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Research Proposal:
An Investigation into the Determinants Associated
with Marital Quality in Urban China

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An Investigation into the Determinants Associated with Marital Quality in Urban China

Current literature in China has focused on the one child policy and the impact on marriage because it has greatly affected the lives of the Chinese population after 1978 when the policy was introduced. This includes the consequences of sex ratio imbalances and the renewed concerns of permanent male bachelorhood for men at marriageable ages (Poston & Glover, 2005). On the other hand, less literature has centered on the state of continuity of marriage in China with changing state policies and institutions because it has not sufficiently captured the quality of current urban marriages given China’s changing marriage landscape. Marital quality is a crucial aspect of family life that shapes individuals and is an important feature of adult life course. Marital quality is positively associated with mental and physical health (Wickrama et al. 1997), less depression (Williams, 2003) and even an important determinant of marital dissolution (Amato & Rogers, 1997). While there is abundant literature in the West about the conceptualization marital quality, there is not a single standardized measure in quantifying and qualifying marital quality in China. In the West, some studies conceptualize marital quality as a unidimensional construct (Glenn, 1990), using a global satisfaction scale as a measurement. Therefore synonyms of marital satisfaction such as success, happiness and consensus are frequently used and interchangeably. Other scholars such as Spanier (1976) suggest that marital quality is a multidimensional concept: marital satisfaction, martial consensus and the expression of love. There have been solid theoretical foundations on the argument for and against the use of unidimensional or multidimensional constructs in the West. In China, the use of either constructs are based on availability of data during that period rather than on sound theoretical justifications to assess marital quality. It is important for future research and studies to provide foundational, unified and theoretical evidence to support the use, rather than conveniently rationalizing through the ease of data available.
The convergence theory of family patterns proposed by Goode (1963) in World Revolution and Family Patterns also point out that cultural diffusions are expected in non western countries due to advancement in economies development, whether or not they are capitalist or socialist counties. Therefore, if modernization has allowed more convergence of eastern and western values, can marital quality be qualified in the same way and same measurement? Existing literature on marital quality in China have qualified a few patterns of similarities (Pimental, 2000), while traditional elements still remains in Chinese culture due to its unique historical and political trajectory (Fan, 2000). In the literature review, research has shown that many Western findings about marital quality converge with the Chinese urban scene, but it has also shown unique Chinese patterns. Therefore, the main issue is to identity determinants that are likely to be associated with marital quality in the Chinese context.

This proposal aims to contribute to the limited but gradually expanding literature on marital quality in China and puts forth a few questions: Should marital quality in China be based on a unidimensional or multidimensional construct? In light of literature reviewed, the proposal takes on a similar a dual dimension approach by (Johnson et al., 1986) where better marital quality is associated with happiness and interaction, while lower marital quality refers to disagreement and instability. Using only one global scale on the basis on marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction might be insufficient because a spouse marital behaviour is not always driven by a single undifferentiated view of his or her marriage (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

**Hypothesis and Research Questions**

The first hypothesis relating to gender role attitudes is that if egalitarianism agreement and behaviours is related to marital quality and a degree of marital satisfaction, then egalitarian attitudes will be correalted to negative marital quality for women. The second hypothesis in relation to men is that currently married man with egalitarian attitudes will experience higher
The third hypothesis relates to division of domestic labour, which is the practical aspect of gender role attitudes. It is hypothesized that the equal allocation of domestic labour (meaning that wives have decision making influences in not participating in gender stereotyped housework) will increase marital quality.

The fourth hypothesis relates to marital relations with family. It is hypothesized that parental influences and approval continue to directly increase perceived marital quality (the assumption is that urban youths in China also have greater freedom of mate choice).

The fifth hypothesis relates to socioeconomic status: income and education. It is hypothesized that higher earning wives with more education experience lower marital quality (higher marital instability and disagreement and lower marital happiness and satisfaction). On the other hand, higher earning husbands who are more educated do not significantly affect marital quality.

The sixth hypothesis relates to demographic variables: age, duration of marriage, religious beliefs and family size. It is hypothesized that demographic characteristics are related positively to marital satisfaction and interaction.

The first and second hypothesis flows from rich literature from the West that egalitarian gender role attitudes have general direct effect on marital quality. Amato and Booth (1995) found that based on both longitudinal and cross sectional surveys, non-traditional gender roles attitudes of wives were accompanied with lower marital quality due changes in the context of marriage. For example, they may be more aware of gender inequality after entering the workforce (Smith, 1985) or in attaining higher education (Thorton et al., 1983). Following Whyte’s (2005) convincing quantitative analysis that urban family life in China
trended towards ‘modernization’ compared to their counterparts in Taiwan makes the variant of modernization theory introduced by Thornton and Fricke constructive (referring to the reduced centrality of the familial mode of social organisation). In this case, the family structure can be further extended to marriage in China because they are closely interconnected and this will prove whether gender ideology and values converge or diverge with western values. Chinese women who subscribe to egalitarian values are assumed to have more demands on equality and fairness in decision making and influences, therefore leading to lower marital quality (instability and disagreement). On the other hand, men who subscribe to egalitarian values are deemed to be more willing to compromise on decision making and understand their wives demands, therefore leading to increased marital quality (satisfaction).

The third hypothesis focuses on division of labour within gender values. Research has shown that Chinese women are still expected to perform both domestic labour at home and juggle economic work outside. Hence, the husband’s willingness to help in domestic labour at home would contribute to wives’ marital satisfaction (Xu, 1996). If husbands were willing to contribute to housework, even if the labour is not equally shared between the couple, it would lead to higher marital quality for the couple.

The fourth hypothesis centers on marital relations and family. Research has also shown that marriage quality in China is not only affected by the relationship with husbands but also with family members such as parents and parents in law. Current research also proves that China’s dating culture is sparse and parents play an important factor in marriages of their children although urban youth have more freedom in mate choice. Pimental 2000 termed it ‘negotiated’ marriages where marriage decisions are influenced by parental input. This brings about the link that approval of parents in children’s mate choices will equate to higher marital quality.
The fifth hypothesis pivots on socioeconomic factors: income and education. There is a strong link between income and education (the higher the education, the higher the income generally). The mobility of employees from the state to the market sector explains why recent market entrants show positive correlation of earning returns and education (Wu & Xie, 2003). Women with higher income and education are perceived to want more equity in the relationship, whether in housework or decision-making in the marriage. Therefore, it is likely that better educated woman with higher income than their husbands’ attributes to lower marital quality. On the other hand, husbands who earn more than their wives may not lead to lower marital quality.

The sixth hypothesis focuses on demographic variables. As reviewed in the literature, demographic characteristics are hypothesized to relate with positive marital quality in satisfaction and interaction.

**Evidence: Method**

**Participants**

This project will entail surveying an expected 300 couples in Beijing based on both demographic questionnaires and interviews. According to Zhou et al. (1996) and Yu (2013), Beijing is the most responsive towards the influences of state policies and was also targeted first in the national strategy towards gender equalization in education and employment during the Mao era. It has to be taken into account that Beijing, as the capital in China would also have bias considerations. It has one of the most educated and cosmopolitan cities in China. In view that not all respondents will fully submit the survey answers, more than 300 questionnaires will be randomly sent out to married couples in urban residential communities via convenient sampling method. Respondents who successfully complete the demographic questionnaire will then be invited for an interview conducted in Beijing. A second snowball
sampling technique will also be deployed to friends and acquaintances of different socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, inviting them to participate in both questionnaire and interview. All participants surveyed must be currently married with or without children. Questionnaires will be sent separately to both husbands and wives and interviews will also be conducted separately for husbands and wives. Interview locations will be at the participant’s convenience, expectedly at home, office or public places.

The Measurement of Marital Quality

A dual dimension construct of marital quality will be employed following closely to Johnson et al. (1986). The first, marital harmony is the positive aspects of marital quality in the relationship indicated by A) marital satisfaction. This would be measured on a global assessment based on the Detroit Area Study (DAS), which Professor Martin King Whyte used in 1984 for the Chengdu survey. The main question asked would be, ‘Ceteris Paribus, are you satisfied with your marriage now? Responses would measure on a 5-point scale from “Very satisfied” to “Very dissatisfied”. B) The second indicator of marital harmony is marital interaction on how much the couple spends time together and the outward show of affection for each other.

The second construct used for marital quality is marital disharmony and the first component A) marital disagreement indicates how often respondents had disagreements with their spouses using a 5 point scale, from “Everyday” to “Never”. B) The second indicator of marital disharmony is instability, as gauged by whether or not spouses ever contemplated divorce. The 3-point scale ranges from “Always”, “Sometimes”, and “Never”.
**Gender Roles and Attitudes and the Division of Domestic Labour**

Gender roles will be measured against attitudes of husbands and wives towards marriage. The main questions would be “The role of husbands is to be the breadwinner, while the role wives is to stay at home and look after children” and “It is important to put the career of the husband before the wife?”. Questions crafted around the division of labour focuses on domestic chores such as a) doing the laundry, b) washing the dishes, c) preparing dinner, d) cleaning the house and e) removing trash revolves around the extent to which each spouse has responsibility over. How equal are domestic chores shared between husbands and wives? These chores have traditionally been delegated to wives. Therefore, since the fairer allocation of labour leads to increase in marital quality, the scale is measured against one end of the spectrum, non-traditional domestic labour (housework solely performed by husbands), moving towards more equal sharing and lastly, traditional domestic labour (housework solely performed by wives).

**Spousal Relations and Family Relations**

Since parental approval has played a significant role in the Chinese context, questions will cater towards the approval of each spouse’s parents before marriage. This would have a 5-point scale of “Strongly approve” to “Strongly disapprove”.

**Socioeconomic Status- Income and Education**

Both income and education are directly related and will be measured against each respondent and the spouse. This measures family income on a scale from “No income” to “more than 1,000,000 RMB”. For education, the measurement will be on a scale of “no education” to “Post-graduate degree”.
**Demographic Variables: Duration of marriage, religious beliefs and family size**

Each respondent would have different durations of marriage and it would be important to include in the analysis. For family size, the scale ranges from “1” for one child to “0” for no children. In terms of religious beliefs, the scale centers on either “yes” or “no”.

With the above explanation, marital quality will be measured and linkages formed against the gender role attitudes, division of labour, family relations, socioeconomic and demographic variables to test the interaction effects and correlations. This study uses linear least square regression models to forecast marital quality. With the results, conclusions can be drawn on the effects of each determinant on marital quality for husbands and wives to evaluate the extent the hypothesis is supported or otherwise.

**Limitations**

The study acknowledges the limitations of using cross sectional data because it does not consider couples who divorce after the sample has been surveyed, neither does it take into account future considerations like life crisis, changes in attitudes with marital duration. Marriages of poorer quality may be removed from the population as more divorces occur, leaving only the marriages of higher quality among individuals of older ages (Glenn, 1990).

In addition, using a sample size from an extremely urbanized area in China may also create problems; such as the over representation of education couples, or over present married Chinese. These findings are confined to Beijing city and may not be a true representation of China given each province’s diversity and richness. With these limitations in mind, the findings still hopes to provide some direction for future research into marital quality in China.
Implications and Contributions

This study sheds more light on differences in marital quality using a dual dimension construct against the different determinants in the Chinese context. Firstly, it provides more understanding for marriage counseling therapists working with currently married couples that have difficulties in their marriages. In the urban areas, more couples have reported problems in marriage due to changes in working and living conditions, creating the demand for marriage consultants (China Daily, 2007). The problem is that marriage consulting is still underdeveloped in China. Equipping counselors with more up to date information with modernized couples enables them to develop strategies and approaches to understand the situation of couples in relation to their expectations desires and demands in the current context.

Secondly, this study provides more quantitative analysis in understanding the convergence and divergence of values between east and west. For example, parental approval and influences for marriages may still be crucial in the Chinese context unlike the West. On the other hand, while wives may be more egalitarian or non-traditional in outlook compared to the past, but from a practical sense, they are still expected to juggle both domestic chores at home and economic labour outside. Reality of the current situation may be different from expectations and ideals of Chinese couples. Although convergence is an evident pattern, Chinese culture still retains many unique and distinctive features different from the West.
References


