

Divorce can be good for health in traditional societies such as China

China has achieved impressive economic growth during the last three decades due to rapid industrialization that has been facilitated by “Special Economic Zones”. In addition, internal migration of over 150 million workers from rural to urban areas has been critical for economic development. However, migration has separated married couples for extended periods; China’s crude divorce rate, measured by number of divorces per 1000 population, has increased from 0.33 in 1979 to 2.8 in 2015. Moreover, enforcement of the one-child policy since 1979 has intensified patrilineal emphasis on sons and can differentially affect men and women’s chances of divorce.

Modeling the inter-relationships between migration, divorce, and well-being requires a long time frame since the effects of explanatory variables on outcomes are likely to be gradual. The frequency and durations of husbands and wives’ migration are likely to differentially affect their chances of divorce and indicators of health and well-being. For example, men and women from rural areas working in urban settings are exposed to modern aspects of social life that can increase the chances of divorce. Second, due to patrilineal family structures, husbands in unhappy marriages with a first-born daughter might be inclined to divorce and remarry with the expectation of producing a son; such pressures need not apply to wives. Third, it is important to augment the analyses of self-reported measures of health with objective physiological measures such as blood pressures that are affected by domestic tension. Couples in unhappy marriages may experience elevated blood pressure that might be *reduced* by amicable separation so that divorce might have beneficial effects for health.

Using longitudinal data from China Health and Nutrition Surveys covering over 19,000 individuals during 1989-2011, this paper modeled the inter-relationships between internal migration, divorce and individual well-being, tackling the conceptual and methodological aspects such as the joint determination of variables. First, random effects probit models showed that migration periods of husbands and wives significantly increased their respective chances of divorce. Second, results from dynamic random effects models for self-reported health showed different effects of separation periods for husbands and wives; divorce did not significantly lower health status. Third, dynamic models for systolic and diastolic blood pressures showed significant effects of migration durations of husbands and wives; men had *lower* systolic blood pressure following the divorce thereby indicating beneficial effects for unhappily married couples. Policy implications of the findings are discussed.

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