

# The Research on the Impact Factor of Divorce Rates in Northeast China

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**Abstract.** The dramatically increasing number of divorces in China over the past two decades had become an issue that closely related to the development of China. At the same time, the skyrocketing divorce rate in the Northeast district topped the rank of divorce rate in China. Although the uphill trend is a common challenge to all the provinces in China, the trend in the three provinces, Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin seem unstoppable. This paper explored the former research and two widely recognized theories, extracting some theoretical direction from it. Then, some points from the former researches and some changes in the society were studied, together with the latest statistics, some possible factors that trigger off the divorce heat are concluded. Finally, this paper proposed some feasible solutions for Chinese authorities to curb the ever-increasing divorce rate.

**Keywords:** Divorce Rate; Marriage; Northeast China.

## 1. Research Background

### 1.1 Introduction of Northeast

Northeast China is a geographical region of China usually corresponds specifically to the three provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Northeast China has a total population of about 107,400,000 people, accounting for 8% of China's total population. The People from the Northeast would first identify themselves as "Northeasterners" before affiliating to individual provinces and cities/towns.

While the Northeast China covers a larger sum of the landmass of China, the economic development is going on a downward trajectory since 1990s. The Gross Regional Product of Liaoning, Heilongjiang and Jilin province ranked 4th, 12th and 19th respectively among 32 province (exclude Hongkong, Macau and Taiwan district) in the 1993, as the industrial structure adjusted continuously, the competitive industries in Northeast went through a recession. The rank of the GRP in the three provinces dropped to 15th, 24th and 26th by the end of 2019. Besides, shadowed under the gloom of the regional economic development, the Per capita disposable income of Northeasterners also laid low in the ranking, for 24563 Yuan in the Jilin province and 24254 Yuan in the Heilongjiang province, lower than the national average level 30733 Yuan by 21% approximately. Accompanying the economic depression, the exodus of population in the Northeast also enormous, of which indicates the net emigrants about 24,000 in the past five years. Among the three northeastern provinces, 46,000 people emigrant from Jilin in 2017, Heilongjiang 121,800, and Jilin 202,900, for a total decrease of 307,700. In addition, in terms of the natural growth rate of permanent resident population, the data of the three northeastern provinces are even worse. In 2017, the national natural growth rate was 5.32, while Liaoning and Heilongjiang showed negative growth, which were -0.44 and -0.41 respectively. Although the loosening of the birth control policy become normal these years, the birth rate in the Northeast China is still at an ultra-low level. At the same time, the aging proceeding keep speeding up, among which Liaoning is the most aging province, with 6.268 million people aged 65 years or above, accounting for 14.35%, while Jilin and Heilongjiang are 12.38%, respectively.

The remainder of this paper is outlined as follows: section 2 introduces the relevant literature. section 3 discusses the underlying cause related to the divorce phenomenon. section 4 presents some proposals for dealing with the divorce heat.

## 1.2 Status Quo of Divorce Rates in Northeast

Since the reform and opening up in 1980s, Chinese people witnessed an earth-shaking change in every corner of their life, a shifting trend of divorce also emerged ever since then. In the modern society, the value of marriage does not remain still, which no longer persists “the wife being faithful to her husband unto death” [1]. However, the cases of divorces in China had remained almost constant (at approximately 1.3 million divorced couples) for many years prior to 2003, after the year of 2004- which is titled the “year of divorce”- the number of divorces in China almost quadrupled, reaching a peak at 4.7 million in 2019.

Among all the Chinese regions, Northeast China achieved a significant rapid increase of crude divorce rate, topping the list of divorce rates in China. According to the China statistical year book (1993~2020) and the national Bureau of statistics, a three times expansion (3.36‰ in 2019) of the national crude divorce rate can be seen, Whereas the figure is noteworthy in the Northeast district. During the same period, the crude divorce rate in Jilin province, Heilongjiang province and Liao Ning climbed to 4.83‰, 4.98‰ and 4.06‰ respectively, compares to 1.87‰, 2.03‰ and 2.00‰ respectively two decades ago. From the statistics of crude divorce rate, it can be seen that the growth rate of crude divorce rate in Liaoning and Jilin Province is significantly higher than the national average level, and though the growth rate of crude divorce rate in Heilongjiang Province is lower than the national average, the crude divorce rate in Heilongjiang Province is significantly higher than the national average and the other two provinces in Northeast China.

Furthermore, among the 4.7 million divorce couples, 0.49 million couples are dwelling in the Northeast regions, accounting for 10.5% of the total divorce number. The related Divorce ratio (note: The ratio of the number of divorces to the number of marriages) in the three provinces of Northeast China also increased dramatically, rose from 14.29% to 51.22% in Jilin, 14.01% to 58.33% in Liaoning, 34.39% to 61.12% in Heilongjiang between 2000 and 2016. In comparison with the national average (36.39% in 2016), the provincial average in Northeast China has been significantly higher than the national average since 2005.

## 2. Factors Related to Divorce

In this section of the paper, some factors extracted from the previous literature research will be discussed first, which indicates the factors from ethnic and socioeconomic vision. Then, based on the references and preliminary research, three aspects of factors related to the divorce will be discussed and explored in the following paragraphs, which are the divorce policy, the urbanization & employment and the cultural factors.

### 2.1 Points and Factors in the Previous Literature Reference

#### 2.1.1 Ethnic Factors

Northeast China is a multi-ethnic region where contains more than 50 minor ethnicities, therefore, an ethnic perspective towards the divorce phenomenon should be focused on. For instance, Li Yutong acclaimed that the Northeast region has a special culture of marriage, due to its minor ethnic residents constitute a high ratio of the population [2]. Consequently, the marital culture in this region has been mixed with variant value and custom, representing as a mixture of liberal value and high self-esteem. On the other hand, Li Yutong also suggests that the emigrant history (note: Northeast China was primitively an inhabitant of Manchus. Since modern times, international and domestic immigrants have entered the Northeast on a large scale, including emigrants from North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, and domestic Chinese.) of Northeastern dwellers formed a cultural context of openness, which cultivating the open mind for Northeastern dwellers to brace fresh ideology and breaking the tradition. Combined with the communication of marital ideology between ethnics mentioned above, there is a higher likelihood of northeastern dwellers to divorce. Former research targeted at the differences between Northeastern frontier ethnic culture and central Chinese culture [3] found that freedom of

romance is prevalent among the minor ethnic minorities, supporting the idea asserted by Li Yutong to some extent which says the mixture of ethnics change the traditional conservative marital concept into a comprehensive one. However, the changes in the concept perspective do not trigger the noteworthy increase in the divorce rate, and it can be falsified by the statistics and researches. For instance, Li Haipeng's research [4] reported that there is 3.38% (in average) of the population from minorities in northeast China by the year 2015, while the ratio of the southwestern district (mostly Guizhou and Yunnan province) is much outstanding at 17.3% (in average). Nonetheless, the crude divorce rate in Guizhou and Yunnan province is 1.34 and 1.23 respectively, whereas the figure in Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning province almost tripled, at 3.07, 3.06 and 2.83 respectively. That is to say, blaming the blend of different culture do not make sense when it comes to the soaring divorce phenomenon, especially when China is a country comprised of 56 diverse ethnic groups.

### 2.1.2 Socioeconomic Factors

Several indicators attached to one's socioeconomic characteristics, such as HuKou (household registration, divided China's population into rural born and urbanite, which tightly related to welfare services and resources of dwellers.) and education, are exerting enormous influence on the process of divorce. By citing on the argument of Blossfeld, de Rose, Hoem, and Rohwer (1995), the influence of spouses' education on the stability of marriage has been shed a light on, which illustrated that individuals are prone to terminate a disastrous marriage when they have higher educational experience, of which enables them to access to ample socioeconomic resource for managing their post-divorce life. Accompanied with Goode's theory (1971), Rohwer and his fellow's assumption can be understood in more comprehensive aspects. By evaluating individual's performance on the development of the society, spouse's socioeconomic level will be differentiated, which further determined the distribution of domestic power. The imbalance of domestic power is the origin of the family conflict, threatening the stability of marriage. However, although the socioeconomic characteristics related to marriage indeed played an indispensable role in the process of divorce, the positive correlation mentioned above cannot always be verified by the data. According to the research on the relative risks of divorce in China[5], it can be found that the secondary educated had a significantly higher possibility (46%) to end an unhappy marriage when it compares to the tertiary educated individuals(2%), whereas the divorcee who only received primary or below education are the most likely to divorce(52%).Furthermore, the statistics for origin of hukou compares the urban born with their rural opponents, while the likelihood of former exceed the latter by 57% of experiencing divorce. However, since 2000s, the gap between citizens and rural dwellers narrowed as a result of the rapid decrease of urban divorce rate and even faster increase of rural divorce cases. Hence, the assumption derived from Goode and Rohwer et al can find a strong statistical support in China, authenticating one's socioeconomic variant such as the education degree and the hukou, are key factors to affect the divorce process, though the relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and divorce rate still needs to be studied further.

Based on Berker's (1991) assumption, the dissolution of a marriage will only take place when the spouses consent that a better economic wellbeing can be expected. Furthermore, Berker refined the Coases's (1960) Theorem and elaborated it with the conclusion that the economic inefficiency of marriage is the crucial factor that trigger off divorce, in spite of other factors such as legal systems.

However, the statistics of the marital reality in China seems contrary to the Berker's argument, by illustrating the data as follows, it is reasonable for us to suspect the credibility of Berker's assertion.

According to the Judicial Big Data Report on Divorce Disputes published by the Supreme People's Court, the disharmonious of affection between couples is the biggest factor in the marriage dissolution, which constituted 45.9%, followed by domestic violence (27.8%), extramarital affair and bad habit respectively. Such phenomenon is powerful evidence reminding us that the intimate relationship between spouses has become a critical factor in modern Chinese marriage, illustrating the fact the contemporary Chinese people weight romantic love more than any other factors in the existence of marriage.

Moreover, the critics toward Berker's assumption also emerged when it comes to the legal perspective. Clark (1999) proposed that the allocation of resource and assets is of great importance in the decision of divorce, which can be seen as a theoretical reference to explain the action of fake divorce (Jia lihun: buying a new house refers to one of the spouses or both sides of the relationship without the true intention of divorce, in order to evade the law on house purchasing limits, and to achieve the common interests).

Although the Berker's theorem can be tested true in certain areas, for instance the relationship between income and formation of marriage, the statistical fact still supporting us to hold a skeptical opinion on its validity to interpret the behavior of divorce.

## 2.2 Potential Factors

### 2.2.1 Policy Factors

With the liberalization of divorce policies, it became simplistic for individuals to initiate and finish divorce proceedings, which end up resulting in the skyrocket of dissolution over the past three decades. According to the Regulations of Marriage Registration published in 1994, a letter of permission issued by the Dan Wei (work unit) was needed when people conducting divorce legally. Under such circumstances, people had to deal with the yoke of opinion in the workplace, facing the potential limits in promotion in which the public views the dissolution of marriage as a result of immoral behavior (such as cheating or whoring). The complicated procedure and strict regulations had set up difficulties, together with the potential cost of divorce reducing people's intention of divorcing significantly.

Therefore, once the Regulations of Marriage Registration modified in 2003, stating the permission from the work unit was no longer requisite, over a 1.6million couples went through divorce procedure, which can be witnessed a 21% increase from the previous year[6]. Ever since, the average crude divorce rate in China almost tripled from 1.37‰ in 2005 to 3.2‰ in 2016, at the same time, the data in the Northeast district climbed to 4.91‰ and 4.71‰ in Heilongjiang province and Liao Ning province respectively.

In the recent two decades, the reform of the Marital laws had provided a possibility for individuals to leave the marriage without reaching a consensus between spouses--Divorce by litigation--which enables individuals to withdraw from an unhappy marriage, for instance, unilateral divorcing became realistic for offering chances to the victims of domestic violence to end up marriage [7]. Previous research on the unilateral divorce shed a light on the potential link between policy changes and divorce rate. Take Mexico as an example, in terms of gender violence, more than 45% Mexican women reported that they had went through intimate partner violence. In these cases, Unilateral divorce not only represents an option for abused wives to escape their marriages, but it also contributes to reducing domestic violence because husbands are less likely to abuse given a more credible threat to leave the marriage [8]. Furthermore, similar research based on American divorce rates issued by Friedberg (1998) also found that the reform in the legislative perspective toward divorce has a strong influence on the divorce rates. Accounting for 17% of the rise in divorce rates in the USA over 20-years-long statistics, the research illustrates the permanent effect on divorce rates related to the reformation.

On the other hand, some transitional turbulence is also related to the political changes. The purchase restriction policies (note: April 30, 2010, Beijing issued the country's ten implementation rules, which sets limits on owning a maximum of two homes) in various regions have been introduced for more than ten years, 45 cities were listed including some metro cities like Beijing, Shanghai. Meanwhile, the boiling of real estate speculation remained still, which deepened the conflict between personal profits and the policy. As a consequence, some couples chose to take the action Jialihun (fake divorce), to acquire house purchasing qualification. It can be seen clearly from the previous statistics that an average of 4.5% sudden increase can be found in the regions where just introduced the purchase restriction policy [9]. However, the policies and laws are not efficient and considerable enough to discriminate the fake divorce from real ones, leading to the phenomenon.

Therefore, the legislative and political changes is a considerable force of resulting the divorce phenomenon, which can be proved in the research and statistics mentioned above.

### 2.2.2 Urbanization & Employment

Another factor that may contributed to the divorce upsurge is the development of social economy, which can be discussed in the two specific aspects--urbanization and female labor force. Acquaintance society had long been depicted as a Chara According to Mr. Fei Hsiao-Tung (1947), the rural China is a network of acquaintance cteristic of Chinese society.

Relationship, where people interact with each other in the "cha-xu pattern" (differentiate pattern). Marriages in an acquaintance society are bound by the network of kinship and geography, such external pressure is beneficial for the stability of marriages to some extent, but the personal feeling is always neglected at the same time [10]. However, In the past four decades, the leaps in the economic field triggered the transformation of Chinese society, which can be seen in the accelerating process of urbanization, totally changed the acquaintance society into a stranger society. According to the national date, the Urbanization level in the Liaoning (67.49%) and Heilongjiang (59.40%) provinces have surpassed the national level (58.52%), while the ratio in the Jilin province trailed the average by 1.87% only. In contrary to the former social pattern, the stranger society is comprised of a mass of social members and the complicated relationships behind it. Therefore, the interaction between social members is reduced, further result in the loosen pressure and restraint from familiar people. Although the process of urbanization has slowed down in the recent years, the Northeast district is still at a high level of urbanization [3]. Consequently, this high level of urbanization, directly and indirectly, affects marriage relations through various factors, which generally increases the risk of divorce in Northeast China.

On the other hand, a bottoming out of female labor force participation can be found in the 2016, took a minor ratio at 63.3%, representing as the lowest figure since 1990(73.3%). Worse still, the employment rate of female only account for 43%, while that of male took the significant lager part (57%). The disparity of employment rate may cause the phenomenon that a majority of women have to stay at home, playing the traditional role as a good wife. In addition, it had been proved by former researcher South (1983) and Meng Qiuli (2000) that the employment disparity between genders is a potential threat to the stability of marriage, for increasing the chance of extramarital love affair or domestic violence in a marriage. Hence, the female employment rates in Northeast China should be considered as an important factor when researching on the divorce phenomenon. While the number of employed people in the whole country is rising steadily, the number of employed people in Northeast China has been declining from 2012 to 2016, especially the employment of women, whose employment situation has been declining, and the overall economic growth rate in Northeast China also showed a precipitous decline in the same period [11]. The declining of employment rates trend seems synchronize with the uprising trend of divorce rates in Northeast, for Heilongjiang rose from 4.09‰ to 4.91‰,Jiling 3.71‰ to 4.71‰ during 2012 to 2016.Therefore,the rapid growing of divorce rates in Northeast China is a result of the labor force gap between genders, showing an inverse relationship between divorce rate and female employment rates.

### 2.2.3 Cultural Factors

Great changes in the Cultural perspective also bring Chinese women a new campaign to improve gender's equality and to care for individualized self. The changes in the value of equality and individualized self are the supportive ingredients when women making up the decision of divorce. All these changes can be dated back to the 1990s, when fictions and films imported from Japanese, Korean, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese experienced prevalence. Later on, the Chinese self-made family melodramas are influenced by the concern of female's innermost feelings delivered from the imported works, together forming a new narrative of female marriage life with Chinese characteristics. Since then, in the modern society, marital dissolution has no longer been considered simply as an end of romantic relationship, but a way to propels women to engage in a self-development campaign. When it comes to the narrative of romantic life, young women prone to combine their self-feeling into the

process of evaluating the quality of marriage, which is contradict to their mother's generation when people treasuring traditional virtues of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

There is another change should not be neglected -- the value of virginity-- the very concept that played an indispensable role in the traditional Chinese female marriage. Due to the traditional culture of virginity, Chinese women would consider themselves filthy when they got abandoned by husbands, which also means there was no possibility to find another normal marriage because their loss of virginity. Hence, females would be avoiding to be abandoned as well as to avoid initiating divorce. However, the situation changed since 1980s. With the large-scale translation and spread of Freudian theories have rendered the individualized psyche as the primary site producing heterosexual desires and sentiments as the foundation of one's identity formation. Sex was unwoven and remained no more a forbidden topic, followed by liberalization of sex attitudes. The confinement of virginity can never bind a woman to end up an unhappy marriage any longer [6].

However, changes also happened in the area other than female's narrative, the value of marriage went through a revolution. And the newly reformed marriage value is appreciated by a majority of Chinese people. The conceptual boundaries between social production and private life had been blurred for more than two thousand years, the boundaries did not be drawn until recent decades. In contrast to the small-scale peasant economy society, marriage and family now no longer served as a fundamental unit of social production, instead, the contemporary Chinese family formed as an intimate tie and spiritual harbour. The private environment, the spiritual harbour, is the only place where people can always find consolation to ease the pain, isolated from pressure in the rapidly changing society. More importantly, modern marriages are considered as a site of sweet home, where the quality of marital life is materialized by the satisfaction of sexuality and romantic relationship. Therefore, the degree of marriage satisfaction now can be evaluated by several criteria, such as conjugal love, sexual life and so on. The changes in the marriage value empowered contemporary Chinese with possibility, which means they are enabled to evaluate the satisfaction of their marriage by certain criteria according to their attitude towards marriage. Therefore, when Chinese spouses encountering unhappy marriage life, it is more likely for them to end the relationship.

On the other hand, the culture of drinking is an unavoidable issue in the marriages. The average air temperature in Northeast China is around minus 20 Degrees Celsius during the winter half year, which may last up to seven months. Under the climate challenge of gelid, drinking wines (note: drinking Chinese wines; Chinese wine also known as Baijiu, Sorghum liquor etc. made from grains, High alcohol content) became a popular way among Northeast residents to warm themselves, against the chilly winter [12]. In addition, the snow-covered land cannot be cultivated during the winter, residents then have opulent spare time feasting with friends and relatives, which helps forming the custom of drinking. Nonetheless, over-drinking become constituent part in the custom of drinking in Northeast district, urging participants of feasts having extremely high consumption of alcohol. In such a context, the culture of drinking will damage the harmony of families, for affecting the socialization of children, deteriorating the emotional support among family members and destroying the economic foundation of families. Worse still, alcoholics often have difficulty controlling their emotions and behaviors, family conflicts then arise. This conflict is an important cause of family discord, domestic violence and family breakdown.

Hence, the culture of drinking in the Northeast China is harmful to the stability of marriage, which can be verified from that 32 percent of divorce cases are related to alcoholism in the Northeast China [13].

### 2.3 Conclusion

Policies affect people's behavioral expectations, which are reflected in behavioral outcomes. The reforms and changes in the policy perspective greatly reduces the costs, even accelerates the procedure, which total changes people's attitude toward divorce, and exerting a long-term influence on the divorce rates. The similar effect can be found in the household purchase regulations, which also influences the prospective earning of people, and causing the turbulence of divorce.

Besides, the development of economy will affect the divorce phenomenon indirectly, for instance, influences the marriages through the urbanization. Although a declining tendency can be found in Northeast recent years, the level of urbanization in the region still at the cutting edge in the country. Therefore, marriages are free from various invisible boundaries from acquaintance society, people are then endowed with liberty to manage the destiny of their marriages. In addition, in the cities, the disparity of employment will intensify the inequality between genders, arising the risk of extramarital love affair and domestic violence, which end up undermining the stability of marriages.

The last but not least, the all-round development of female's self-cognition enhances their sense of self-worth in marriages, thus they begin to have more courage to take divorce options in their marriages. More importantly, the drastic changes in the concept of marriage in modern society has led to the changes of the marriage culture which has been inherited for thousands of years, accompanied with the changes of social life, divorce then has become a commonplace.

In all, the factors in ethnic vision and socioeconomic point have been testified incorrect above, for a Lack of strong data support and discordance with the reality of society. However, the policy, urbanization & employment and the cultural variants are the key factors contributing the skyrocketing divorce situation in Northeast.

### **3. Suggestions on Controlling the Divorce Rates**

#### **3.1 Setting a Cooling-off Period in Divorce Procedure**

Mandatory cooling off period is a feasible measure have been put into practice in many countries, such as USA, South Korea and France etc. With the introduction of new Civil Code of the People's Republic of China in 2021, 30 days long cooling off period had been official implemented. However, China can still learn some beneficial information from their Asian neighbor-- South Korea, where Confucian values of family and patriarchy also have prevailed for centuries. In South Korea, the long run experience of the policy practice had proved that the mandatory cooling off period increases filing cancellation and reduces finalized divorce rates to some extent [14]. In addition, researchers also found that although the cooling off policy increased the divorce filing cancellation, the policy failed to curb the divorce filing rate [14].

The cooling off policy is designed to prevent couples from emotional shocks caused by sudden marital upheaval by forcing a time of deliberation. That is to say, while the cooling off policy may be helpful to reduce the number of marital dissolutions at the end, the breaches in marriages cannot be recovered, as well as some victims of intimate violence may suffered from the prolonging filing time. According to the statistics in Korea, the longer cooling off enacted, the better impact can be seen, which indicates a 2 to 6 months waiting is most efficient for canceling the divorce filing [15]. Therefore, the four-weeks-long cooling off policy China needed to be co-operated with the popularization of family social work, which helps couples to resolve temporary conflicts in the delay. More importantly, the family social work is constructive in identifying and preventing the domestic violence, further helping the victims away from the negative impact from the policy.

#### **3.2 Reducing Social Burden and Increasing Jobs**

On the other hand, as the variants of divorces had been mentioned above, the gap between gender in the labor market should be narrowed, as it had already been proved that the situation of employment and work pressure is influencing the stability of marriages strongly. Hence, if the regulation of the labor market can be reformed, the work pressure can be eased and the gender discrimination be erased appropriately, the divorce rate may be reduced accordingly. Besides, a lower dependency coefficient and a better social welfare also should be expected, to solve the worries and burden for both urban and rural residents.

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