	50	36.8
4-6 years	361	6.8	36	26.5	Secondary	2,651	50.2	72	52.9
7-10 years	783	14.8	28	20.6	Tertiary	662	12.5	14	10.3
11-15 years	812	15.4	20	14.7	Age at first marriage				
16-20 years	804	15.2	20	14.7	15-19 years	317	6.0	8	5.9
21-25 years	937	17.7	14	10.3	20-24 years	2,883	54.6	56	41.2
26 + years	1402	26.6	10	7.4	25-29 years	1,723	32.6	55	40.4
Birth cohort					30+ years	356	6.7	17	12.5
1965-1969	1,353	25.6	16	11.8	Premarital cohabitation				
1970-1974	1,218	23.1	25	18.4	Direct marriage	4,267	80.8	97	71.3
1975-1979	862	16.3	24	17.6	Cohabitation marriage	1,012	19.2	39	28.7
1980-1984	826	15.6	19	14.0	Children				
1985-1989	820	15.5	35	25.7	Childless	394	7.5	25	18.4
1990-1998	200	3.8	17	12.5	With child(ren)	4,885	92.5	111	81.6

Source: The China Family Panel Studies 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

divorce rate, at 91.8%, compared to childless women, whose divorce rate is 8.2%.

Table 3 provides descriptive statistics on males. Among 5,279 male cases, 136 divorced between 2014 and 2020. Men's gender-role attitude shows a significant association with divorce outcomes. As in women, the majority of men hold traditional (75.0%) attitudes whereas fewer men have egalitarian (5.4%) views. The share of men hold egalitarian attitudes is a little higher than women (5.4% VS. 4.3%). Divorce rates are highest among men with traditional attitudes, reaching 61.9%, followed by men with neutral attitudes, at 32.0%. In contrast, men with egalitarian views have a significantly lower divorce rate of 6.2%. This suggests that men with traditional gender-role attitudes may face a higher risk of divorce,

which is the opposite to the pattern observed among women, where those with egalitarian views had higher divorce rates.

Men's marriages lasting 4-6 years have the highest divorce rate of 26.5%, and those lasting 7-10 years have a high divorce rate of 20.6%. In contrast, marriages lasting more than 26 years have the lowest divorce rate at 7.4%. This confirms the negative effect of longer marriage duration on the likelihood of divorce. Men born in the latest period (1985-1989) exhibit the highest divorce rate (25.7%), also, men born in 1990-1998 have a high rate of divorce of 12.5%. Han men have a higher divorce rate of 94.1% compared to 5.9% for men from other ethnic groups. Men from urban areas have a divorce rate of 32.4%, compared to the rate is 67.6% for men from rural areas. Educational attainment has negative effect on divorce among men; men with secondary education experience the highest divorce rate, accounting for 52.9%, whereas those with tertiary education have a lower divorce rate, with 10.3%. Men who married between the ages of 25 and 29 have a high divorce rate of 40.4%, and those who marry after 30 also experience a notable divorce rate of 12.5%. Marrying after the age of 30 raises the risk of divorce, just as it does for women. Additionally, premarital cohabitation significantly impacts divorce rates; men who cohabited before marriage have a high divorce rate of 28.7%, whereas those who married without cohabitation have a rate of 71.3%. Men with children have a significantly lower divorce rate (81.6%) compared to those without children, indicating that having children reduces the likelihood of divorce.

The descriptive statistics for both males and females highlight the impact of gender-role attitudes on divorce in China. For men, individuals with traditional gender-role attitudes face higher divorce rates, whereas those with egalitarian attitudes tend to have lower divorce rates.

However, this is exactly the opposite to women; those with traditional gender-role attitudes have lower divorce rates whereas those with egalitarian views are associated with higher divorce rates. This underscores the complex interplay between gender norms and marital stability across both genders. Additionally, factors such as marriage duration, birth cohort, education level, ethnicity, hukou origin, age at first marriage and premarital cohabitation status also influence divorce outcomes.

Cox Proportional Hazard Model

Cox regression of women's divorce.

The results of a Cox regression analysis of divorce on gender-role attitudes for women are provided in Table 4. Overall, women's gender-role attitudes significantly influence the risk of divorce. Compared to those with traditional gender-role attitudes, other things being equal, women with neutral attitudes shows a substantially higher risk of divorce, with a hazard ratio of 1.83, with a significance level of $p < 0.01$. This finding suggests that women who hold neutral views are nearly twice as likely to divorce compared to those with traditional views. Women with egalitarian gender role attitudes have a higher risk of divorce compared to those with traditional attitudes, but with a significance level of $p > 0.05$ which we believe is due to the small number of cases with egalitarian gender role attitudes. With a sufficient number of cases, it could be adequately demonstrated that women with egalitarian attitudes have a higher risk of divorce. This result supports the *Hypothesis 1*. Traditional gender role attitudes advocate that men are responsible for careers and women for the family. Although there is inequality in the division of labor between the sexes, it has become a customary norm in

Table 4. Cox regression results of divorce on gender-role attitudes among women

Variable		Hazard ratio	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Gender-role attitude				
Traditional	(reference)	1.00		
Neutral		1.83	1.17	2.85
Egalitarian		1.39	0.59	3.25
Birth cohort				
1965-1969	(reference)	1.00		
1970-1974		1.81	0.76	4.27
1975-1979		2.18	0.89	5.30
1980-1984		2.30	0.94	5.65
1985-1989		5.59	2.47	12.66
1990-1998		7.40	2.99	18.30
Ethnicity				
Han ethnic group	(reference)	1.00		
Other ethnic groups		1.12	0.54	2.33
Hukou origin				
Rural (reference)		1.00		
Urban		2.32	1.44	3.72
Education				
Primary or below		0.64	0.38	1.08
Secondary	(reference)	1.00		
Tertiary		0.65	0.34	1.27
Age at first marriage				
15-19 years		1.21	0.65	2.26
20-24 years	(reference)	1.00		
25-29 years		0.87	0.48	1.58
30+ years		3.22	1.23	8.42
Premarital cohabitation				
Direct marriage	(reference)	1.00		
Cohabitation marriage		1.03	0.64	1.65
Children				
Childless	(reference)	1.00		
With child (ren)		1.49	0.69	3.22
No. of subjects			6,338	
No. of divorce			97	
Person-years			28,598	
Max. log. likelihood			-784.19	
$P > \chi^2$			0.00	

Source: The China Family Panel Studies 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

Chinese society. Therefore, women with traditional gender role attitudes are less likely to

have disagreements or conflicts with their husbands, and their marriages are relatively stable. On the contrary, women who hold an attitude of egalitarian gender roles prefer to have equal household division of labor, childcare, decision-making power and autonomy with their husbands in marriage. However, in China, the existing social norms and family expectations of women are still that women should focus on the family. Therefore, women who hold an attitude of egalitarian gender roles are more likely to face social pressure and intergenerational conflicts in the family, which will indirectly affect the quality of marriage and lead to divorce. In addition to external pressure, women's pursuit of self-realization will also make them break through the unequal household division of labor and choose divorce. We found that even if the majority of people hold traditional gender role attitudes, compared with the minority group who hold egalitarian gender role attitudes, there is still a significant difference in divorce.

In addition to gender-role attitudes, several other factors significantly impact divorce risk. Women born in later cohorts (1970-1998) exhibit progressively higher hazard ratios compared to those born between 1965-1969, with the highest risk observed for those born between 1990-1998 (hazard ratio of 7.40, $p < 0.001$). This shows the younger cohorts face the higher risk of divorce. The hukou origin of women also plays a critical role. Controlling for other predictors, women with urban hukou have a divorce risk that is 2.32 times higher than that of women with rural hukou, with a significance level of $p < 0.001$. Household registration in urban areas is associated with more than double the risk of divorce.

Regarding educational attainment, women with either higher or lower levels of education have about a 35.0% higher risk of divorce compared to those with a primary school

education or less. However, this difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Age at first marriage significantly influences divorce risk as well. Women who marry at age 30 or older face a substantially higher risk of divorce, with a hazard ratio of 3.22 ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, marrying at ages 15-19 or 25-29 does not show significant differences from the reference group (ages 20-24).

Premarital cohabitation status and children (having children) do not show significant impacts on divorce risk in this analysis ($p > 0.05$). Women who cohabit before marriage and those with children do not exhibit substantial differences in likelihood of experiencing divorce compared to their respective reference groups.

Overall, the Cox regression results highlight the significant impact of gender-role attitudes on the risk of divorce among women. Additionally, birth cohort, hukou origin, and age at first marriage are crucial factors influencing marital stability. These findings underscore the complex interplay between socio-demographic factors and personal attitudes towards gender roles in determining divorce risk.

Cox regression of men's divorce.

Table 5 presents the results of a Cox regression analysis examining the impact of gender-role attitudes and various covariates on the risk of divorce among men. The analysis shows that gender-role attitudes significantly influence the risk of divorce for men. Using men with traditional gender-role attitudes as the reference group, the results indicate that men with egalitarian attitudes have a 88% lower risk of divorce, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Men who hold egalitarian views are less likely to divorce compared to those with traditional

Table 5. Cox regression results of divorce on gender-role attitudes among men

Variable		Hazard ratio	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Gender-role attitude				
Traditional	(reference)	1.00		
Neutral		1.28	0.87	1.90
Egalitarian		0.12	0.02	0.88
Birth cohort				
1965-1969	(reference)	1.00		
1970-1974		1.73	0.92	3.24
1975-1979		2.31	1.21	4.40
1980-1984		1.98	1.00	3.90
1985-1989		4.35	2.29	8.25
1990-1998		10.42	4.84	22.45
Ethnicity				
Han ethnic group	(reference)	1.00		
Other ethnic groups		0.66	0.32	1.36
Hukou origin				
Rural	(reference)	1.00		
Urban		1.62	1.07	2.45
Education				
Primary or below		1.33	0.90	1.96
Secondary	(reference)	1.00		
Tertiary		0.41	0.22	0.77
Age at first marriage				
15-19 years		1.29	0.60	2.77
20-24 years	(reference)	1.00		
25-29 years		1.98	1.30	3.00
30+ years		3.67	2.01	6.71
Premarital cohabitation				
Direct marriage	(reference)	1.00		
Cohabitation marriage		1.17	0.79	1.73
Children				
Childless	(reference)	1.00		
With child (ren)		0.53	0.32	0.87
No. of subjects			5,279	
No. of divorce			136	
Person-years			23,426	
Max. log. likelihood			-1077.1	
$P > \chi^2$			0.00	

Source: The China Family Panel Studies 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

views. In contrast, men with neutral gender role attitudes do not show a significant difference

compared to the reference group. These findings support *Hypothesis 2*. Men with traditional gender role concepts are relatively backward in their understanding of gender division of labor. Against the backdrop of women's increasing participation in public economic activities, it is clear that men with traditional gender role concepts have not adapted to women's new roles. Men's adherence to the traditional unequal gender division of labor is not conducive to the harmony and stability of modern marriages, so they face a higher risk of divorce. In contrast, men who hold an egalitarian gender role attitude are more adaptable to social and cultural changes and are able to accept women's new economic roles. An equal rather than gender-based division of labor in the home meets modern women's expectations for marriage, leading to more satisfied marriages. This suggests that, to some extent, men's egalitarian gender role attitudes protect marriage in Chinese society.

Several other factors also affect divorce risk. For instance, men born between 1990-1998 exhibit the highest risk, with a hazard ratio of 10.42 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a dramatic increase in divorce risk for the youngest cohort. Hukou origin is also an important predictor of divorce. Men with urban hukou show a higher risk of divorce than men with rural hukou, as indicated by a hazard ratio of 1.62 ($p < 0.05$). Compared to those with middle school or high school education, men with college or higher education have a 59% lower likelihood of divorce, with a significance level of $p < 0.01$. Men who marry at ages 25-29 or at age 30 or older have a significantly higher risk of divorce, with hazard ratios of 2.00 and 3.67, respectively ($p < 0.001$), compared to those who marry between the ages of 20-24. Premarital cohabitation does not have a significant impact on the risk of divorce, as is the case for women's experiences. However, having children is associated with a significantly lower risk

of divorce, as men with children have a hazard ratio of 0.53 ($p < 0.05$) compared to childless men.

Comparison Between Women and Men.

Comparing the results between women and men, several key differences and similarities emerge. Both genders show that younger cohorts face higher risks of divorce, with the youngest cohorts having the highest hazard ratios. However, gender-role attitudes impact men and women differently. For women, less traditional views are associated with a higher risk of divorce, whereas for men, egalitarian attitudes are associated with a lower risk.

Urban household registration increases the risk of divorce for both men and women, but the impact is more pronounced for women. Education also plays a critical role, as college or higher education significantly reduces the risk of divorce for men.

Age at first marriage shows a substantial impact on divorce risk for both genders, with older ages at marriage increasing the risk significantly. Premarital cohabitation does not significantly affect the likelihood of divorce. Having children significantly reduces the divorce risk for men but does not have the same effect for women.

In summary, the Cox regression results underscore the significant influence of gender-role attitudes and socio-demographic factors on divorce risk among men and women. The findings reveal that egalitarian attitudes lower the risk of divorce for men, whereas egalitarian views increase the risk for women. Additionally, younger cohorts, urban household registration, and higher age at first marriage are associated with higher divorce risks for both genders. These results highlight the importance of understanding gender-role

attitudes and gender differences in marital stability, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to address the unique challenges faced by men and women in marital relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insights into the impact of gender-role attitudes on the risk of divorce in China, highlighting significant differences between men and women. Our findings reveal that, in a society where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, evolving perceptions of gender roles are influencing marital stability.

Firstly, to our best knowledge, this study is among the first to demonstrate that individual-level gender-role attitudes significantly affect the risk of divorce in China. Whereas traditional gender role divisions remain prevalent, a small minority of individuals now hold egalitarian views. Interestingly, these egalitarian attitudes have opposite effects on men and women: egalitarian views are associated with a lower risk of divorce among men but a higher risk among women. This divergence underscores the complex dynamics of gender-role attitudes in marital relationships.

The implications of these findings are also profound. They suggest that promoting gender equality in modern China is necessary for fostering stable and high-quality marriages. Some scholars argue that egalitarian gender relations, based on intimacy, empathy, and mutual understanding, can lead to more stable and satisfying marriages (e.g., Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers, 2003). Therefore, encouraging gender equality could be one of the vital strategies for improving marital stability in China.

China faces significant demographic challenges, including low birth rates and an aging population. Maintaining family stability is helpful in addressing these issues, at least alleviating social burdens. Moreover, the participation of women in the labor force is essential to counteract the labor shortages resulting from an aging population. Although gender equality in education and the labor market has made significant progress, achieving gender equality within the household remains a challenge. Such context is what prior research described as the main causes for lowest-low fertility (McDonald, 2000). Mitigating the gendered division of labor within families is essential for moving China's gender revolution from its first stage to the next (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt & Lappegård, 2015).

Our study is not without limitations. First, all independent variables were treated as time-invariant, partly because some variables are inherent characteristics that do not change over time. Additionally, considering the relatively short duration of the study period, we believe this approach does not significantly alter the results. Another limitation is that we primarily focus on individual attitudes toward gender roles, which may differ from actual role performance. As Oláh & Gähler (2014) note, inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviors—such as holding egalitarian attitudes despite dividing work traditionally—can lead to a higher risk of union dissolution. Future research should include variables such as women's participation in paid labor and men's involvement in household labor to assess role performance more accurately. Furthermore, the relatively small number of divorce cases in our sample suggests that the gender revolution is still in its earlier stages in China, indicating the need for further research to better understand the impact of gender-role attitudes on

divorce.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant influence of gender-role attitudes on divorce risk in China, with distinct effects observed between men and women. Our findings provide a basis for policy formulation aimed at promoting gender equality and enhancing family stability. By addressing the challenges of gender inequality within households, China can move towards more equitable family structures and stronger marital relationships.

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