

# CHINESE FAMILIES

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY  
RESEARCH VOLUME 16

**CHINESE FAMILIES: TRADITION,  
MODERNISATION, AND CHANGE**

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>About the Editors</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Changes in the Association between Education and Cohabitation in Post-reform China</b> <i>Wei Wang and Man-Yee Kan</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>Chapter 2 Like Mother, Like Daughter? Mother–Daughter Educational Mobility in Rural China</b> <i>Manting Chen</i>	<i>31</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Satisfaction with Family Status and Housework Participation in Modern China</b> <i>Man-Yee Kan, Guangye He and Xiaogang Wu</i>	<i>65</i>
<b>Chapter 4 Satisfaction of Division of Household Labour in China</b> <i>Fang Fang</i>	<i>89</i>
<b>Chapter 5 Couple Similarity and Life Satisfaction: A Study of Young Couples in Shanghai of Mainland China</b> <i>Ke Shen, H. Brin Xu, Omkar Joshi and Feinian Chen</i>	<i>107</i>
<b>Chapter 6 Gender Egalitarianism and Subjective Well-being among Older Adults in China</b> <i>Chengming Han and Jiehua Lu</i>	<i>127</i>
<b>Chapter 7 Housework Participation and Fertility Intentions: Analysing the Gendered Division of Labour and Fertility in Taiwan</b> <i>Kamila Kolpashnikova and Man-Yee Kan</i>	<i>141</i>

<b>Chapter 8 Multigenerational Experiences of Women in Taiwanese Families</b> <i>Ting-Yu Su</i>	157
<b>Chapter 9 The Policy Measures Used by the Hong Kong Government to Respond to the Adult Worker Model and the Male-breadwinner Model</b> <i>Sam Wai Kam Yu, Iris Po Yee Lo and Ruby Chui Man Chau</i>	175
<b>Chapter 10 Attitudes Towards Marriage among Chinese and American College Students: A Comparative Study</b> <i>Timothy Madigan</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	237

# LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

## Chapter 1

Fig. 1.	The Rise of the Age of First Marriage and Years of Education for Married Individuals 1949–2016	16
Fig. 2.	Percentage of Premarital Cohabitation Across Educational Attainment and Marriage Cohorts for Married Males	17
Fig. 3.	Percentage of Premarital Cohabitation Across Educational Attainment and Marriage Cohorts for Married Females	18
Fig. 4.	Predicted Premarital Cohabitation Probability for Married Males and Females Across Educational Levels in Post-reform China	23
Table 1.	Explanatory Variables by Cohabitation and Marriage Cohorts for Males	19
Table 2.	Explanatory Variables by Cohabitation and Marriage Cohorts for Females	20
Table 3.	Odds Ratios for the Association of Educational Attainment and Premarital Cohabitation for Married Males by Marriage Cohorts in Post-reform China	21
Table 4.	Odds Ratios for the Association of Educational Attainment and Premarital Cohabitation for Married Females by Marriage Cohorts in Post-reform China	22

## Chapter 2

Fig. 1.	Daughters' Education in Rural China: A Conceptual Framework	35
Fig. 2.	Predicted Probability of College Education Attainment at Each Level of Mother's Education, by Gender	50
Fig. 3.	Predicted Probability of College Education Attainment at Each Level of Father's Education, by Gender	50
Table 1.	SUR Results of Daughter's (Models 1, 3, 5, and 7) and Son's (Models 2, 4, 6, and 8) College-level Educational Attainment	43
Table 2.	Significance Tests Results of Coefficients of Parental Education	45
Table 3.	Logistic Regression Results of Children's College Attainment	48
Table 4.	Significance Tests Results of Coefficients of the Interaction Terms of Parental Education	49
Table 5.	Logistic Regression Results of Daughters' College Attainment	52
Table 6.	Descriptive Statistics of Main Predictors	59

Table 7.	SUR Results of Daughter's and Son's College-level Educational Attainment	60
Table 8.	Significance Tests Results of Coefficients of Parental Education	61
Table 9.	County-level Fixed Effect Results of Daughter's and Son's College-level Educational Attainment	61
Table 10.	Significance Tests Results of Coefficients of Parental Education	62
Table 11.	SUR Results of Daughters' and Sons' College-level Educational Attainment Interaction Terms	63

### Chapter 3

Fig. 1.	A Diagram of Relative Housework Contribution and Family Status Satisfaction	79
Fig. 2.	A Diagram of Housework Time and Family Status Satisfaction	80
Table 1.	Descriptive Statistics of Selected Variables	73
Table 2.	OLS Regression of Relative Housework Contribution and Wives' Family Status Satisfaction	74
Table 3.	OLS Regression of Relative Housework Contribution and Husbands' Family Status Satisfaction	75
Table 4.	OLS Regression of Housework Time and Wives' Family Status Satisfaction	77
Table 5.	OLS Regression of Housework Time and Husbands' Family Status Satisfaction	78
Table 6.	SEM of Relative Housework Contribution and Wives' Family Status Satisfaction	81
Table 7.	SEM of Relative Housework Contribution and Husbands' Family Status Satisfaction	82
Table 8.	SEM of Housework Time and Wives' Family Status Satisfaction	83
Table 9.	SEM of Housework Time and Husbands' Family Status Satisfaction	84

### Chapter 4

Table 1.	Descriptive Statistics for Variables by Gender	97
Table 2.	Weighted Logistic Regression Models Predicting Women's and Men's Satisfaction with Division of Household Labour ( $N = 9,330$ )	98

### Chapter 5

Fig. 1.	Life Satisfaction in Three Waves of FYRST	118
Table 1.	Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables ( $N = 2,463$ )	115
Table 2.	Comparisons in Four Characteristics between the Husband and Wife (FYRST 2012–2016) ( $N = 2,463$ )	116
Table 3.	Husband's Decision-making Power (FYRST 2012–2016) ( $N = 2,463$ )	117

Table 4.	Impacts of Couple Similarity on Life Satisfaction with Ordered Logistic Regression Models (2012–2016) ( $N = 2,463$ )	119
----------	---	-----

Table 5.	Heterogeneous Impacts of Couple Similarity on Life Satisfaction by Education with Ordered Logistic Regression Models (2012–2016) ( $N = 2,463$ )	121
----------	--	-----

## Chapter 6

Table 1.	Means and Standard Deviations of Variables	133
----------	--	-----

Table 2.	Standardised Regression on Subjective Well-being	134
----------	--	-----

Table 3.	Standardised Regression for Intersectional Effects of Hukou and Gender	134
----------	--	-----

## Chapter 7

Table 1.	Mean (SD) of Main Variables, Men	146
----------	----------------------------------	-----

Table 2.	Mean (SD) of Main Variables, Women	147
----------	------------------------------------	-----

Table 3.	Fixed-effect Models for Housework Hours	150
----------	---	-----

Table 4.	Probit Models of the Intention to have More Children (Odds Ratios)	152
----------	--	-----

Table 5.	Conditional Marginal Effects on the Intention to have More Children	153
----------	---	-----

## Chapter 9

Chart 1.	Participants' (30) Views on the Government's Role in Helping Women Save Pension Incomes	187
----------	---	-----

Chart 2.	Preferences for Participation in the Family and/or Work Economy	190
----------	---	-----

Table 1.	Different Combinations of the Strategies Used by the Government to Respond to the Adult Worker Model and the Male-breadwinner Model	178
----------	---	-----

Table 2.	Policy Measures for Supporting the Strategies Used by the Government to Strengthen the Two Models	179
----------	---	-----

Table 3.	Hong Kong Government's Strategies for Responding to the Two Models	184
----------	--	-----

Table 4.	Personal Characteristics of Participants	185
----------	--	-----

## Chapter 10

Table 1.	Mean Levels of Demographic Characteristics among College Students, by Country	218
----------	---	-----

Table 2.	Mean Levels of Marriage Dimensions among College Students, by Country	219
----------	---	-----

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# FOREWORD

Over the last half of a century, Chinese societies have undergone a tremendous amount of social, cultural, and economic changes. Although Chinese family structures and norms have been established over thousands of years, economic developments, expansion in education, global trade, and migration have resulted in substantial changes to those structures and norms. In particular, families and marriages have experienced several rapid changes in Chinese societies over the last three decades: marriage rates have declined, gender gaps in education have been narrowed down or closed, the age of first having a child has increased, and non-traditional forms of family trajectories, such as pre-marital cohabitation have become increasingly common. Yet, Chinese families have also become more diverse, both culturally and geographically, as they have been under varying historical and political influences and different public family-related policies within Greater China.

This volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* aims at comprehending the various changes, continuities, and diversities in Chinese families. There are 10 chapters focussing upon families in Greater China, including the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These chapters address a wide array of topics, including education and cohabitation, rural–urban variations in family structures, gender attitudes, fertility aspirations, spousal relationships and marital quality, and intergenerational relations. The first five chapters are about the People's Republic of China and address topics on cohabitation, mother-and-daughter relationships, gender division of labour, and marital satisfaction. The last four chapters each focusses on a particular Chinese society: one on Shanghai, two on Taiwan, and one on Hong Kong. The final chapter takes a comparative perspective about China and the United States. These chapters altogether provide a rich set of data to show the variations and commonalities among contemporary Chinese families.

In Chinese societies, premarital cohabitation is still not common. However, this practice is increasing over time. From experiences of several Western industrialised countries, highly educated people are the foremost group to cohabit before marriage and cohabitation will diffuse to all educational groups over time. In 'Changes in the Association between Education and Cohabitation in Post-reform China', Wei Wang and Man-Yee Kan analyse data from the China Family Panel Studies (2010–2016) to examine how premarital cohabitation is associated with educational qualifications across different marriage cohorts in China. They find that, unlike the experiences of Western industrialised countries, the positive association between education and premarital cohabitation has not decreased, but instead has increased across the cohorts.

Education plays a key role in transforming gender and family norms. The gender gap in higher education has been closed in China in recent years. How might the educational mobility of women be influenced by their mothers? In 'Like Mother, Like Daughter? Mother–Daughter Educational Mobility in Rural China', Manting Chen analyses data of the China Family Panel Studies 2010 to investigate the association between mothers' and daughters' educational attainments in rural China. Her findings suggest that mothers' educational attainment is positively associated with their daughters' one. Moreover, the association between mothers' and daughters' educational attainments is stronger than those between mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, and fathers and sons, especially among the most highly educated groups. Mothers' higher education also mitigates negative effects of the daughters being born at an older age and having brothers.

The home is where modern and traditional behaviours often conflict with one other. It is also where gender is performed, reinforced, and challenged in daily activities, especially in housework. What determines the gender division of domestic labour and what are the implications for marital satisfaction? In 'Satisfaction with Family Status and Housework Participation in Modern China', Man-Yee Kan, Guangye He and Xiaogang Wu analyse data of the Women's Status Survey 2010 to look into how the division of housework between husbands and wives is associated with the satisfaction with family status. They find that both husbands and wives are less satisfied with their family status if they do more housework than their spouses. What is more, relative housework contribution is more significantly and negatively associated with family status satisfaction than absolute housework time. Their findings also highlight differences between urban and rural areas. Housework is negatively associated with women's and men's satisfaction with family status in urban area but not in rural area when endogeneity between these housework and satisfaction is taken into account.

Furthermore, intergenerational support is a key characteristics of Chinese societies. How might this affect the domestic division of labour at home and marital satisfaction? Fang Fang's paper 'Satisfaction of Division of Household Labour in China', based on analysis of the Women's Status Survey 2000 data, examines how satisfaction with division of household labour between spouses is associated with economic resources, gender ideology, time availability, and domestic help from parents and parents-in-law. Her findings show that intergenerational relationship is intertwined with the gender dynamics between spouses in families in China. Only married women's satisfaction, but not married men's, is shown to be associated with domestic help provided by parents or parents-in-law.

The gender dynamics in married couples are not only manifested in domestic labour, but also in other socio-economic characterises. In 'Couple Similarity and Life Satisfaction: A Study of Young Couples in Shanghai of Mainland China', Ke Shen, H. Brin Xu, Omkar Joshi, and Feinian Chen examined how life satisfaction of Shanghai young couples is influenced by similarity in each other's characteristics. They analyse data of the Fudan Yangtze River Delta Social Transformation Survey, which interviewed the first single-child generation youths born in Shanghai between 1980 and 1989, and find that similarity in age,

educational levels, and income between married spouses do not have any impacts on the couples' life satisfaction. The most important factor that explains life satisfaction is the *hukou* (urban and rural household registration) composition of the spouses. When the husband has the urban *hukou* and the wife has the rural one, and when both spouses hold the urban *hukou*, they will be more satisfied with their life, especially for those without college education.

The rural and urban differences in gender attitudes, housework, and their associations with subjective well-being are not only found among younger people, but also among older adults in China. In 'Gender Egalitarianism and Subjective Well-being Among Older Adults in China', Chengming Han and Jiehua Lu focus on older adults aged between 63 and 95 and look into how gender egalitarian attitudes and routine housework might affect their subjective well-being. They employ data of the 2010 Survey on the Social Status of Women in China. They find clear differences between rural and urban older people in gender attitudes and housework. Although women undertake much more housework, housework is associated with subjective well-being only among rural women but not urban women.

The gendered division of housework is likely to affect other important family decisions. Will the division of housework between spouses affect their fertility intentions? In 'Housework Participation and Fertility Intentions: Analysing the Gendered Division of Labour and Fertility in Taiwan', Kamila Kolpashnikova and Man-Yee Kan investigate this question by using data of the 2007–2016 Taiwan Panel Study of Family Dynamics. They find that married women tend to desire for more children if their husbands undertake more housework. On the contrary, married men's fertility intention does not seem to be affected by their own or their wives' housework participation. Such gender imbalance reflects, to a certain extent, that Taiwan is transitioning only slowly from a male breadwinner family model to a gender egalitarian one.

To what extent have women's experiences in growing up, getting married, becoming mothers, and so on have changed over the last 50 years in Taiwan? Focussing again on Taiwan, and taking a different methodological approach from the previous chapter, in 'The Multigenerational Experiences of Women in Taiwanese Families', Ting-Yu Su employs a critical theory framework and provides narratives of stories of a woman's and her grandmother's gendered perceptions and experiences in Taiwan. Her research reveals how gendered experiences as daughters and mothers have changed and what traditions are still culturally embedded.

How gender roles and norms have been transformed in Chinese societies depend very much on public policies. Are the policies reinforcing traditional male breadwinner model of families or are they encouraging couples to form dual earner gender egalitarian families? In 'The Policy Measures Used by the Hong Kong Government to Respond to the Adult Worker Model and the Male-breadwinner Model', Sam Wai Kam Yu, Iris Po Yee Lo and Ruby Chui Man Chau examine how the Hong Kong government's policies have responded to these two family models. In particular, they look into policy measures which can support women's employment, the local work-based pension scheme, and measures that may help full time family carers to secure resources for retirement. Their study is

also based on interview findings of a number of professional women about their views of the pension scheme in Hong Kong.

Do young Chinese people hold different attitudes towards marriages and family compared to people from Western countries? In 'Attitudes towards Marriage among Chinese and American College Students: A Comparative Study', Timothy Madigan analyses data collected from colleges students in China and the United States about their attitudes towards marriage, age to get married, the number of desired children, the age to have children, divorce, pre-marital cohabitation, and gender division of labour within marriage. He finds that Chinese students tend to support the marriage institution and plan having children a year later in age compared to the US students. Chinese students also prefer having fewer total number of children than US students. Chinese students and US students differ in their attitudes towards divorce and gender division of labour at home, but they shared similar attitudes about cohabitation.

In sum, these chapters showcase how gender relations, family norms, and intergenerational ties are being performed, transformed, challenged, and reproduced in the home and marriages of Chinese families in different regions. They also provide valuable insights into the gender and intergenerational dynamics of modern Chinese families.

Man-Yee Kan  
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# CHAPTER 1

## CHANGES IN THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND COHABITATION IN POST-REFORM CHINA

Wei Wang and Man-Yee Kan

### ABSTRACT

*Purpose: Premarital cohabitation has increased dramatically in China in the last few decades. Past studies have suggested that education is positively associated with premarital cohabitation in China, but how this association changes over time when cohabitation grows from a marginal phenomenon to a popular choice remains unknown. This chapter investigates the changes in the association between education and premarital cohabitation among married individuals in post-reform China.*

*Design/methodology/approach: Using pooled data from the China Family Panel Studies (2010–2016), logistic regressions are carried out to compare the association between education and premarital cohabitation across three marriage cohorts: 1981–1992, 1993–2001, and 2002–2016.*

*Findings: Results show that opposite to trends in many Western countries, the positive association between education and premarital cohabitation has not decreased but instead strengthened over time in China. This trend is more consistent for women than men.*

*Research limitations/implications: The pathways through which education influences cohabitation have not been examined. Moreover, the scope of this*

*research is limited to married individuals and does not include cohabiting experiences that do not lead to marriage. Future research may address this issue when such data become available.*

*Originality/value: This chapter for the first time examines how the association between education and premarital cohabitation changes over time across different marriage cohorts and whether the diffusion process has happened like what has been observed in Western countries. The findings suggest that China is developing different patterns and trends of demographic changes because of its unique institutional and cultural context.*

**Keywords:** Cohabitation; marriage; education; post-reform China; Asian families; China Family Panel Studies

## INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation has become an increasingly common stage before marriage in post-reform China. As educational attainment is an important indicator of economic prospect, social status, and cultural characteristics, the identification of the association between education and cohabitation is essential for deepening the understanding of the essence and features of cohabitation in a given society. The aim of this chapter is thus to explore the association between educational attainment and premarital cohabitation among married individuals in post-reform China (after 1978), with a particular focus on the historical development of this association over the past few decades. This chapter will first introduce the theoretical framework and empirical evidence regarding education and cohabitation in Western countries, which will be followed by a discussion around the contextual difference of China, with respect to the institutional and cultural changes related to cohabitation and education.

Family patterns have experienced dramatic changes in the last century throughout the world. Many Western developed countries have witnessed demographic changes featuring sub-replacement fertility, alternative arrangements of marriage, higher divorce rate, gender-egalitarian relationships, births out of wedlock, and declining population size. This has been summarised by some scholars as the 'second demographic transition' (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Of particular importance is the phenomenon of cohabitation, meaning co-residing without being legally married, which has increased dramatically over the last 50 years. For example, the percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation grew from 10% in the 1960s to over 50% in the 1990s in the United States (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Smock, 2000). Regardless of national variations, an increasing trend has been observed among European nations in general, with Nordic countries taking the lead. The proportion of cohabiting couples among those in any partnership for people aged between 25 and 34 in 2001 reached 85% in Sweden and was above 70% in both Finland and Denmark (Kiernan, 2004). In East Asian countries, such as Japan, similar trends were found as well. For the same age group (25–34), 25% of

females were reported to have had cohabitation experience in a national survey in Japan in 2004 (Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2009). These findings indicate that a fundamental change in intimate relationships and family formation might have occurred all around the world (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). Much of the previous research on cohabitation has focussed on the characteristics of cohabitators, and the results were inconclusive. While the majority of the literature has found that cohabitators tend to be less educated (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995), others have found variations among different countries, or over time within the same country (Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010).

In China, although cohabitation is a relatively new phenomenon, it has experienced a significant increase over the past few decades after the economic reform started in the late 1970s. The proportion of couples cohabiting before marriage was only around 10% in the 1970s, and this figure was found to be nearly one-third in the recent marriage cohort (Yu & Xie, 2015). However, there are fundamental differences between cohabitation in China and Western developed countries. One major difference is that fertility is very rare in the state of cohabiting in China, contrasting with that in Western countries where a delinking of procreation and marriage has been witnessed (Cherlin, 2004). For instance, half of all out-of-wedlock births occur in cohabiting relationships in the United States (Bumpass et al., 1991; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004), whereas fertility remains an activity that is tightly restricted within marriage in China. This seems to link with current legislations in China that require women to be married to get the 'birth permit' before giving birth to children, which is crucial for ensuring that the child can be registered with the House Registration System (Hukou)<sup>1</sup> and be entitled to the benefit of the state schools and social welfare system (Currier, 2008). As a result, this regulation renders the out-of-wedlock birth rate extremely low and childbearing continues to be predominantly restricted within marriage. Unlike Western countries, where cohabitation increasingly resembles a family status (Bumpass et al., 1991), and marriage has gradually been deinstitutionalised and reduced to 'a prestigious form of symbolic capital' (Cherlin, 2004) or 'one life-style among others' (Giddens, 1992), marriage persists as the primary institution in China. In this context, cohabitation seems to function as a transitional stage before marriage rather than substituting for marriage.

Therefore, the low fertility in cohabitating relationships in China reflects a deeper institutional difference between Chinese and Western societies. Contrary to cohabitation appearing as an individual choice in many Western developed countries, cohabitation in China occurs under the strong influence of the state through its laws and regulations regarding marriage and fertility. Thus, cohabitation is not an entirely personal choice in China, but an outcome of individuals navigating their family choices under the shaping force of a strong state.

Despite a large volume of research on cohabitation in Western countries, there has been little research on cohabitation in China, which leads to a limited understanding of the phenomenon. Given the aforementioned differences between cohabitation in Western countries and China, it is uncertain if the existing theories and conclusions for cohabitation in Western countries apply to the context

of China. There has been empirical evidence of characteristics of cohabitators in China that are different from the previous literature. For example, contrary to the findings in the majority of Western literature that cohabitators are less educated, [Yu and Xie \(2015\)](#) reached the opposite conclusion that Chinese cohabitators are from the better-educated group. A deeper understanding of how education and cohabitation relate to each other will not only provide valuable insights into the nature of this rising phenomenon in China, but also contributes a case study on how demographic changes develop in a different institutional and cultural context.

By using longitudinal data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS 2010–2016), a detailed study of the applicability of the existing Western theories in China is carried out in this chapter. Specifically, this study will investigate the nature of the relationship between education and premarital cohabitation through examining whether the likelihood of premarital cohabitation differs among education groups and between genders. Moreover, this study for the first time will investigate how the association between education and premarital cohabitation changes over time across different marriage cohorts and whether the diffusion process has happened like what has been observed in Western countries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will introduce the theoretical framework and empirical evidence of education and cohabitation in Western countries, followed by a discussion on the unique institutional context in China and recent changes in Chinese family formation in the post-reform era, as well as the current literature on cohabitation and education in China. Finally, hypotheses will be generated from the literature review.

### *Theoretical Framework*

[Thomson and Bernhardt \(2010\)](#) suggested that the understanding of how education influences cohabitation structurally and ideologically is still limited. As a different form of an intimate relationship, cohabitation resembles marriage in many aspects, including co-residence and sexual activity. The role of cohabitation has traditionally been categorised as an alternative to marriage or as a transitional stage prior to marriage ([Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004](#)). Thus, this section presents the main theories about the relationship between education and intimate union formation, which includes both marriage and cohabitation. This is in line with the previous literature on this topic ([Ikamari, 2005](#); [Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010](#)).

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to examining the relationship between education and union formation. The first approach emphasises the mechanism, entailing the pathways through which education influences union formation. Two main theories belong to this approach, including economic theory and ideological theory. The second approach, represented by diffusion theory, focusses on the progress or development of the relationship at the societal level.

The following section will explain these theories in more detail and argue that the diffusion theory provides a more relevant framework for this empirical study, that is, understanding the evolving relationship between education and cohabitation in China.

According to the economic theory, education can influence the possibility and timing of union formation either negatively or positively. Negative economic theory suggests that education raises the opportunity cost of entering into marriage or cohabitation, thereby reducing the incentives for people to form unions. According to [Becker's \(1981\)](#) new home economics theory, men and women trade with each other in the marriage market akin to firms to maximise their utilities. In the traditional society where the level of women's educational attainment and participation in the labour market was much lower than that of men, marriage formation benefitted both parties, as men and women specialised in the labour market and family, respectively. However, rising educational and labour market opportunities for women have made them more independent of men's economic support and increased the opportunity cost of entering into marriage, which makes marriage less desirable. As a form of union, although cohabitation is less desired, the opportunity cost of entering into cohabitation is lower than that of marriage, as it is associated with lower commitments in comparison to marriage ([Thornton et al., 1995](#)). Therefore, cohabitation may become an alternative to marriage for dual-earner relationships.

Positive economic theory, on the contrary, suggests that education has a positive effect on union formation by providing the necessary resources required for family functions. Education enables individuals to become economically independent and provides employment and income to support a thorough search for partners ([Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010](#)). This is in line with [Oppenheimer's \(1988, 1997\)](#) job search theory – that a marriage search is similar to a job search, especially in terms of the match sought and the duration of the search. Although education may affect marriage timing by delaying the transition to a stable work role, in the long run, education and consequential improvements in the labour market and earnings could improve one's position in the partnership market, facilitate the capacity of finding a suitable residence, and secure resources for stable family life ([Oppenheimer, 1988](#)). In this case, cohabitation can be seen as a transitional stage for those who are less advantageous economically to accumulate resources before entering into marriage.

However, the application of these theories depends largely on the societal contexts, in particular, gender relations and the institutional environment supporting or restraining the family–work compatibility ([Bernhardt, 1993](#); [Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010](#)). For example, [Thomson and Bernhardt \(2010\)](#) pointed out that in places where social policies and cultural practices promote gender equality and the compatibility of work and family life, education tends to play a positive role in providing resources for people to enter into unions. However, in situations where gender role specialisation is high, the positive economic theory can still apply to men as education associates them with a higher earning potential that better fulfils the 'bread-winning' role. In contrast, the negative economic theory can be applied to women, who face a significant opportunity cost of forming unions and

bearing children (Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010). In such cases, cohabitation may be more popular among highly educated women.

Ideological theory suggests that education changes the desirability of marriage or cohabitation via shaping the attitudes and values held by people. The process of education makes people more individualistic by exposing them to alternative ideas and preferences to their family origin. This rise in individualisation was widely recognised as a driving force of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1983; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). Education also produces values that place self-fulfilment above forms of collective life, for example, family or marriage (Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010), which undermines the values required for family formation. This effect is more obvious in traditional societies where women rely on marriage and childbearing to gain social status. In such a context, when education liberates women from the expectations of early marriage and childbearing, it gives them new career opportunities and personal goals (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1987; Ikamari, 2005), which makes marriage less desirable.

The application of ideological theory also depends on the societal environment. In societies where a higher degree of values is placed on individual autonomy and gender equality and when cohabitation is widely approved, education may have little influence on the desirability of cohabitation or marriage (Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010). However, in societies where these ideas are not so common, education may have a significant influence, especially for women (Yu & Xie, 2015).

In contrast with the aforementioned theories, the diffusion theory shifts the perspective from mechanism to societal-historical development. It points out that even within the same society, the application of the theories is heavily influenced by institutional and cultural changes. Therefore, the relationship between education and cohabitation is expected to follow a dynamic developmental process. In 2001, Kiernan introduced a diffusion thesis for understanding how the pattern of cohabitation evolves in different historical stages. By examining the extent and depth of changes of cohabitation in Western Europe, Kiernan (2001) describes a trajectory that cohabitation has taken, from being a deviant behaviour at the primitive stage, to functioning as either a prelude to marriage or a trial marriage in the second stage, to becoming more socially acceptable as an alternative to marriage in the third stage, and finally becoming indistinguishable from marriage in the last stage. Thus, the phenomenon of cohabitation can be seen as a gradual and incremental process from innovation to diffusion. During this process, the relationship between education and cohabitation changes accordingly. When cohabitation is still a deviant behaviour, ideational changes are important for distinguishing cohabitators from non-cohabitators. Thus, education is more likely to influence cohabitation choice by bringing about changes in values and attitudes. As cohabitation gains wider acceptance, education may impact cohabitation choice more from an economic perspective.

Chinese society has undergone dramatic changes in the last few decades after the economic reform was initiated. From its origins as a deviant behaviour, cohabitation has gradually gained increasing acceptance in society (Yu & Xie, 2015). With the transition from a planned economy into a market economy and the expansion of education, the norms of gender role specialisation have

also changed from a male-breadwinning/female-homemaking dichotomy to a dual-earners model. However, a resurgence of gender inequality in both family and labour market has been observed in recent years (Cao & Hu, 2007). As societal environment changes and cohabitation progresses from being an innovative behaviour to increasingly common practice, it is reasonable to suggest that the relationship between education and cohabitation has also evolved. Thus, it is not adequate to understand this relationship from a static perspective, and the diffusion theory provides a better framework to understand how the economic and ideological theories worked in various stages of the post-reform era.

### *Empirical Evidence*

The majority of Western literature has focussed on the mechanism approach. An inverse relationship between cohabitation and education has been found consistently, meaning that better education is associated with a lower possibility of cohabitation and a higher likelihood of marrying directly. For example, using panel data of mothers and children drawn from the Detroit metropolitan area from 1961 to 1985, Thornton et al. (1995) found that people with little school accumulation cohabit at higher rates than those with greater accumulation. This suggests that people with lower school accumulation substitute cohabitation for marriage, at least for a period of time, while those with more accumulation are more likely to marry directly. Using a national sample survey of 13,017 respondents conducted in 1987–1988 in the United States, Bumpass et al. (1991) further confirmed that for all birth cohorts born from 1930 to 1960, cohabitation among young adults was the least among the college educated people. The cohort comparison showed that the college educated individuals did experience an increase in cohabitation in the 1970s, but the growth rate was less than that for less-educated counterparts (i.e. those who did not complete high school). Thus, college graduates are not innovators in the dissemination of cohabitation but are imitators. This trend was further affirmed by Bumpass and Lu (2000) using a more recent national dataset in the United States, where they found that cohabitation rose among all education groups between 1987 and 1995, but the greatest relative increase occurred among high school graduates (44%), and the least growth was among college graduates (19%).

Therefore, research based on both local and national samples from 1961 to 1995 have consistently pointed to the inverse relationship between education and cohabitation, and this negative association has been strengthened in recent years. The standard explanation provided by these findings is the lack of financial resources for less-educated people. This is concurrent with the positive economic theory mentioned in the previous section, that education has a positive effect on union formation by providing necessary resources for mate search and for establishing a household. When faced with economic constraints, people may take cohabitation as a substitution for marriage in the early years of union, as cohabitation is associated with lower commitments as opposed to marriage (Thornton et al., 1995).

However, it is important to point out that the empirical evidence discussed above is predominantly from the United States. Research findings from other

countries are not necessarily similar. For example, using data from the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study between 1999 and 2003, [Thomson and Bernhardt \(2010\)](#) concluded that the risk of cohabitation is not associated with prior educational attainment or ongoing enrolment. This is interesting, especially since earlier research in Sweden ([Hoem, 1986](#)) has found that cohabitation was pioneered by the working class rather than the college graduates using a sample of Swedish women born in between 1936 and 1960.

These contradictory findings suggest that the relationship between education and cohabitation not only varies across countries, but also changes over time within one country as its institutional and cultural context changes. This supports the diffusion theory. When cohabitation rate was still low in Sweden, education had a negative effect on cohabitation. For the more recent cohort, almost all new unions start from cohabitation. The differential effect of education on cohabitators no longer exists in this family-friendly, gender-egalitarian welfare state ([Thomson & Bernhardt, 2010](#)). Since the majority of datasets used in the empirical research in the United States were collected before 1995, further research using more recent data might show varied outcomes to past studies.

The diffusion effect over time within a country has also been confirmed by [Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan \(2013\)](#) using data from the British General Household Survey from 1979 to 2007. However, the direction of change is opposite to what has been found in Sweden. Specifically, cohabitation began among the best-educated women rather than the least-educated women in the 1970s and 1980s. But over time, the lower-educated group overtook the higher-educated group. The explanation is that the well-educated were the pioneers of value change who embraced nonconformist and anti-authoritarian attitudes and rejected traditional marriage. Thus, they were the ‘innovators’ of cohabitation in the early stage. This concurs with the ideological theory mentioned in the previous section and suggests that the trajectory of the relationship between education and cohabitation might be different, depending on the historical and cultural context where cohabitation emerged from.

Therefore, cohabitation is a dynamic process both in the individual life course and over time in society ([Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2013](#)). Ultimately, it is an individual choice made in a specific institutional and cultural context. With the changes of social and cultural acceptability of cohabitation, and the changes of gender relations and demographic structure in the broader context, the relationship between education and cohabitation is expected to change accordingly ([Manting, 1996](#); [Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2013](#); [Smock, 2000](#)).

### *The Case of China*

In China, cohabitation was extremely rare both in the traditional Chinese society before 1949 and under the socialist regime between 1949 and 1978 ([Zheng et al., 2011](#)), but has gradually gained popularity in the recent decades. The proportion of couples cohabiting before marriage has grown from around 10% in the late 1970s to nearly one-third in the recent marriage cohort ([Yu & Xie, 2015](#)). The growing popularity of cohabitation is interlinked with other changes in Chinese