

# **Impact of Family Background upon the Timing of First Marriage in Contemporary China and Russia**

(Proposal)

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Students of marriage in the United States have consistently observed that youth from higher-status families are more likely than their disadvantaged counterparts to postpone marriage (South 2001). Nonetheless, the association between social origin and the timing of marriage appears to be conditional at least on the desirability (social norms) and feasibility (nature of the marriage market) of marriage (Dixon 1978) as well as the pattern of intergenerational transition of social status (see South 2001). It thus implies that how family background influences individual marital entry could vary across cultural and historical settings. China and Russia, which historically shared the common system of early and universal female marriages (Lee & Wang 1999; Scherbov & Vianen 1999) and had arguably similar experiences of communism in the recent past, represent two distinctive contexts different from the West regarding nuptiality (Dixon 1978). On the other hand, huge socio-cultural disparities have persisted between the two. Notwithstanding such knowledge, it remains unclear how family background affects the timing of first marriage in contemporary China and Russia, and whether the effects are different, or alike, between the two societies. Rooted in the rich body of literature on socio-economic determinants of marriage, comparative studies addressing these questions would contribute to a more general understanding of the relationship between social origin and individual transition to family formation.

Relying on data from the 1996 “Life Histories and Social Change in Contemporary China” survey (Treiman 1998), I estimated discrete-time survival models of age at first marriage with the complementary log-log specification (Allison 1995). Covariates include basic demographic characteristics, individual achievements, family background (class background, father’s occupation,

education, and Communist Party membership), and historical periods. In historical China, where marriages were largely arranged by senior household members, males with privileged social background were able to marry earlier (Lee & Campbell 1997) while female marriage was virtually universal and early regardless of social class (Lee & Wang 1999). The results from my analysis showed instead that advantageous social origins appear to delay individual transition to marriage in today's China. In addition, age at first marriage was found to be strongly correlated with historical contexts featuring different population policies, suggesting powerful influences of governmental regulations on individual marital behavior.

As the next step, I will carry out parallel analysis for Russia during the Soviet era (1917-1991), using the same survival models and specifications, in order to compare the prospective results with those based on the Chinese data. There is evidence that the People's Republic of China was more egalitarian with respect to intergenerational mobility of educational attainment than the former Soviet Union and its East European blocs (Deng & Treiman 1997). As far as intergenerational transition of social status is concerned, I expect that the timing of first marriage was even more strongly related to social origins in the former Soviet Union than in contemporary China. On the other hand, education was found to have strong positive impact on individual transition to marriage in Russia (Cartwright 2000). Like China, the Soviet Russia had witnessed not only a series of disastrous crises, particularly the Revolution of 1917 and Civil War (1917-1922), the ruling of Stalin (1928-1934), and the World War II (1941-1947), but also oscillations in population policies, including regulations on abortion (pp.129-130, Scherbov & Vianen 1999). The models for Russia will include an array of covariates representing specific historical periods of the Soviet Union characterized by either consequential social catastrophes or/and relevant population policies. Following Dixon (1978), it seems reasonable to assume that the huge loss of young men would prevent some females from marrying at normal ages during and right after World War II. Similarly,

hardship facing young people during other aforementioned turmoil would be expected to have negative effects on marital entry. In contrast, periods when abortion was prohibited might feature somewhat earlier marriage ages due to shotgun marriages. Yet choosing a more appropriate categorization of USSR history regarding the concern remains part of my future work. Finally, the data come from the 1993 international project, "Social Stratification in Eastern Europe after 1989" directed by Szelenyi and Treiman (Treiman 1994). The nationally representative sample consists of approximately 5,000 adult Russian, 4685 of them being 20 through 69 years old. It is worthy noting that most of the cases outside the age range are those born prior to 1927, thus came of marriageable age during the Second World War.

The descriptive results are further compared to evaluate to what extent the impacts of social origin on the timing of first marriage differ between the two selected societies, namely contemporary China and former Soviet Russia. Combined with our knowledge about patterns of marital entry in the American society, the current study would shed light upon and contribute to a more general understanding of the relationship between social origin and individual transition to family formation.

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