

**CHINA'S FAMILY CHANGES:
AN UPDATE FROM THE 2020
POPULATION CENSUS**

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Executive Summary

1. China's 2020 population census data, published in 2022, show profound changes in Chinese families, including reduction in the average size and number of multi-generational households, delay in marriage and increase in the divorce rate.
2. Despite the shift from the one-child policy to the two-child policy in 2016, Chinese families continue to shrink in size, from 3.44 in 2000 to 3.10 in 2010 and 2.62 in 2020, averaging a decrease of 0.4-0.5 every 10 years, a pace that has been sustained since the early 1980s.
3. China's family structure has also changed rapidly. In 2000, the three-member and four-member households were most common. The top two in 2010 became three-member and two-member households. The shift continued in the past decade, with two-member and single-person households topping the 2020 list.
4. The rise of single-person households is a major finding from the 2020 census data. In 2020, 8.9% of mainland Chinese lived in single-person households, double that in 2010. The rate of solo living is highest among those aged 65 and above, but those in the 20s have the fastest increase. Notably, single-person households have grown more rapidly in rural areas than in towns and cities.
5. The past decade has also seen notable changes in marriage norms and patterns. The mean age of women's first marriage was comparatively low in 2000 and 2010 (23.2 and 24.0 respectively). However, it increased remarkably to 28.0 in 2020, fast approaching that in Japan (nearly 30) and Korea (over 30). China no longer maintains the pattern of early marriage.
6. Singlehood rate has been on the rise for women in the age group 30-34, reaching 9.3% in 2020. Nonetheless, it is much lower than the around 30% in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. From a comparative perspective, China largely maintains the pattern of nearly universal marriage.

7. The rise of solo living is likely to continue in China in the coming decades, driven by demographic factors such as migration for education and work, population ageing and growing widowhood, and value changes towards delayed marriage and independent living.
8. A big question is how long the pattern of nearly universal marriage can last in China. Despite the trend towards later marriage and higher singlehood, the norm of getting married before age 30, which sharply devalues women over 30 in the marriage market, remains strong in China thus far, particularly among Chinese parents who are committed to ensuring their daughters' on-time marriage.
9. The next decade is likely to be different. China's post-80 generation will be 40-50 years of age by 2030. Holding less traditional attitudes towards marriage, they may not feel the need to pressure their daughters to marry before 30. In this connection, China's convergence with other East Asian societies in terms of late marriage and high singlehood will accelerate in the coming decade.

CHINA'S FAMILY CHANGES: AN UPDATE FROM THE 2020 POPULATION CENSUS

ZHAO Litao*

Convergence or Chinese Characteristics?

- 1.1 Based on population census data up to 2010, Chinese families have undergone profound changes in terms of size, structure, functions and norms, including postponed marriage, declining fertility, family miniaturisation and rise of single-person households (particularly among young people in the 20s and older adults aged 70 and above).¹
- 1.2 On the other hand, despite the trend towards smaller families, later marriages and higher divorce rates, Chinese families have demonstrated considerable resilience in upholding some of the traditional values. For instance, the percentage of extended family has been surprisingly stable.² Postponed marriage has not evolved into forgone marriage.³
- 1.3 From a comparative perspective, China was distinctively different from other East Asian societies in some key aspects as of 2010. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong have departed from the pattern of early and universal marriage for women five or six decades ago and are converging to the pattern of late marriage

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¹ For a brief review, see Zhao Litao and Li Xueying (2017), "Family Changes in China", *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1274, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

² Wang Yuesheng (2013), "Zhongguo chengxiang jiating jiegou biandong fenxi: jiyu 2010 nian renkou pucha shuju" [An analysis of changes in family structure in urban and rural China: findings from the 2010 population census data], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [Social Sciences in China] 12: 60-77.

³ Gavin W Jones and Wei-Jun Jean Yeung (2014), "Marriage in Asia", *Journal of Family Issues* 35: 1567-1583.

and high singlehood widely observed in Western societies. China, however, largely maintained the pattern of early and universal marriage as of 2010.⁴

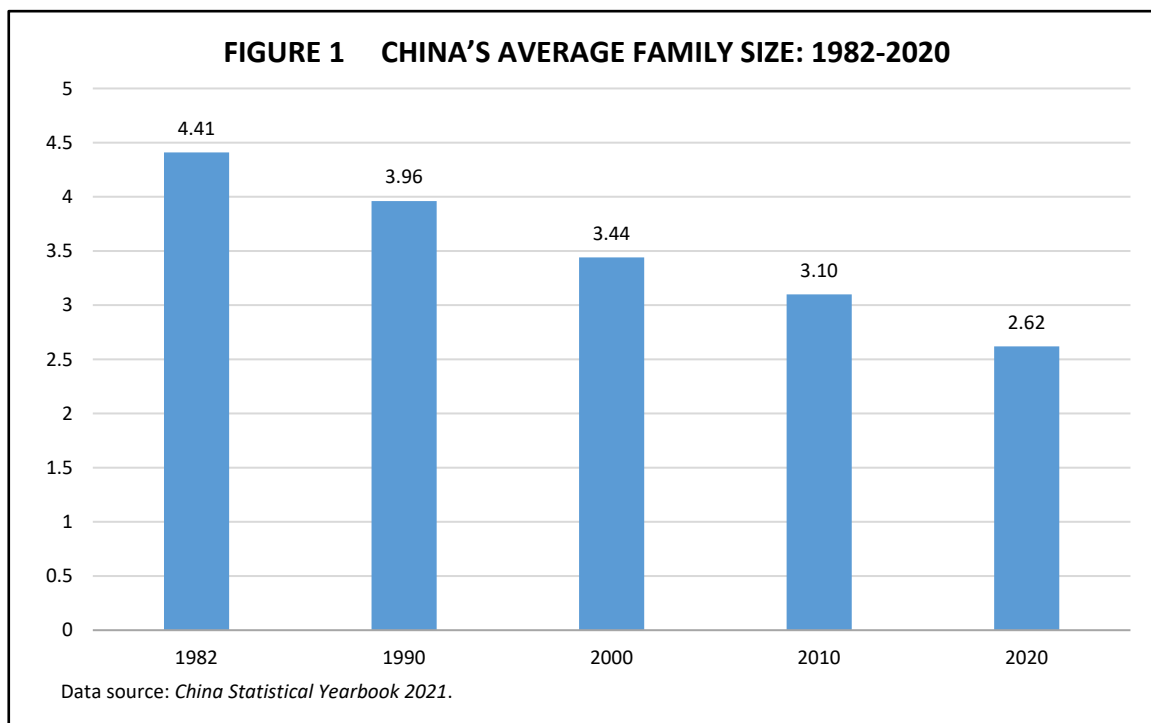
- 1.4 However, the question is whether China's distinctiveness as of 2010 was mainly due to its delayed onset of industrialisation, urbanisation and higher education expansion vis-à-vis its East Asian neighbours. If so, convergence would occur in the 2010s and China would be less distinctive as of 2020.
- 1.5 Alternatively, if Chinese distinctiveness is linked to some idiosyncratic norms and values, convergence towards other East Asian societies would be limited as of 2020. A case in point is that the pattern of nearly universal marriage for Chinese women by age 30 is likely to be sustained by concerned parents as societal norms sharply devalue single women in their 30s.⁵
- 1.6 In 2022, China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published results from the 2020 population census, which provide new evidence to addressing the question of convergence versus Chinese distinctiveness. Moreover, the last decade has witnessed a surge in inter- and intra-provincial migration flows in China and a shift from the one-child policy to the two-child policy. The 2020 population census data can shed light on how Chinese families adapt to the changing context.

Shrinking Family Size

- 2.1 China's earlier waves of population census had shown a steady decline in average family size, from 4.41 in 1982 to 3.96 in 1990, 3.44 in 2000 and 3.10 in 2010 (see Figure 1). The one-child policy, one of the major drivers of China's falling fertility and decreasing family size, was abolished in 2016 and replaced by the two-child policy. The policy overhaul was intended to rein in the declining fertility.

⁴ In 2010, the mean age of first marriage for women was 29.7 in Japan, 30.1 in South Korea and 30.4 in Taiwan, higher than China's 24.7. Meanwhile, over 30% of women aged 30-34 were single in Japan and Taiwan and nearly 30% in South Korea, much higher than China's less than 5%. See Gavin W Jones and Wei-Jun Jean Yeung (2014), "Marriage in Asia".

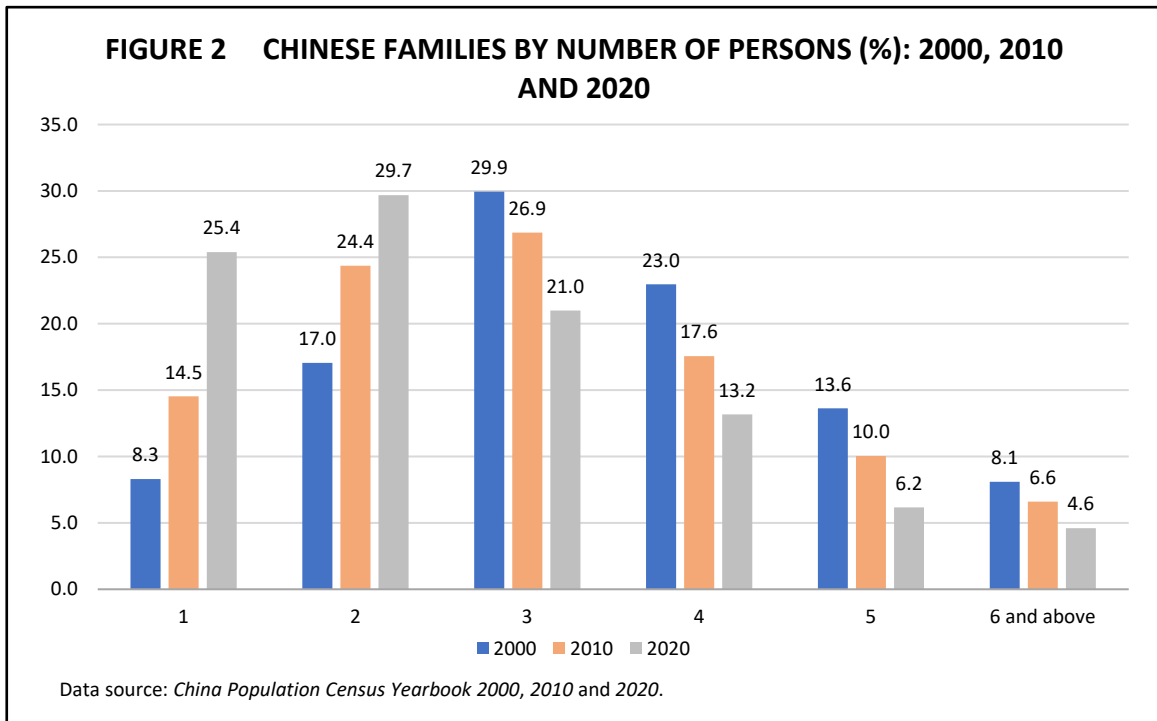
⁵ Ellen E Pimentel (2000), "Just How Do I Love Thee? Marital Relations in Urban China", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 32-47; Tianhan Gui (2017), "'Devalued' Daughters Versus 'Appreciated' Sons: Gender Inequality in China's Parent-Organized Matchmaking Markets", *Journal of Family Issues* 38: 1923-1948.



2.2 According to the 2020 population census data, China's average family size continued to slide, reaching the lowest level of 2.62 in 2020. The new birth-control policy of 2016 came too late to have any substantial effect. The average family size decreased by nearly 0.5 between 2010 and 2020, comparable to the pace in the previous three decades.

2.3 Figure 2 presents the percentage of Chinese families of different sizes in 2000, 2010 and 2020. The trend of family miniaturisation is amply clear. In the past two decades, single-person households and two-member households have gained in share, while households with three or more members were on the decline.

2.4 In 2000, the three-member households and four-member households were the prevailing ones (with a share of 29.9% and 23.0% respectively). The top two list in 2010 shifted to three-member households (26.9%) and two-member households (24.4%). The trend towards smaller households continued in the past decade. On the 2020 top two list were two-member households (29.7%) and single-person households (25.4%). The growth of the latter was spectacular, especially in the past decade.

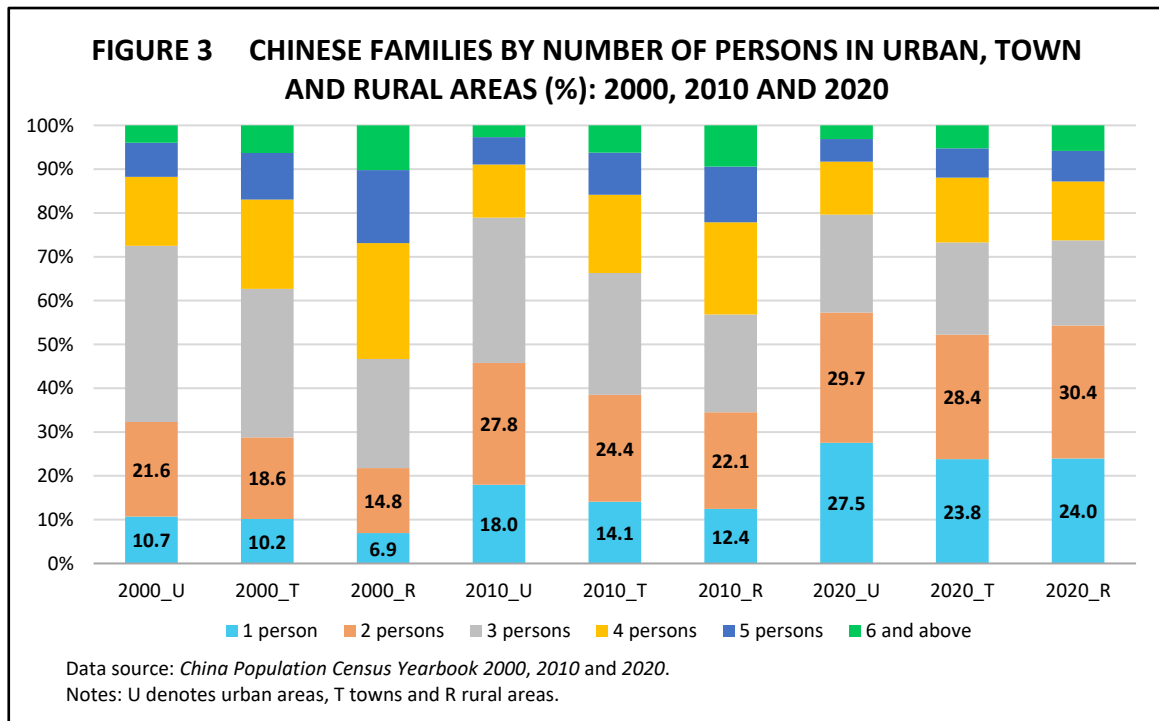


2.5 Figure 3 shows how family size varies across urban, town and rural areas. In 2000 and 2010, urban areas had a higher percentage of smaller households than in rural areas, while rural areas had a higher percentage of larger households (with three or more members). As expected, rural areas were more “traditional” in having larger families. Over 50% of rural families in 2000 and over 40% in 2010 had four or more members, markedly higher than comparable figures for urban families (below 30% in 2000 and about 20% in 2010).

2.6 A big change surprisingly occurred in the past decade. The growth of single-person households and two-member households was much faster in rural areas than in towns and cities between 2010 and 2020, effectively eradicating the large rural-urban differences in the share of smaller households. In 2020, the combined share of single-person households and two-member households was 54.4% in rural areas, similar to the 57.2% in urban areas and 52.2% in towns.

2.7 Demographic changes such as migration and population ageing are the likely causes of rural-urban convergence. Based on the census data, China’s migrant population increased from 221 million to 376 million between 2010 and 2020, much larger than

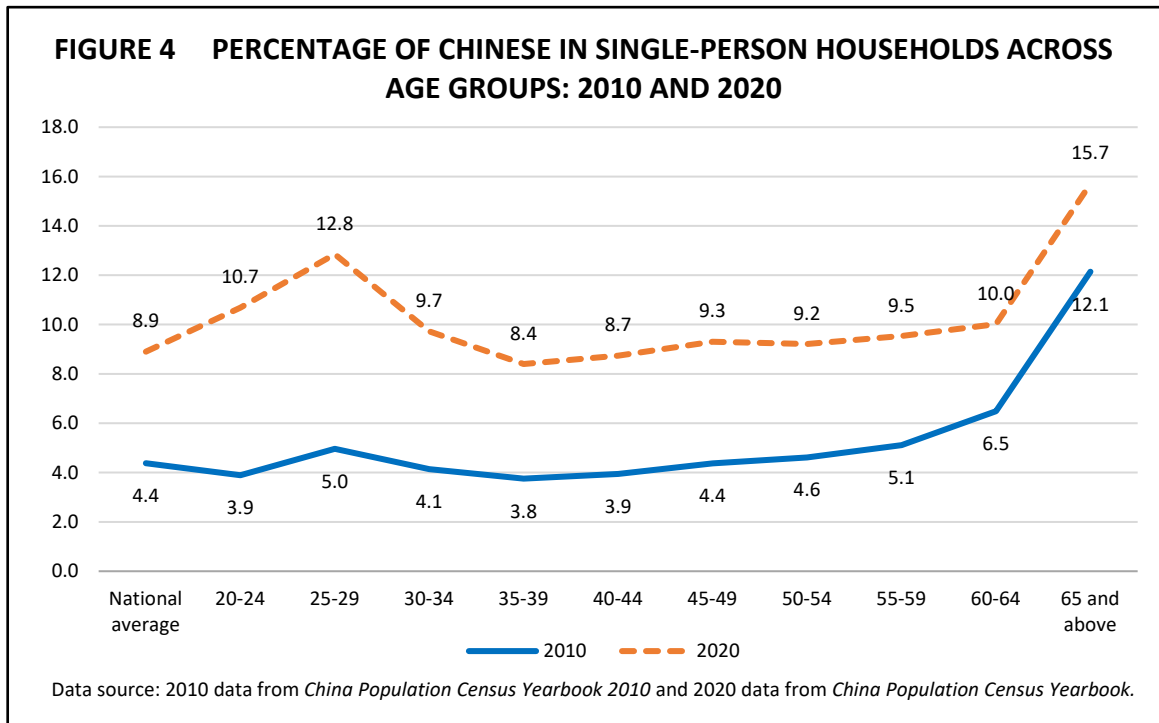
the growth from 121 million to 221 million between 2000 and 2010.⁶ Out-migration of young people has reduced the rural family size. Notably, many rural elders have also migrated to the cities to be with their adult children and to care for their grandchildren.⁷ The new migration pattern involving rural older migrants also contributes to the rural-urban convergence in family size.



2.8 Figure 4 focuses on the single-person households. The rate of solo living has changed over life course. It was on the rise among the young age groups, reaching a spike in the age group 25-29, driven by factors such as seeking education or employment away from home. At age 30, the rate of solo living started to decline, largely due to marriage and family formation. It remained stable among middle-aged Chinese before a sharp increase was evident among older Chinese aged 60 and above, mainly due to rising widowhood with age.

⁶ See Zhao Litao (2021), “China’s Population Trends from the 2020 Census: Ageing, Mobile and More Educated”, *EAI Background Brief*, No.1590, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

⁷ A recent study estimates the number to be 7.74 million. See Julia Juan Wang and Daniel W L Lai (2022), “Mental Health of Older Migrants Migrating along with Adult Children in China: A Systematic Review”, *Ageing & Society* 42(4): 786-811.

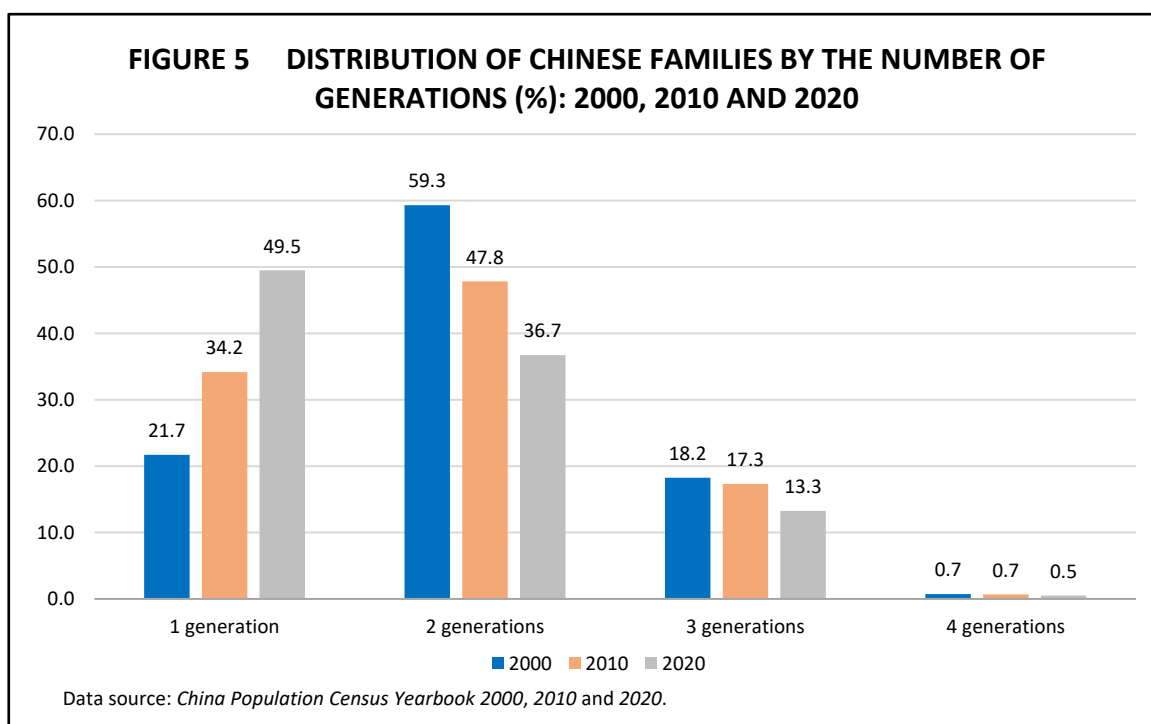


2.9 There were notable changes between 2010 and 2020. First, the rate of solo living doubled from 4.4% to 8.9%. Second, while the life course pattern still held in 2020, younger age groups—20-24 and 25-29—had a larger increase in the rate of solo living than that of other age groups.

2.10 Overall, China’s census data have revealed a clear trend towards family miniaturisation. A typical Chinese family in 2000 was either a three-member household or a four-member household; in 2020 it was either a two-member household or a single-person household. The trend towards family miniaturisation accelerated in the past decade, more so in rural than in urban areas. Solo living has been on the rise across all age groups, with the fastest growth occurring in young people in their 20s.

“Flattened” Family Structure

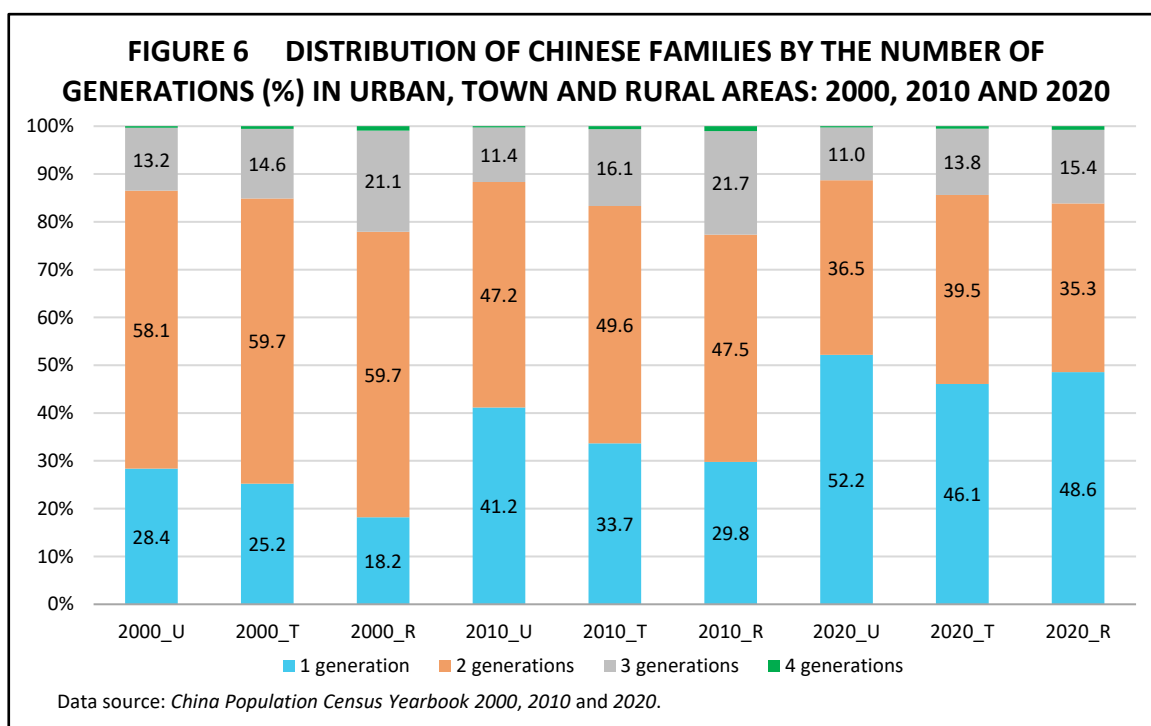
3.1 China’s census data also provide information on the number of generations in a household. Figure 5 presents the percentage of Chinese families with varying numbers of generation between 2000 and 2020. It shows that a major change had occurred in the past decade.



3.2 Two-generation households were dominant in 2000 and 2010 with a share of 59.3% and 47.8% respectively, and three-generation households were quite stable at 18.2% in 2000 and 17.3% in 2010. However, the landscape was drastically different in 2020. With a share of 49.5%, one-generation households became the prevailing type, while three-generation households declined to 13.3%.

3.3 Another big change is the rural-urban convergence in family structure in the past decade. Figure 6 compares families in urban, town and rural areas. In 2000 and 2010, the rural-urban differences were distinctive. While the percentage of two-generation households was similar, urban areas had a considerably higher percentage of one-generation households, while rural areas had a considerably higher percentage of three-generation households.

3.4 In 2020, rural and urban families were much alike. The percentage of one-generation households was only slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas (52.5% versus 48.6%). The three-generation households were still more common in the countryside. However, the rural-urban difference had dwindled considerably in 2020 than in 2010 or 2000.



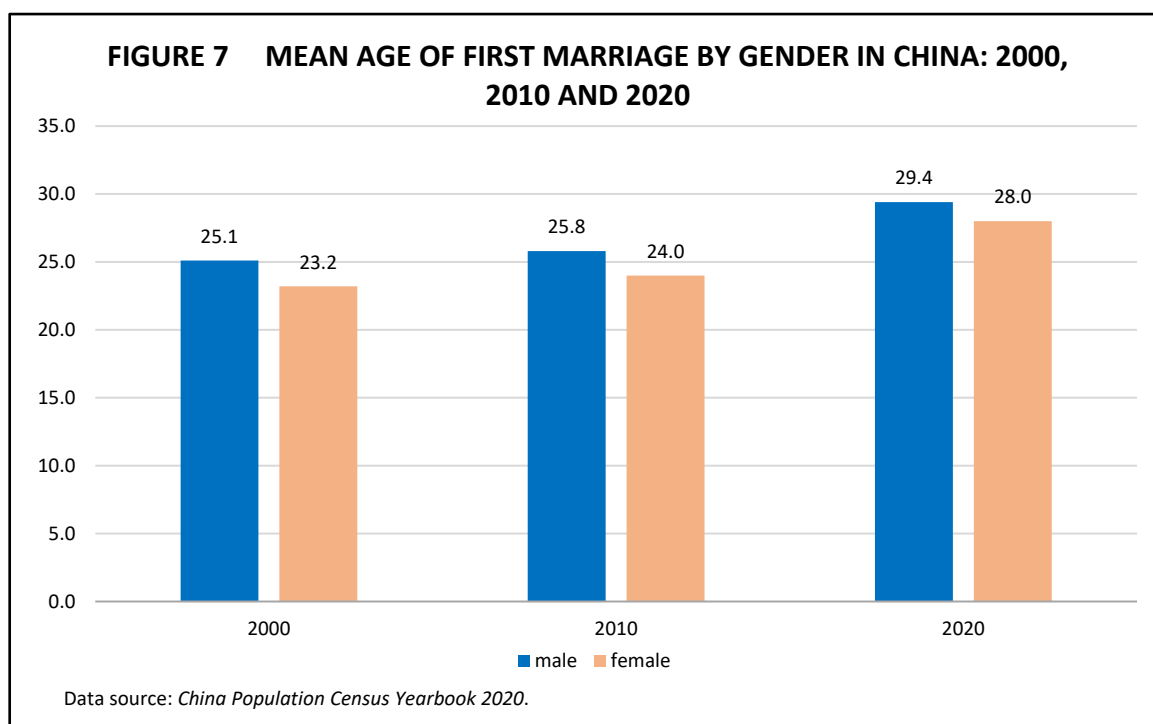
3.5 The dramatic growth of single-person households in rural areas in the past decade (see Figure 3) is probably the main driver behind the rural-urban convergence in the prevalence of one-generation households. The faster decline of three-generation households in rural areas in the 2010s is likely due to the out-migration of rural elders—known as “*lao piao*” (老漂 or older migrants)—to care for their grandchildren in the cities.

Still Nearly Universal Marriage Despite Rising Singlehood

4.1 The rise of singlehood in East Asian societies such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong has raised the question of whether China is following suit. Of particular importance to policymakers and scholars is whether postponed marriage has evolved into forgone marriage in China.

4.2 Figure 7 presents the mean age of first marriage for Chinese men and women in 2000, 2010 and 2020. As of 2010, China had maintained the pattern of early marriage. The mean age of first marriage for women had a modest increase from

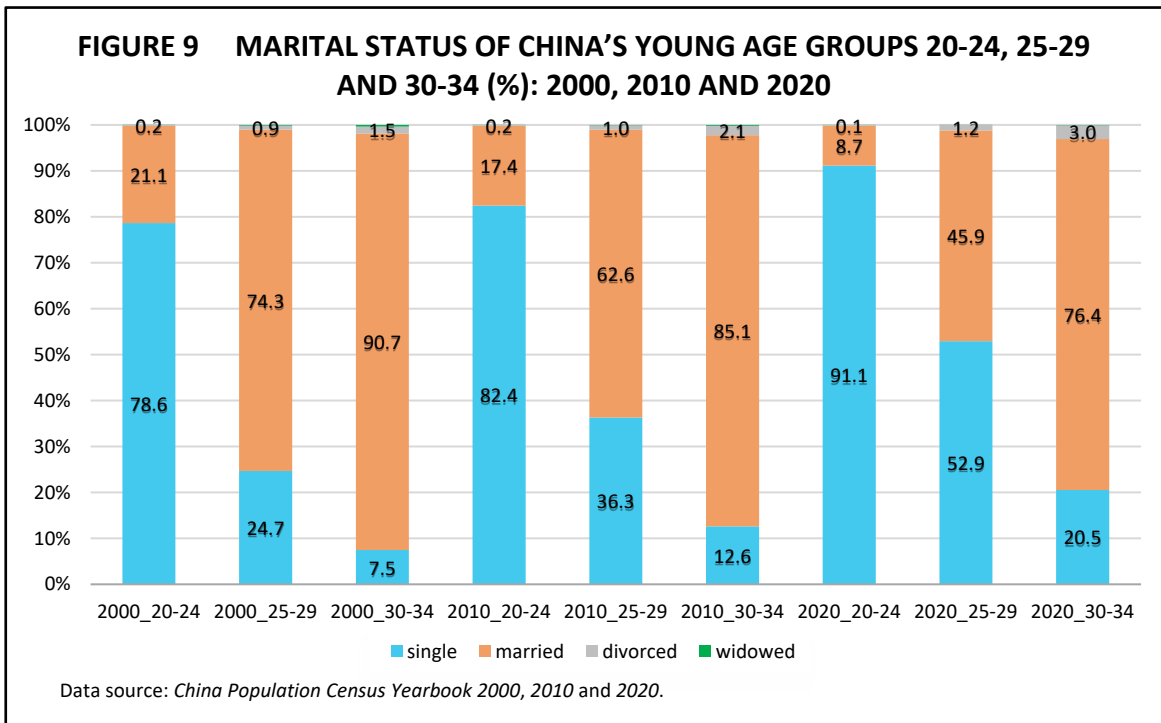
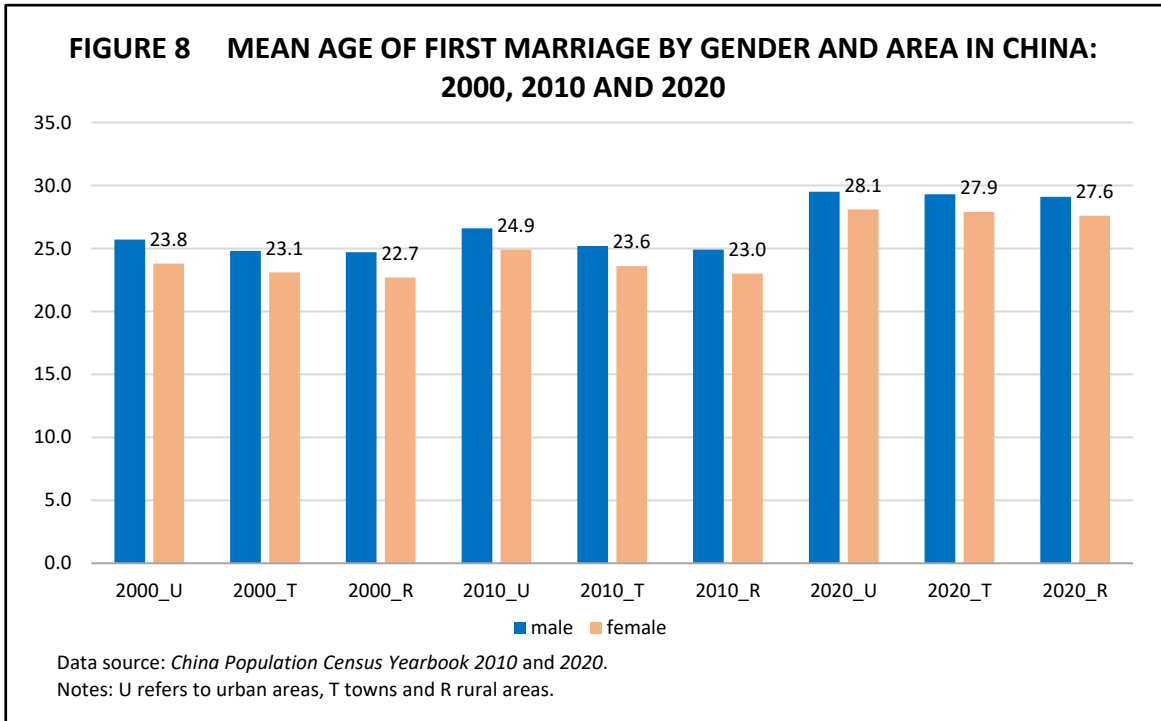
23.2 in 2000 to 24.0 in 2010. However, it increased remarkably to 28.0 in 2020, quite close to the nearly 30 in Japan and over 30 in South Korea.⁸



4.3 Figure 8 compares the mean age of first marriage across urban, town and rural areas in 2000, 2010 and 2020. The scenario remains the same. The pattern of early marriage holds for Chinese women nationwide in 2000 and 2010. However, it no longer holds in 2020. For rural women in 2020, their mean age at first marriage reached 27.6, much alike women in towns (27.9) and urban areas (28.1).

4.4 Another question is whether the pattern of nearly universal marriage still holds for Chinese women. China’s 2020 population census classified marital status into four categories: single, married, divorced and widowed. Figure 9 shows the distribution of each type for three young age groups in 2000, 2010 and 2020. Three findings are noteworthy. First, there were tremendous differences across the three age groups in terms of singlehood or marriage rates. The overwhelming majority of those aged 20-24 were single, while the overwhelming majority of those aged 30-34 were married.

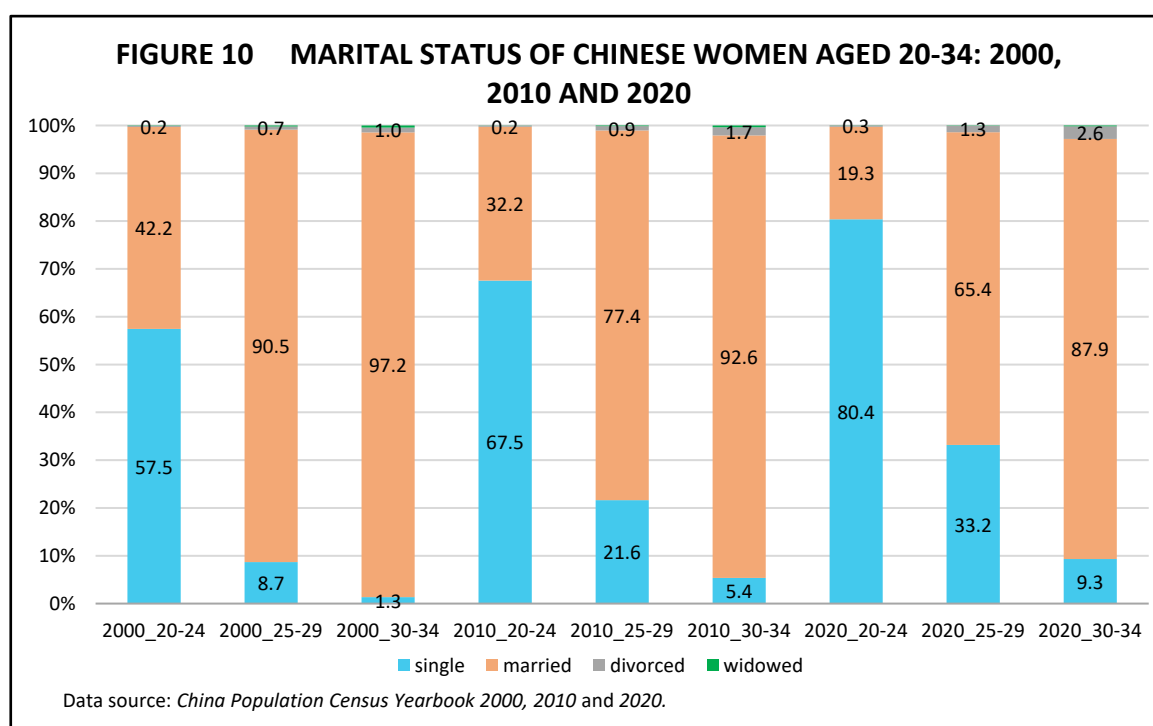
⁸ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e54dd7c6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e54dd7c6-en>, accessed 22 February 2023.



4.5 Second, there were notable changes over time, especially in the past decade. The rate of singlehood was on the rise for all three age groups. The change was particularly profound among those aged 25-29. In 2000, nearly one in four was single; it was one in two in 2020.

4.6 Third, the crude divorce rate increased rapidly between 2000 and 2020. It had doubled from 1.5% to 3.0% for the age group 30-34. From a comparative perspective, China’s crude divorce rate has already surpassed that of Japan and South Korea, where the divorce rate has been declining to around 2% or below.⁹

4.7 Figure 10 focuses on Chinese women aged between 20 and 34 in 2000, 2010 and 2020. Of particular interest is the changing rate of singlehood in the age group 30-34. In Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hongkong, the rate of singlehood is high around 30% for women aged 30-34.¹⁰ By the benchmark of 30%, China remains distinctively different. Still below 10% in 2020, Chinese women aged 30-34 were much less likely to be single than their counterparts in other East Asian societies.



4.8 Apparently, the norm of getting married before the age of 30, which sharply devalues women over 30 in the marriage market, is still widely held in China. In the three waves of population census data of 2000, 2010 or 2020, the rate of singlehood

⁹ The crude divorce rate was below 2% in Japan in 2019, slightly higher than the 2% in South Korea in 2020, while China had a higher crude divorce rate of over 3% in 2019. See <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e54dd7c6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e54dd7c6-en>, accessed 20 September 2022.

¹⁰ Gavin W Jones and Wei-Jun Jean Yeung (2014), “Marriage in Asia”.

dropped drastically from age group 20-24 to age group 25-29 and decreased further to age group 30-34.

- 4.9 Nonetheless, singlehood has been evidently on the rise among Chinese women. Among those aged 30-34, the rate of singlehood increased from 1.3% in 2000 to 5.4% in 2010 and 9.3% in 2020. By this rate of growth, up to 15% of women in their early 30s are likely to be single in 2030.
- 4.10 Overall, China has been converging with other East Asian societies in terms of the trend towards later marriage and higher singlehood. Nonetheless, China has largely maintained the pattern of nearly universal marriage as of 2020, making it different from Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong where postponed marriage has evolved into forgone marriage for a sizeable portion of women.

Looking to the Next Decade

- 5.1 A host of demographic factors and value changes in China have shaped family size, living arrangement and marriage patterns in the past decade. To varying extents, they will continue to shape Chinese family changes in the coming decades.
- 5.2 The rise of single-person households, or solo living, is a major finding from the 2020 population census data. It is closely associated with other familial changes, including the reduction in average family size from 3.10 in 2010 to 2.62 in 2020 (see Figure 1), and the increase in singlehood—men and women combined—from 36.3% in 2010 to 52.9% in 2020 for the age group 25-29, and from 12.6% to 20.5% for those aged 30-34 (see Figure 9).
- 5.3 The rate of solo living is higher among the elderly but increases speedily among the young people (see Figure 4). Growing widowhood is likely the main cause of rising solo living among older Chinese. With the population continuing to age, the rate of solo living among those aged 65 and above is likely to increase from 15.7% in 2020 (see Figure 4) to over 20% in 2030.

- 5.4 For young people in the 20s, leaving home for education and work is likely the main cause for solo living. Value changes towards greater social acceptance of delayed marriage may also play a role. A third factor, which disadvantages young men from less well-off families, is the high cost of marriage formation.¹¹ These factors are not easily amenable to policy interventions. The rising trend of solo living among young people is hence likely to continue in the 2020s.
- 5.5 Solo living poses different social challenges depending on the stage of life course. For young people, how long solo living lasts has implications for the timing of marriage and childbearing. An important question for China is whether the rate of solo living in the age group 30-34 will be considerably higher in 2030 than the 2020 level of 9.7% (see Figure 4). If so, the concern over low fertility will become even more grave.¹² For the elderly, rising solo living poses challenges to family-based caregiving. China's healthy ageing agenda is likely to prioritise developing home- and community-based social care.
- 5.6 The central question still revolves around the pattern of nearly universal marriage among Chinese women. Despite an increase in the mean age of first marriage and the rate of singlehood in the past decade, 88% of Chinese women aged 30-34 were married in 2020 (see Figure 10).
- 5.7 Substantial parental involvement in daughters' marriage decisions and societal norms sharply devaluing women over 30 in the marriage market have been singled out as contributing factors. However, the 2020s may witness the beginning of a profound, long-term intergenerational change. China's post-80 generation, who will be 40-50 years of age in the coming decade, are highly likely to hold less traditional attitudes towards marriage than their parents and place less pressure on their daughters to marry before 30.

¹¹ Based on fieldwork done by Chinese sociologists, an emerging norm is that to be competitive on the marriage market, a young rural man should own a car worth about 100,000 *yuan* (or S\$20,000) and have a housing unit in the county seat or an urbanised town (which may cost 6,000-7,000 *yuan* per square metre). See <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2021-11-01/doc-iktzqtyu4721598.shtml>, accessed 1 November 2021.

¹² The 2020 population census data show China's total fertility rate to be as low as 1.3. See <http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtc/zdtjgz/zgrkpc/dqcrkpc/ggl/>, accessed 24 May 2021.

5.8 In this scenario, convergence with other East Asian societies in terms of late marriage and high singlehood will probably accelerate in the coming decade. The 2030 population census data will be an indicator of whether China's intergenerational change plays out this way.

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