

Inter-religious Marriages between Muslim Hui and the Majority Han in Urban China: Regional Variations and Structural Factors

Xing, Wei & Cao, Xingshan

Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

Introduction

The life of Chinese ethnic minorities and their relations with the majority Han in contemporary urban China has been barely studied from sociological perspective, despite its theoretical and practical significance, the availability of systemic Chinese census data, as well as the recent rapidly increasing interests about the dramatic social transformation in urban China. This paper, as part of our effort to fill the gap, investigates patterns and structural influential factors of intermarriage between Muslim Hui and the Majority Han in urban China, using 1990 census data.

The Muslims in China are decedents of Persian and Arabic Muslim merchants doing business in China as early as A.D. 500, but mostly of officially migrants under the Mongol conquests around A.D. 1000-1200. In 1990s, there were totally ten million Muslims, who were classified as ten ethnic groups. With long history of contact and cohabitation with the majority Han, Muslim Chinese has, to different extent, culturally assimilated to the majority Han. Muslim Hui is the biggest Muslim group, with a population over 8.6 millions in 1990, and it is also the most urbanized minority groups and widely spread in the whole country, constituting a very large proportion of ethnic minorities in most Chinese cities.

Culturally, Muslim Hui has been much assimilated to the Majority Han, wearing Han clothes, speaking the language of Han, and celebrating the Han festivals. They maintained some Arabian and Persian vocabulary only for religious rituals. It is widely accepted that the core difference between Muslim Hui and the majority Han lies in religion, between Islam and Confucianism.

Traditionally, the majority Han has no strict restrictions to out-marriages, while Muslim Hui has strong taboos, prohibiting its members marrying out with non-Muslim people, especially for Hui women. However, recent relevant studies have controversial findings. Some scholars find that in contemporary urban China, ethnic boundaries are quite open; all kinds of interethnic marriages are possible, including inter-religious marriages between Hui and Han, while others insists the opposite.

Research questions

Therefore, this study describes the variation of intermarriage rate in different cities in the country, and further analyzes the impact of city-level structural factors on intermarriage using multivariate regression analysis. Specifically, we examine the effects of demographic factors, socioeconomic stratification between and within ethnic groups, and residential patterns on outmarriage rate of Hui with Han. We answer two questions:

1) is there any variation in terms of out-marriage of Hui to Han in Urban China? 2) What, at city structural level, is (are) the responsible factor for the variation?

Methodology

We use 1% 1990 Chinese Census data for this study. To address the issues of urban intermarriage between Hui and Han, we only focus on Hui and Han people with urban household registration and living in the urban areas. At the same time, we only select people who were 15 or older in the year 1990, to make the analysis more accurate.

The study is basically a macro-level analysis, with city as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable is the outmarriage rate of Hui in a city. Here an outmarriage is defined as a marriage of either a Hui husband with a Han wife or a Hui wife with a Han husband. Since our analysis is targeted on intermarriage between Hui and Han, cities without Hui are systematically eliminated from the analysis. Eventually, our analysis includes 476 cities (either large county towns, or county-level cities, or prefecture-level cities, or districts within larger cities, from an administrative perspective).

Independent variables cover three major aspects of structural determinants on intermarriage: demographic factors, socioeconomic stratification, and residential pattern. For demographic factors, we have three variables: city's population size, Hui population size, and sex ratio of Hui women within the local Hui group. Two variables are used to measure socioeconomic stratification. Index of diversity of education of Hui measures the social stratification within the local Hui group, and average educational difference in between Hui and Han measures the inter-group socioeconomic stratification. Finally, index of interaction (P) between Hui and Han is used to capture the impact of residential pattern. We use OLS regression to model the variation of outmarriage rate across the nation's urban Hui population.

Results and conclusions

The regression results suggest that all three aspects of structural factors have significant impact on out-marriage rate of Hui. Specifically, a large Hui group in a city could reduce its outmarriage rate. But an unbalanced sex ratio would increase the outmarriage rate. Meanwhile, educational gap between Hui and Han has a positive impact on Hui outmarriage, but Educational diversity within Hui has a negative impact on outmarriage. Finally, Index of interaction between Hui and Han of a city could significantly increase Hui's outmarriage with Han.

Structural factors are very important determinants of intermarriage between Hui and Han in urban China, which to a large degree corresponds to the previous findings. However, this study found that residential pattern, specifically interaction between ethnic groups, had the most substantial influence on intermarriage in urban China.