

Living-apart Marriage in China: Trends, Determinants, and Implications

A key traditional expectation attached to marital life is spouses' coresidence in the same household. Departing from this tradition, living apart in marriage represents an unconventional, deinstitutionalized way of organizing marital life. Analyzing nationally representative data from the 2006-2021 Chinese General Social Survey, we examine the trends, determinants, and implications of living-apart marriage in China. Descriptive analysis shows that living-apart marriage increased from 8% to 21% between 2006 and 2021, with a notable spike from 12% in 2018 to 21% in 2021. Disaggregating living-apart marriage by distance (i.e., living apart in the same city, in different cities within the same province, and in different provinces/countries), the increase between 2018 and 2021 was driven by an increase in married couples living apart within the same city. Regression results show that married people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to live apart from their spouse—people with lower levels of education, those from single-earner families (as opposed to dual-earner families), and rural residents or rural-to-urban migrants (as opposed to native urban residents). Regression results further reveal the negative well-being implications of living apart from one's spouse. Compared with individuals living with their spouse, those who live apart from their spouse—regardless of distance—have lower marital satisfaction, report lower mutual disclosure between the spouses, feel less happy, and are lonelier. In Western societies, living apart together often reflects couples' preference for balancing individual autonomy and commitment in an intimate relationship; a positive socioeconomic selection into living apart together is often observed beyond young adulthood; and living apart together brings about well-being benefits. In contrast, our findings suggest that married people in China are likely compelled by practical or economic needs to live apart from their spouse, and this tends to undermine their subjective and relationship well-being. Although the rise of living-apart marriage indicates the deinstitutionalization of marriage in China, this deinstitutionalization seems to arise from very different social and economic circumstances and have adverse well-being implications.