

Chapter 3

Changing Patterns of Marriage and Divorce in Today's China

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3.1 Introduction

In China, family remains the core of society, and marriage is still a constituent event in family formation. However, conjugal bonds have long been considered as secondary in comparison to other intra-family relationships, and became more valued only in recent years, especially after the reform and opening-up policy was launched in 1978. Traditionally, the family line perpetuates through the male descent (Pimentel 2000), and the function of marriage is primarily utilitarian: to bear children and enlarge the family. Thus, arranged marriage and virilocal residence prevailed for centuries, ensuring the reproduction of the extended family with little consideration for love within marital bonds (Pimentel 2000).

Some changes began to take place following the implementation of the 1950 Marriage Law, which among other provisions, prohibited bigamy and arranged marriage. But it was not until the early 1980s that more profound transformations occurred, with social change and economic transition increasingly influencing lifestyles and therefore the expectations related to marriage and personal achievement.

While marriage has long been universal in Chinese society, things are changing and there is a gradual diversification of marriage and family behaviours, in urban areas especially (Chambers 2012). Mate selection, and therefore the vast majority of marriages, is now the result of individual choice, and the role of parents in the mate-selection process is declining. However, marriage behaviours in China are still influenced by various individual factors, and vary between regions (Luo 1999; Xu and Cheng 2001; Ni 2008; Zhang 2008). Nevertheless, it is observed that overall, first marriage is increasingly delayed for both men and women, and that the proportion of unmarried people is growing, partly due to social changes brought about by globalization (Ju 2006; Yang and Yao 2007).

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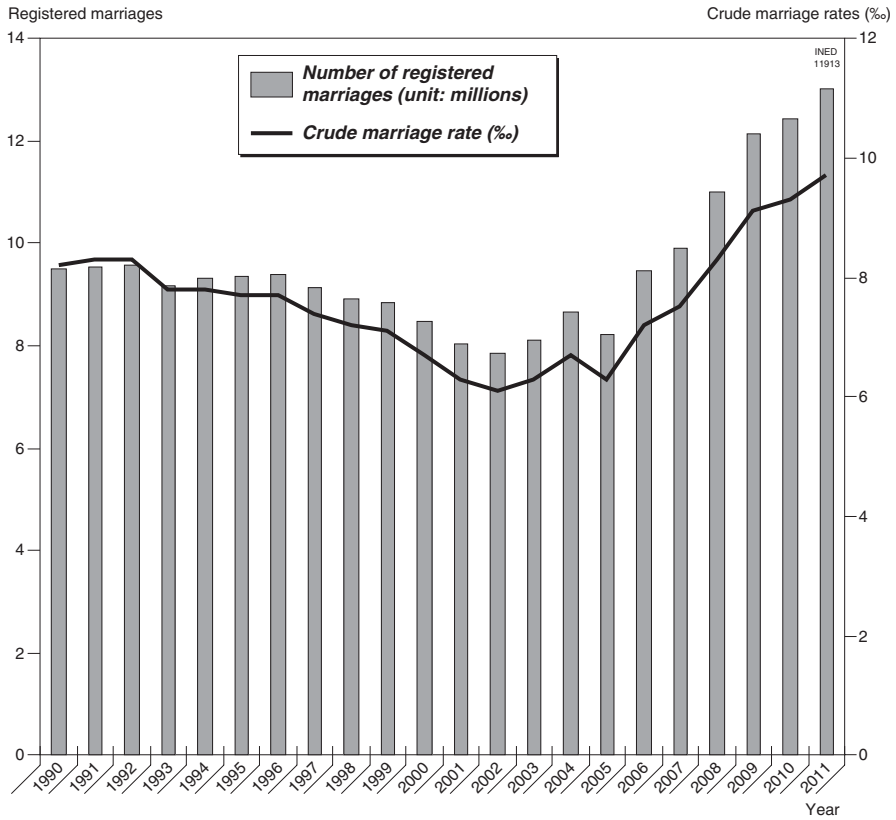


Fig. 3.1 Registered marriages and crude marriage rates (1990–2011) (in millions) (Source: NBS 2012)

This chapter describes recent trends in marriage and divorce as evidenced by the latest population censuses and civil registration data. It highlights the generalization of marriage postponement in the youngest cohorts, with a focus on the fact that men remain single until later ages, on average, than women. In the last section, factors influencing marriage and divorce behaviours are discussed.

3.2 Trends in Marriage Number and Frequency

In China, marriage behaviours have undergone significant changes since the reform and opening-up policy was launched in 1978, and in particular in the most recent decade (2000–2010). As observed in some neighbouring countries (Jones 2007), the trend in China is toward delayed marriage, resulting in increasing proportions of unmarried men and women.

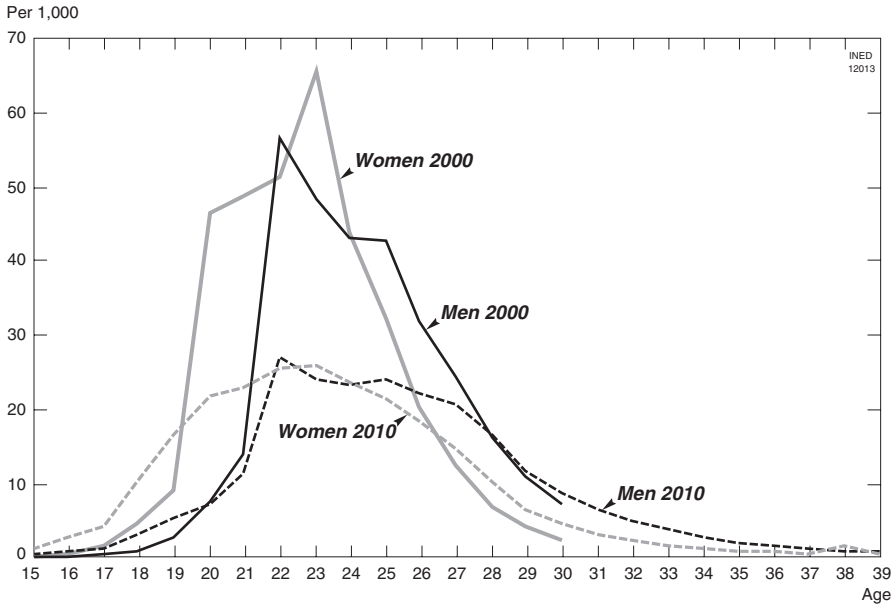


Fig. 3.2 Age-specific marriage rates in 2000 and 2010 (Source: Authors' calculations based on PCO 2002 and PCO 2012)

Figure 3.1 shows that the number of marriages registered annually gradually declined between 1990 and 2002, from 9.51 million to 7.86 million. It then trended upward again, rising to 8.17 million in 2005 and then to 13.02 million in 2011. Meanwhile, the crude marriage rates¹ followed a similar trend, dropping from 8.2 per 1,000 in 1990 to 6.1 per 1,000 in 2002. The trend then reversed, reaching 9.7 per 1,000 in 2011, the highest rate observed in the past 20 years.

These fluctuations in the number of marriages and the crude marriage rates are due mainly to the changing size of cohorts entering the marriage market, in particular those born in the 1970s who reached the age of marriage in the early 1990s and whose size decreased year-on-year during the decade, followed by the increasingly large birth cohorts born in the 1980s, which reached the age of marriage in the early 2000s. But this increase in the absolute numbers of marriages in recent years does not translate into an increased marriage frequency, and conceals the actual trend toward a sustained postponement of marriage.

Indeed, the age-specific marriage rates (Fig. 3.2) indicate that marriage frequency declined significantly between 2000 and 2010, especially at the peak ages for marriage. For men and women aged 22–24 in particular, the rates more than halved during the decade, and this decline was, for women, only very partially offset by the slight increase observed at earlier ages (17–20 years) and later ages (27–30 years).

¹ Crude marriage rates are the number of marriages registered a given year divided by the total population in the middle of the same year.

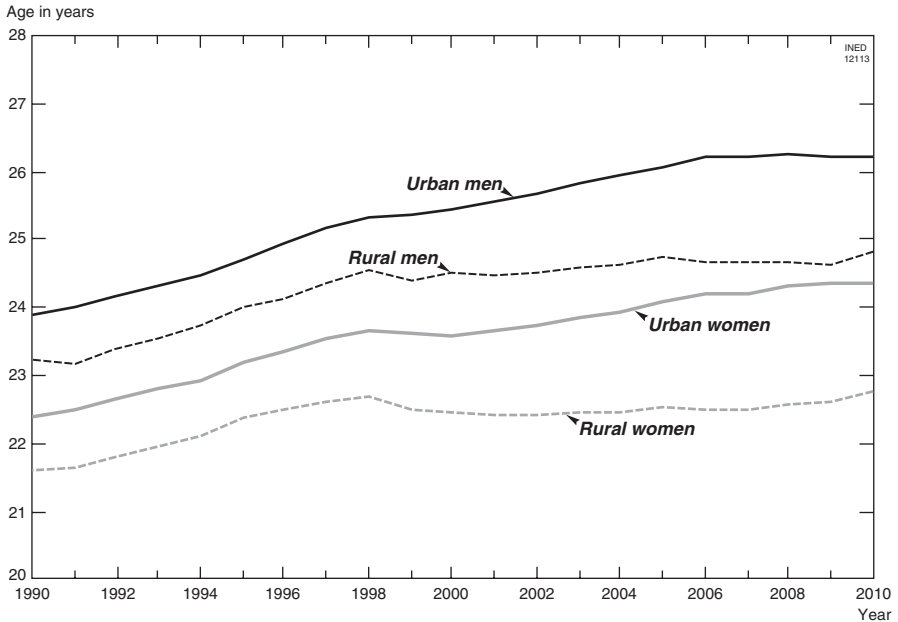


Fig. 3.3 Mean age at first marriage by sex and place of residence 1990–2010 (Source: Authors' calculations based on PCO 2012)

3.3 Delayed Marriage for Both Men and Women

The past two decades have therefore seen a gradual increase in the mean age at first marriage, which gained 2 years between 1990 and 2010, from 22.8 to 24.9 year total number of people aged 6 s. The pace of increase was similar for both men and women. However, the increase was comparatively faster in the 1990s — when the Chinese government took action to promote late marriage, primarily through the refinement of provincial family planning regulations (Zhang and Gu 2007) — than in the 2000s.

It is noticeable, however, that marriage postponement was more pronounced in urban than in rural areas, and for men than for women (Fig. 3.3). In urban areas,² the mean age at first marriage increased by 2.3 years, from 23.9 to 26.2 years for men and by 2.0 years from 22.4 to 24.4 years for women between 1990 and 2010. Meanwhile, in rural areas it gained only 1.6 years (from 23.2 to 24.8 years) for men and 1.2 years (from 21.6 to 22.8 years) for women. The increase was steadier in urban areas over the whole period, while the mean age at first marriage started to level off in rural areas from the late 1990s. The gap in the mean age at first marriage

² Cities (*shi*) and towns (*zhen*) are merged here in a single category considered as urban areas. However, in the 2010 census, the data for mean age at first marriage are listed separately by cities, towns, and rural areas. In this chapter, the data for “urban areas” are the weighted average of the values for cities and towns.

between men and women and between urban and rural areas therefore gradually widened, especially from around 1998. While the average age gap between spouses was around 1.5 years in both urban and rural areas in 1990, it increased by 6 months, to reach around 2 years in 2010. Also, while the difference between urban and rural areas was almost negligible in 1990 (0.7 years for men and 0.8 years for women), it had doubled in 2010, to reach 1.4 and 1.6 years respectively, indicating that marriage behaviours are changing everywhere, but faster in urban than in rural areas.

3.4 Men Remain Unmarried Until Later Ages than Women

The postponement of marriage is also evident when looking at the age-specific proportions of never-married people (Fig. 3.4). The percentage of men and women who are still single increased significantly from 1995 to 2010, especially in the youngest cohorts. The proportion of men still unmarried in the 20–24 age cohort increased by 13.8 percentage points in these 15 years (from 68.6 to 82.4%), while the proportion of women still unmarried in this age group increased by 20.2 percentage points (from 47.4 to 67.6%). In the 25–29 age cohort, the share of unmarried men increased even more significantly, by 18.1 percentage points in the period (from 18.2 to 36.3%), versus 16.1 percentage points for women. However, in this age group, the percentage of unmarried women quadrupled in the period, from 5.5% in 1995 to 21.6% in 2010. This means that while almost all Chinese women were married before age 30 in 1995, one in four in this age group were still unmarried in 2010. This bears witness to the extremely fast changes that have taken place in China's marriage market in recent years.

In addition, the oldest never-married, i.e. those who are still single after age 30 — an age which has long been considered as a social threshold for marriage in China (Attané et al. 2013) — are increasingly numerous. The proportion of unmarried men in the 30–34 age cohort has doubled, rising from 6.2% in 1995 to 12.6% in 2010, while in the 35–39 age cohort, the proportion rose from 4.6 to 6.4% over the period. The phenomenon also exists among women, but is much less prevalent, with a proportion of never-married women in the 30–34 age group that rose from 0.8% in 1995 to 5.4% in 2010. In the 35–39 age cohort, it rose from 0.3 to 1.8% over the same period.

Another issue, however, is that more men than women remain unmarried until later ages, and that lifelong bachelorhood is mainly a male concern (Figs. 3.5 and 3.6). Indeed, men account for more than 75% of the never-married population above age 30, and exceed 90% by age 45. This reflects the impact of the marriage squeeze that characterizes China's adult male population (see Chap. 5. in this book), affecting men with little or no education especially (Attané et al. 2013). While men with secondary or higher education are almost universally married by age 40, 10% of those with a primary education level are still unmarried; this

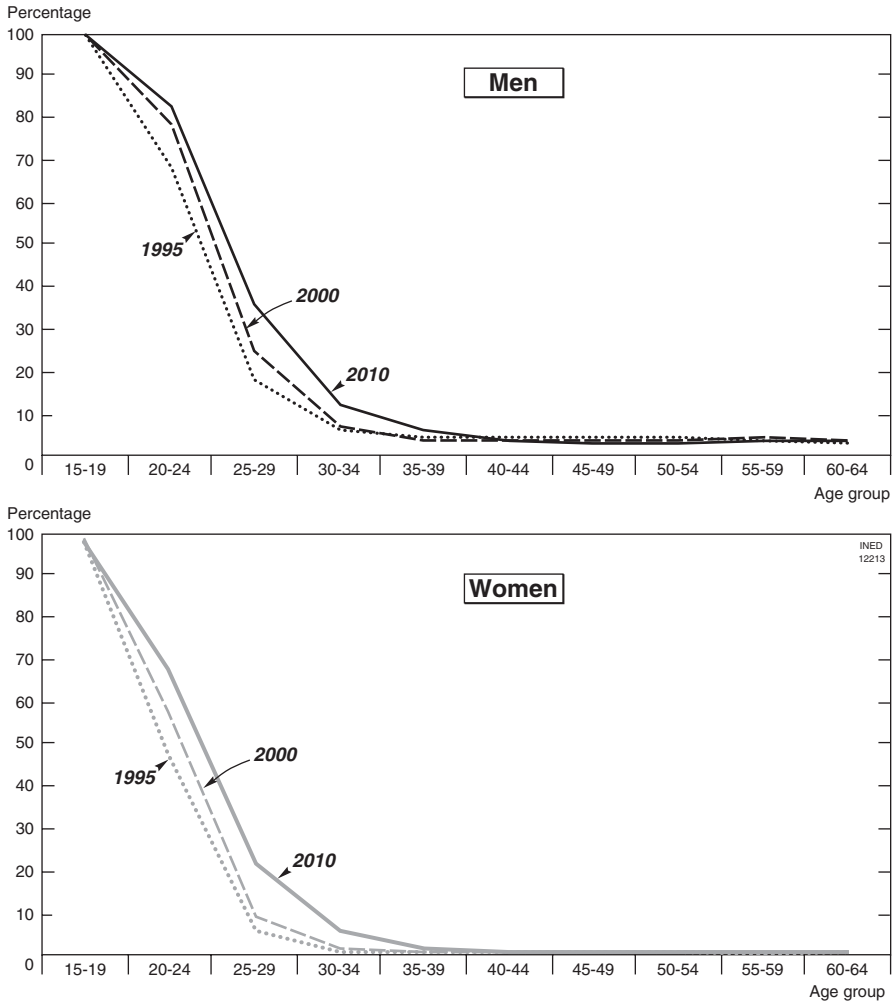


Fig. 3.4 Percentages of unmarried men and women, by age, in 1995, 2000 and 2010 (Source: Authors' calculations based on NBS 2007, PCO 2002 and PCO 2012)

percentage even reaches 40% for those with no schooling (Fig. 3.5). Conversely, almost all women are married by age 35, whatever their educational level. It also appears that the higher the level of education, the less imbalanced the sex ratio of the unmarried. The only group with almost similar proportions of men and women is the group with higher education (Fig. 3.6), indicating that men who are able to provide women with better socioeconomic conditions all have access to marriage, which is far from being the case for the less advantaged socioeconomic groups (Attané et al. 2013).

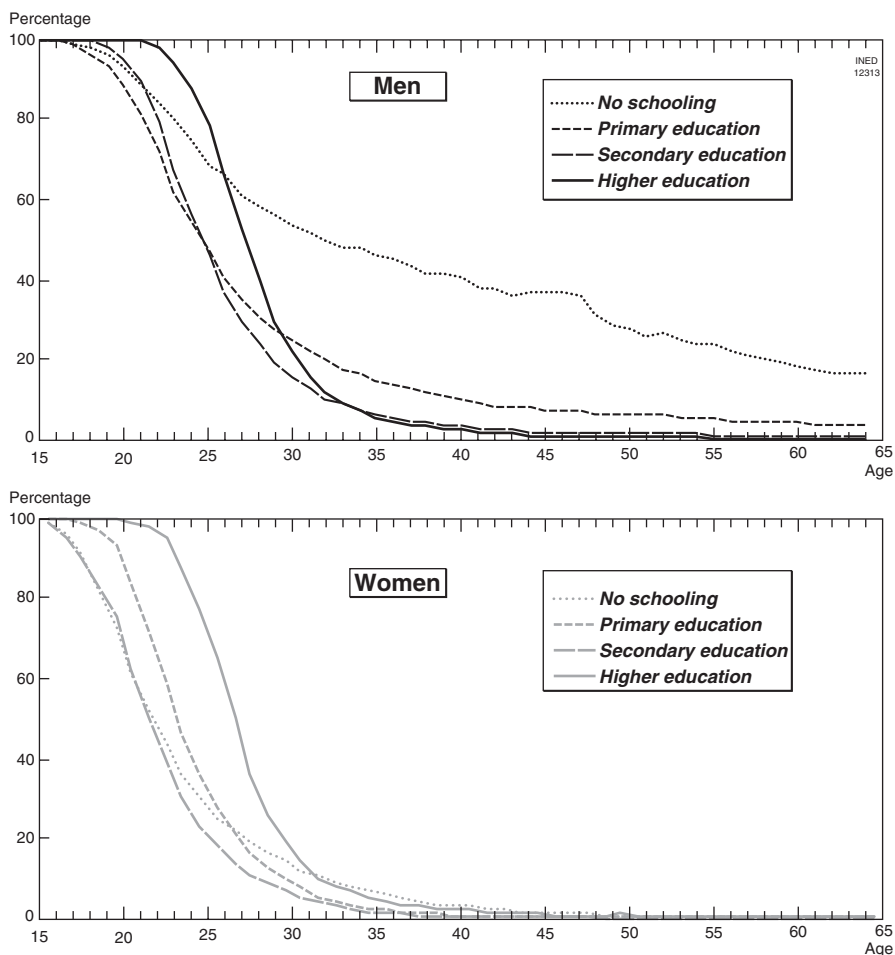


Fig. 3.5 Percentage of never-married men and women by age and level of education (in 2010) (Source: Authors' calculations based on PCO 2012)

3.5 An Increase in Divorce

Changes in marriage behaviours are also observed when looking at divorce. In the decades preceding the reform and opening-up policy, divorce rates were very low in China compared to the world average (Platte 1988). However, rapid socioeconomic development is bringing change in its wake, and in recent years China has experienced a significant rise in divorce.

While the number of marriages has fluctuated in the two decades considered, mainly due to changes in the size of the cohorts involved, as stated above, the number of divorces and crude divorce rates have increased steadily, and the increase has even accelerated significantly from the early 2000s (Fig. 3.7). In the past 20 years,

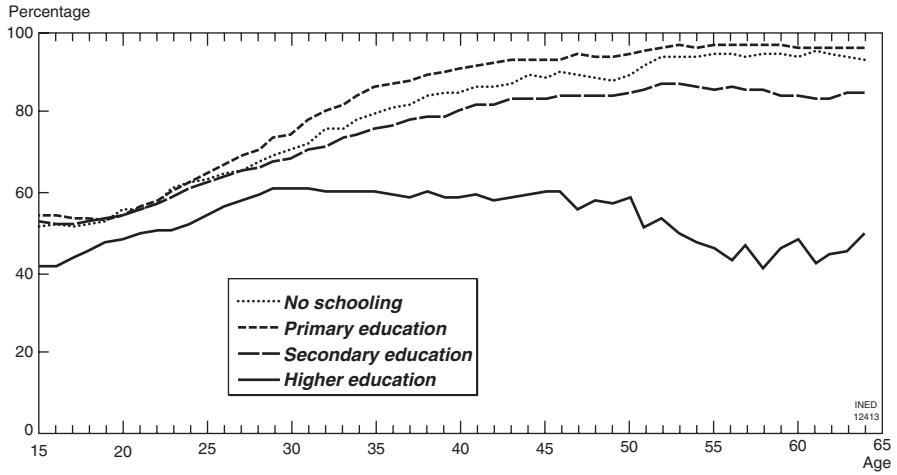


Fig. 3.6 Proportions of men in the never-married population by age in 2010 (Source: Authors' calculations based on PCO 2012)

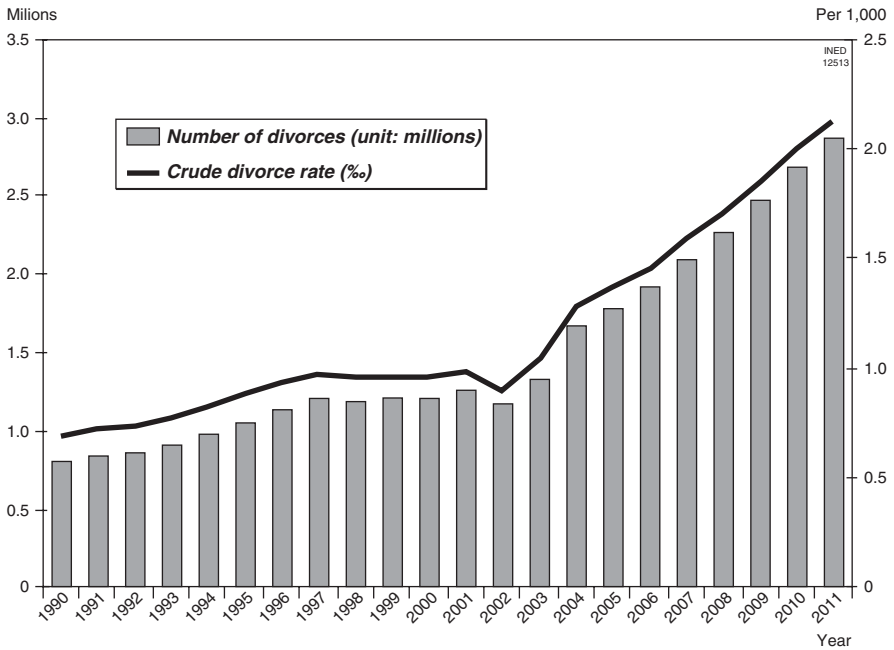


Fig. 3.7 Registered divorces and crude divorce rates, 1990–2011 (Source: NBS 2012)

divorces have increased 3.5-fold, from 0.8 million in 1990, to 1.21 million in 2000, and then to 2.87 million in 2011. Following a similar trend, the crude divorce rates have risen steadily from 0.69 per 1,000 in 1990 to 2.13 per 1,000 in 2011, bearing witness to the social transformations that are affecting traditional values and the premium placed on marriage.

With the expansion of divorce, the proportion of divorcees who are not remarried³ has increased significantly in the past two decades (Fig. 3.8), except in the youngest age cohorts in which fewer people are married — or if married, they have comparatively shorter marriage durations so are less exposed to the risk of divorce. For instance, at age 30, 1.2% of men and 0.6% of women were divorced in 1995. But by 2010, these percentages had reached 1.7 and 1.4% respectively. The increase was even more striking at later ages, with a doubling of the proportions of men divorced at ages 40–50, and a tripling or quadrupling for women. Changes are therefore particularly evident for women: while the median age of the divorced population increased by 2.7 years for men between 1995 and 2010 (from 39.1 to 41.8 years), it increased by 5.4 years for women (from 35.9 to 41.3 years).

However, despite significant change in marital behaviour in recent years, the overwhelming majority of Chinese people aged 30–60, both men and women, are married, even if men remain single until later ages on average, and are more frequently divorced and not remarried than women (Fig. 3.9).

Discussion

Since the launch of its market-oriented economic reform in 1978, China has experienced rapid economic growth and significant socio-demographic changes, including changes in marriage and divorce patterns (Wang and Zhou 2010). The changes are twofold: first, marriage is increasingly delayed for both men and women, and, second, divorces are increasingly common. Indeed, while divorce rates were extremely low in China in the 1960s and 1970s, they have increased dramatically since then, in particular in the 2000s. Marriage and divorce patterns in China are therefore becoming increasingly similar to those in some neighbouring countries, where the fertility transition has been accompanied by a striking trend toward delayed marriage and, in many cases, a failure to marry at all (Jones 2007).

In China, these changes must be viewed in relation to various factors associated with the social liberalization that accompanied the economic reforms. For instance, the development of higher education and the subsequent increase in the average length of schooling in the youngest generations (see Chap. 4 in this book), tend to play in favour of marriage postponement. Also, China's rapid economic development in the past decades, with increased urbanization and rural-to-urban migration, has greatly altered people's aspirations and lifestyles (Zhang and Gu 2007).

³ The 2010 census does not provide data on remarriage. Remarried people are therefore not statistically distinct from married people.

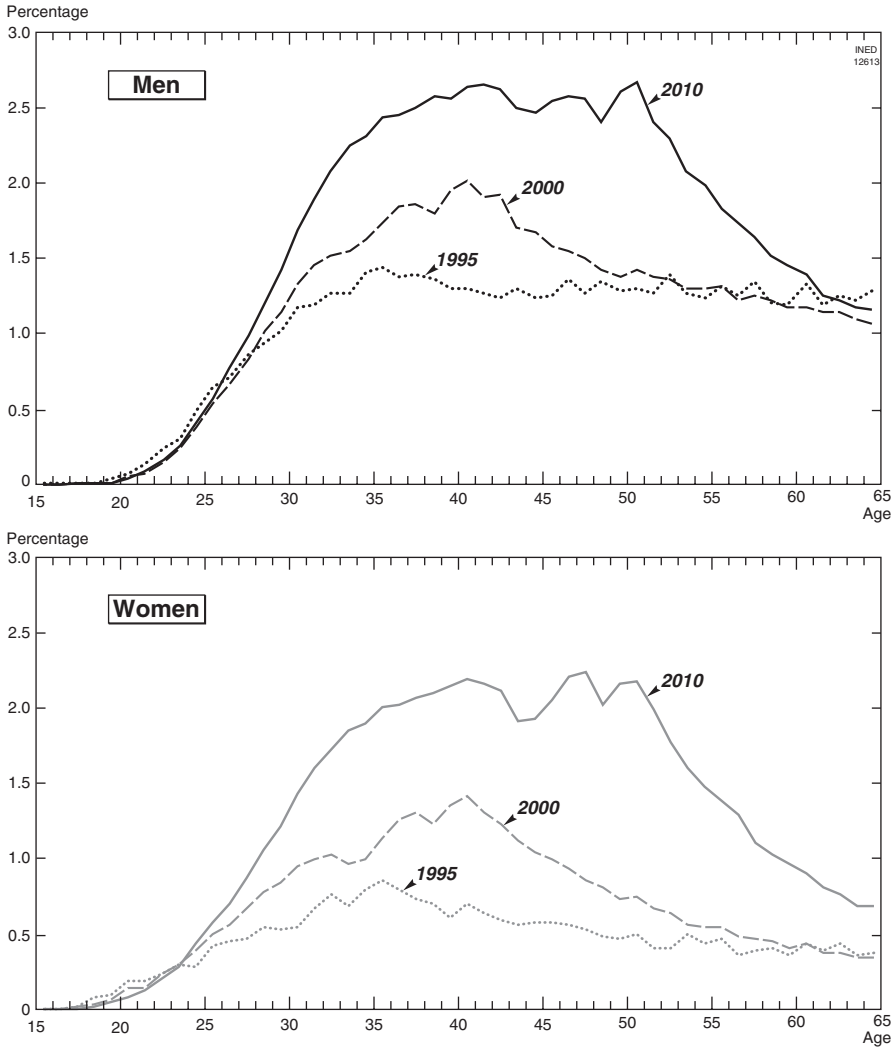


Fig. 3.8 Percentages of men and women divorced and not remarried by age in 1995, 2000 and 2010 (Sources: Authors' calculations based on NBS 2007; PCO 2002 and PCO 2012)

As China's society is becoming increasingly competitive, young women and men, in urban areas especially, tend to be more self-centred and focused on their professional carrier than in the past and are therefore more likely to delay their marriage (Zhao 2008; Wang 2010; Cui 2011). More generally speaking, people are now giving increasing priority to their personal achievement and individual wellbeing, so marital dissolution is becoming a socially acceptable alternative when a marriage is no longer satisfying (Gao and Wu 2012). For instance, using data from surveys conducted in Shanghai, Shaanxi, and Hebei, Zeng et al. (2002) analysed the association

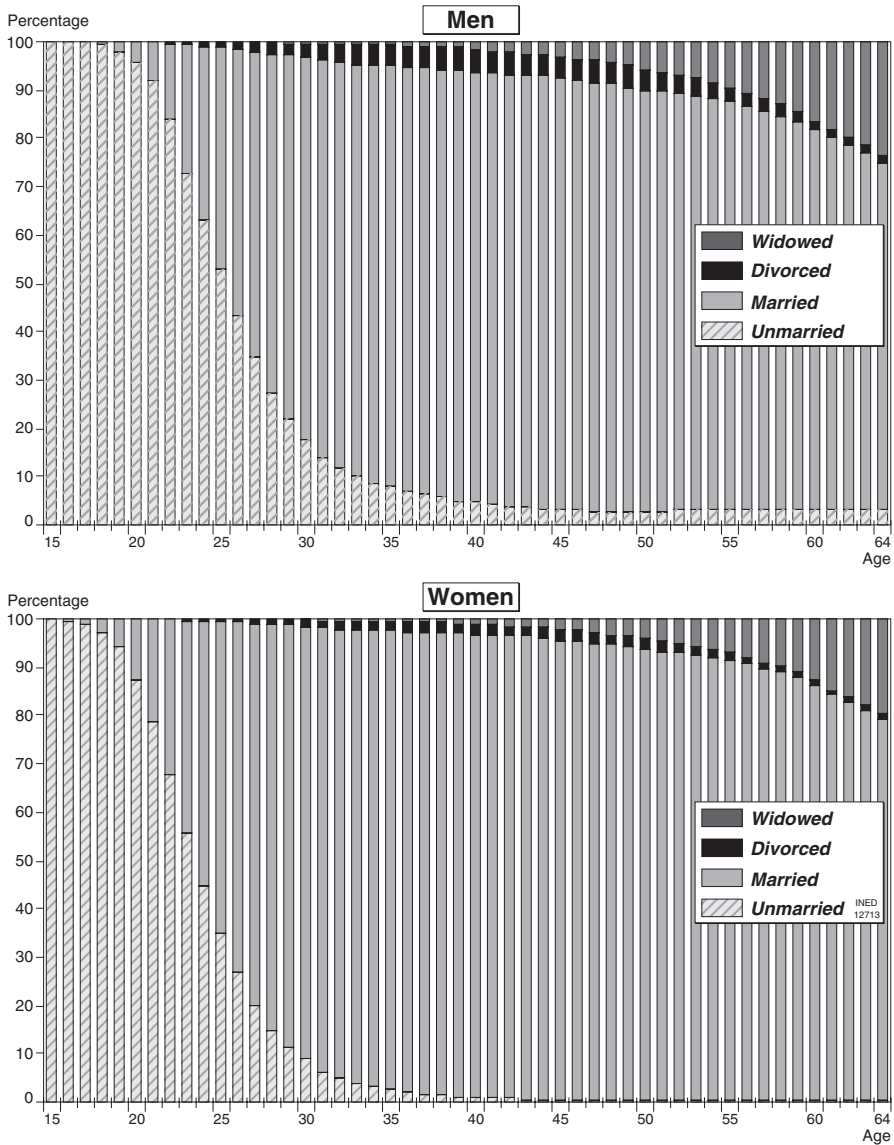


Fig. 3.9 Distribution of men and women by age and marital status in 2010 (Sources: Authors' calculations based on PCO 2012)

between the risk of divorce and various socio-demographic factors. Interestingly, the study showed that the risk of divorce after an arranged marriage was about 2.6 times higher than for non-arranged marriages. It also demonstrated that the risk of divorce for women who had three or more daughters but no son was 2.2 times higher than that of women who had three or more children with at least one son,

indicating that the absence of a male heir in a context of strong preference for sons (see Chap. 5 in this book) can also be a justification for a divorce among Chinese men.

Another important issue underlying marriage postponement is the increasing overall cost of marriage. As most of these costs are borne by grooms and their family, young men often have to wait longer before saving enough to pay for their marriage, and these ruinous costs exert a heavy burden on young people and their family (Wang 2010). They include the wedding ceremony itself, the bride-price — a practice that remains prevalent in rural areas, but is now rare in urban China (Anderson 2007) —, and last but not least, the purchase of a house or an apartment that is becoming a pre-condition for attracting a potential wife in urban areas (Attané 2011).

On the whole, attitudes toward marriage and childbearing are changing (Wang 2010; Cui 2011). Chinese society is becoming more individualist and tolerant, with greater acceptance of divorce, in both laws and public attitudes, and of non-marital cohabitation (Wang and Zhou 2010; Zhao 2008). The wider range of inter-personal relationships and living arrangements in today's society is a sign that the concept of family is becoming more fluid and changeable (Chambers 2012).

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