

## *Cohabitation and Gender Equality: Ideal and Real Division of Household Labor among Chinese Youth\**

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### *Abstract*

China has witnessed the rise of cohabitation and the delay of marriage among young people, but less attention has been paid to cohabitation as a process of living arrangement that may create new room to define gender roles or replicate conventional gender relations. Previous studies have debated on whether cohabitation is an egalitarian union with more symmetric bargaining power and individualistic pursuits, and this study sheds light on how young people in China negotiate their gender role ideologies in cohabiting unions. Based on in-depth interviews with 18 cohabiting couples in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and nearby cities in South China, this study finds that men were more divided in their gender role ideologies and women were predominantly favorable toward egalitarian beliefs. In the “intended egalitarian” couples, both partners supported egalitarian ideals and reported sharing housework equally, which served men’s family-oriented masculinity and women’s individualistic pursuits and self-development. In the “discordant” couples, with a typical “traditional

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\* The study was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 41901140), the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (General Research Fund, CUHK14609219), the Worldwide Universities Network, and the Research Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Direct Grant).

man and egalitarian woman” combination, traditional men were more defensive than egalitarian women. Most discordant couples adopted traditional arrangements, and only a few traditional men tolerated egalitarian arrangements as “temporary” due to their unemployed status or other real-life constraints. Both the celebration of egalitarian ideals in some couples and the persistence of traditional arrangements in others reflect the mixed and uneven trends of gender equalization in the reform-era China.

Worldwide, young people have continued to delay their marriage and embrace cohabitation as a popular choice in their union formation.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, cohabitation has become the modal first union in the intimate relationship trajectory.<sup>2</sup> In some Western countries, cohabitation can be a long-term coupledness and an alternative to marriage, in which parenthood is widely practiced.<sup>3</sup> China has also witnessed a significant increase in cohabitation. Although marriage remains robust and universally expected in China, the proportion with cohabitation experience has increased to more than 40 percent in the marriage cohort of 2010–2012, compared with less than 4 percent in the marriage cohort before 1959.<sup>4</sup>

Given this demographic and family change, demographers and family sociologists have written extensively about determinants and consequences of cohabitation.<sup>5</sup> Most studies focus on the driving forces and evolution of cohabitation in relation to marriage and singlehood, comparing what triggers the transition to marriage and to cohabitation.<sup>6</sup> Less attention is paid to cohabitation as a process of living arrangement. As cohabitation may be a more or less established union across societies,<sup>7</sup> this study contextualizes the nature of the cohabiting relationship in contemporary China. The rapid increase of cohabitation suggests an important change in young people’s living arrangement, but at the same time, it is yet to be examined whether such a nonmarital coresidential relationship creates new room to define gender roles or replicates conventional gender relations.

Cohabitation has been perceived to be more egalitarian than marriage. Unlike marriage that often features gender role specialization,<sup>8</sup> cohabitation tends to witness an expression of self-fulfillment and individualistic values, as theorized by the Second Demographic Transition theory.<sup>9</sup> Although cohabitation used to be more prevalent among