
The edited volume offers a timely contribution to the rapidly growing literature investigating transformations in marriage and sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan and urban China. It is a must-read for both established researchers and students interested in the field. The volume consists of 12 well-integrated chapters, which draw upon a wide range of methods and materials (ranging from legal document analysis, ethnography and survey data), to offer a comprehensive analysis of complex micro and macro processes and trends.

Drawing from this rich primary and secondary data, the volume details a shift from the public to the private ordering of intimate life and how individual desires, personal choices and self-fulfillment shape decisions on when and with whom to get married, and if and how to initiate sexual relationships. It shows how sexual intimacy is becoming delinked from marriage and childbearing (Ch. 3 by James Farrer, Ch. 7 by Petula Sik Ying Ho), how norms are increasingly permissive of same-sex relations (Ch. 1 by Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman), how mean age at first marriage has increased (Ch. 1, Ch. 4 by Yong Cai and Wang Feng), and how legal changes have reduced barriers for divorce (Ch. 2 by Deborah S. Davis, Ch. 9 by Grace Shu-Chin Kuo), as reflected in increased crude divorce rates in all three societies. The volume makes important points about how shifting norms and practices pertaining to marriage and sexuality are interrelated with marketization and the shifting role of the state, which continues to discipline intimate behavior, albeit in new and less explicit ways. The volume also reveals new knowledge on how expanding cross-border marriage and labor markets offer new grounds for intimate relationships (Ch. 7, Ch. 11 by Hsiu-hua Shen, Ch. 12 by Sara L. Friedman).

In many ways, the volume tells a story of how shifts in marriage and sexuality are gendered. Drawing attention to how women and men are renegotiating sexual space, women’s sexual agency is still curtailed by norms of prudence and chastity (Ch. 3). Similarly, while men seem to have become more open to extramarital sex, one’s wife’s infidelity is still regarded as problematic (Chs. 7, 11). Moreover, although women in mainland China, due to their numeric shortage, are considered to be in an advantageous position, the shengnü (leftover women) discourse has reinforced the universality of marriage, contributing to further stress and anxiety
among unmarried middle-class women and their parents (Ch. 5 by Jun Zhang and Peidong Sun). The fact that college-educated women in China stay unmarried to a lesser extent than their male counterparts, and compared to earlier age cohorts (Ch. 1, Table 1.2) testifies to the highly constructed nature of the discourse. The volume also documents gendered outcomes of marriage; although marriage seems to be more a “woman’s thing”, men in Hong Kong are more satisfied with marriage, especially younger men, than women (Ch. 6 by Kwok-fai Ting). Similarly, Taiwanese women express less satisfaction with marriage, and women, even if engaging in paid work, do most of the household work (Ch. 10 by Ruoh-rong Yu and Yu-sheng Liu). Even as men work and live across the Taiwan Strait, some women cherish male breadwinning over fidelity, and opt not to divorce, despite their husband’s extramarital affairs (Ch. 11). This points at the prospect that gender segregated labor markets and social policy provisions (implicating women’s labor force participation, the gender wage gap, care arrangements, intergenerational relations, etc.) may also lead to inertia, the resilience of the institution of marriage – and even the reemergence of traditional gender norms, something which is not discussed in any detail.

Rather, the book has as its theoretical point of departure that marriage in the three societies is becoming deinstitutionalized, a process identified by the US-based sociologist Andrew Cherlin, suggesting that “previously taken-for-granted assumptions about the propriety of premarital sex, grounds for divorce, or even the necessity of marriage no longer prevail”. Although the volume has convincingly shown that there are trends challenging the universality of marriage, it seems questionable that the notion of deinstitutionalization of marriage fully captures the ongoing renegotiations of marriage and sexual intimacy, especially in mainland China where childbearing is only legally permitted within marriage (Ch. 2). The idea of the marriage institution as resilient is also supported by a recent survey by All-China Women’s Federation. The proportion of women and men who agree with the statement that for women “a good marriage is better than a career” has increased between 2000 and 2010.2

Instead of interpreting changes in marriage and sexuality as a process of deinstitutionalization of marriage, it may be useful to draw theoretical insights from Lauer and

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Yodanis (2010), who argue that alternatives to marriage can become institutionalized in parallel with marriage, but without marriage becoming deinstitutionalized in itself. 3 However, the extent to which alternative forms of intimacies will become institutionalized will be highly contingent on gendered outcomes of changes in the labor market, social policy and marriage laws, as well as (in China) how the sex ratio question unfolds – and to what extent notions of companionship and individualized choice will evolve. Although an interesting contribution, the fact remains that the theory of deinstitutionalization proposed in this book does not convince this reviewer that it is the most appropriate or relevant explanation for the changes occurring in marriage and sexuality in the three societies studied.

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