

Late transition to motherhood in Hong Kong

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This study takes the first attempt to examine late transition to motherhood in Hong Kong, a society where the total fertility rate is ultra-low and the median age at first birth is one of the latest among high-income societies. We aim to investigate the profiles of women who have first births at a late stage (at 35 or older), focusing on the relational (i.e. within marriage, cohabitation or singlehood) and socio-economic context of late motherhood and explore whether their profiles align more closely with the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory or the Pattern of Disadvantage (POD) hypothesis. We utilized data from the Hong Kong birth registrations and restricted our attention to first births in the period of 1981-2019 (N=1,176,481).

Our descriptive results indicate that in the late 2010s, approximately 25% of the first births occurred to mothers aged 35+, compared to less than 3% in the early 1980s. And even the proportion of first births after age 40+ rose significantly. A cross-country comparison reveals that the trend of late transition to motherhood is more prevalent in the high-income East Asian societies than in Western societies, with Hong Kong showing the highest proportion of late first births.

There are three main findings from our logistic regressions. Firstly, the relational context of late motherhood has changed. The late transition to motherhood first increased within cohabitation over 1981-1995, then followed by the rise of late childbearing within marriage over 1996-2005. In the period of 2006-2019, the probability of late motherhood among the single women surged and became the highest among the three groups. Secondly, compared to secondary education, mothers with primary and tertiary education levels were more inclined to have late birth. This suggests a U-shaped relationship between maternal education and the likelihood of late childbearing. Notably, in the 2010s, the probability of late motherhood was highest among women with primary education or below. Thirdly, among single mothers, those in highly skilled jobs are most likely to have first births at age 35+ in the period of 2010-2019.