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# Marriage expenses in rural China

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# Marriage expenses in rural China

## Abstract

High marriage expenses in China's rural areas have drawn considerable attention from the public, media, and academia. The objective of this article is to review recent literature on China's rural marriage expenses and related issues. We first describe China's rural marriage process, the high level of expenses including total expenses, expenses on housing, bride price, and expenses on marriage banquets involved. Afterwards we analyze speculatively the three causes of high marriage expenses: parental obligation, face-related competition in village culture, and imbalanced bargaining power due to the shortage of women. Next we introduce briefly the consequences of high expenditure on marriage. Then we investigate the three contentious issues related to high rural marriage expenses, namely: economic exploitation between families, between generations, and within generations; high marriage expenses and female social status, and the preference for sons. We conclude with issues for future research.

Keywords: Marriage expenses, bride price, female shortage, exploitation, preference for sons, face-related competition, bargaining power

## 1. Introduction

In rural China, patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal systems are predominant. Marriage usually means marrying a daughter-in-law into the family for the bridegroom's family, and marrying off a daughter for the bride's family. Rural marriage expenses for males are often much higher than those for females. Dramatic socioeconomic and demographic transformations in rural China have meant that male marriage expenses have undergone major changes, especially since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most striking feature of these is the skyrocketing expense of marriage in relation to local incomes.<sup>1</sup>

Some early studies attribute the increases in marriage expenses to China's economic development, the increase in incomes, and the rise in parental obligations.<sup>2</sup> However, recently two other factors have emerged that should not be neglected, which have driven up rural marriage expenses drastically for males, namely the rural sex imbalance for marriageable partners, and the rise in face-related competition in villages.<sup>3</sup>

Along with studies on the cause of rising marriage expenses, some research has focused on the effect of high marriage expenses on men's parents, unorthodox marriage and trafficking of women, as well as the existence of bare branches (rural males unable to marry beyond the generally accepted marriage age) and bare branch villages.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have also touched on some specific aspects related to high marriage expenses.<sup>5</sup> Among these, three topics are contentious and deserve further discussion. One is related to the nature of the high marriage expenses and wealth transfer from the groom's parent to the bride's family and to the newlyweds' family: do these transfers still fit the classic

marriage payment theory or marriage endowment theory? Another concerns marriage expenses and the elevated social status of women in rural areas. The third is focused on marriage expenses and the preference for sons.

For this review, we build on the extant literature, most of which is Chinese, to introduce the subject of changes in marriage expenses in rural China mainly since the 2000s. Marriage expense includes both that incurred on the bride's side, and that on the groom's side. Here we just focus on the marriage expenses paid by the male and omit those incurred by the female side. The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The second section introduces the rural marriage process and marriage expense variations, especially over the past two decades. The third section focuses on three determinants underlying the drastic increase in marriage expenses, including the parental obligation to obtain a spouse for their son, rural sex ratio imbalance for marriageable partners, and face-related competition in villages. The fourth section discusses the consequences of high marriage expenses. In the fifth section we investigate the three specific aspects related to marriage expenses, namely exploitation of high marriage expenses, their impact on the status of rural females, and their impact on engrained preference for sons. The last section provides some conclusions.

## **2. Marriage Process and Expenses**

### **A. Marriage process**

Marriage customs vary according to region, ethnicity, and individual economic situation. Across the different areas of China, there are many differences in the complexity of the process, the details of procedures, and the names of the steps in the process.<sup>6</sup> With

social development and ideological transition, rural marriage customs have evolved over time and been simplified to a certain extent, but the principal steps of a traditional rural marriage process remain intact. In general, the marriage process primarily consists of the following four steps (Figure 1): the marriage proposal, match-making, the engagement, and the wedding banquet.

### **Figure 1 here**

There are also regional disparities in the names of the expenses in all of the steps. We summarize the expenses in Figure 1. In many areas, a marriage house is a prerequisite for all the subsequent steps. Each step is moved forward with money, starting with a visit from a matchmaker. There is also a greeting gift when the man and woman meet. If the woman is interested, the man must offer a bride price. An engagement date will then be decided, followed by the purchase of household appliances and supplies. Finally, there are many activities on the wedding day. Almost every single step the bride takes costs money.<sup>7</sup> The literature has indicated that the expenses for a house, bride price, and marriage ceremony expenses comprise the main bulk of rural marriage expenses.<sup>8</sup>

In the following section, we examine the total marriage expenses and specifically the three major expenses: housing, the bride price, and the wedding banquet.

## **B. Total expenses**

It is generally accepted that rural marriage expenses have been increasing in China since the late 1970s after China decollectivized agriculture and chose to open up.<sup>9</sup> Total marriage expenses include cash and gifts, although the cash amounts and the contents of the gifts have changed dramatically. In the 1970s, for marriage there were generally three

gifts, namely a wristwatch, a bicycle, and a sewing machine. Later, the three gifts became a sofa, a five-drawer chest, and a cabinet, which were all household items. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, the three gifts were referred to as the “three gold gifts”, i.e., gold necklaces, gold earrings, and gold rings, which were all women’s accessories. After the 1990s, the trend became “three new items”, i.e., a TV, a refrigerator, and a computer. Currently, the trend is for “three big new items”, i.e., a house, a car, and bank notes.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there are many accessories and supplies that are supposed to be included inside the house. The bank notes can be used to buy gifts such as the “three gold gifts”.

Marriage expenses have increased so rapidly that since the turn of the 21st century they have risen to a dozen times the per capita net income or annual household savings in local rural areas.<sup>11</sup> Below we summarize some surveys on marriage expenses.

#### **Table 1 here**

Survey 1 showed that the marriage expenses were equivalent to 14-25 times a resident’s annual net income.<sup>12</sup> Survey 2 revealed that it cost a family’s 10 year savings to marry in a bride.<sup>13</sup> Survey 3 revealed that obtaining a spouse for a son cost a family 10 to 20 years of its annual household savings.<sup>14</sup> In survey 4 it took more than 10 years of household savings for marriage in the case of the majority of respondents.<sup>15</sup> Survey 5, which was conducted in 2009 nationwide over 364 villages, revealed that the average marriage expenses (including a new house, the bride price, and the wedding banquet) for an average family on their son’s wedding was 95,500 Yuan. The average marriage expenses in the eastern region were 112,500 Yuan, which was equivalent to 18.8 times an eastern region resident’s net income. The average marriage expenses in the western region

were 74,000 Yuan, which was equivalent to 22 years of a rural resident's net income in that area.<sup>16</sup> Case 6 and Case 7 in southwestern China revealed a surprisingly high marriage expense exclusive of a marriage house which cost 25 to 30 years' per capita net income.<sup>17</sup>

### **C. Housing**

For Chinese farmers, a decent house is the primary index that measures a household's living standards and economic conditions. Zhang shows that in the early 1980s, house-building was not a necessity for a rural marriage. However, by the early 1990s a house had become a basic necessity.<sup>18</sup> Even though this study focused only on the case of a northern village, the conclusion could be generalized nationwide.

Today, a house is a prerequisite for arranging a rural marriage. Marriageable Chinese women have placed a great emphasis on men's financial resources, which are often assessed by the sizes and locations of men's houses and their parents' houses, when they are searching for a prospective husband. Some reports in 2011 indicated that Chinese men without their own houses (or condos) would not be considered for dating.<sup>19</sup> A survey conducted in 2010 indicated that over 70% of women believe that a man must have a house before he can get married.<sup>20</sup> Another survey conducted in 2009 by the Women's Federation of Heilongjiang Province on rural bride prices and marriage expenses indicated that 88.7% of those surveyed believed that a house was necessary for marriage.<sup>21</sup> If parents wish to find a spouse for their son, they first must save a certain amount of wealth to build or buy a decent house or apartment. A family's housing wealth relative to others is an important marker of relative status in the marriage market. Without a bridal house, the son will be at a disadvantage in the marriage market.<sup>22</sup> The competition for marriage partners often



motivates people to purchase larger and more expensive houses/apartments beyond their direct consumption (and financial investment) value.<sup>23</sup> As McKenzie and Tullock put it: “Chinese parents have built on third stories to their two-story houses only to make them useful fronts for making their sons more marriageable, with the third floors often left empty and unused”.<sup>24</sup>

A bridal house or apartment is quite costly relative to income. In villages in Tianjin, the municipality directly under the central government, building a house for a new couple cost almost 10 years of savings for a rural family.<sup>25</sup> In villages in Shandong in 2007, building a marriage house cost more than 100,000 Yuan, and the rural per capita net income was 5,046 Yuan then; thus, the house cost almost 20 times the annual net income in that year.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere in Henan, the requirement for a house on marriage was even higher. A two-story house with decorations in 2011 cost approximately 150,000 to 200,000 Yuan, and the average local resident’s net income was slightly more than 3,000 Yuan. Thus, this type of two-story house was equivalent to 40-50 times the average resident’s net income.<sup>27</sup>

Recently, an ethos of buying a house for the couple in the city/county downtown has developed, which costs more than building a house in a village. In some villages in Shandong Province, some parents had already built new houses in the village, as required for their sons’ marriages. However, the prospective brides asked for houses in the city instead. Thus, the parents who had already built a house in the village had to borrow money to buy another house in the city.<sup>28</sup> In Liaoning Province, a migrant worker said, “Many migrant workers are like me and have already built a house at home (in village) in preparation for marriage. However, currently, most of the girls also go out to work and do

not want to get married in the villages. Those girls wish to find someone who has a house in the city".<sup>29</sup> In some villages of northwestern Henan Province, buying a marriage house in the town or city is now a new trend.<sup>30</sup> In the rural areas of Fenghua, in Zhejiang Province, over half of those recently married have bought a house in a city or town.<sup>31</sup>

#### **D. Bride price**

Bride price is an essential part of the marriage rituals in rural China. Chinese cultural traditions still require a bride price to make a marriage official. Most rural residents recognize the bride price as a norm and internalize it in their own cultural values.<sup>32</sup> If there is no bride price, the bride herself will face intense pressure from her own and her husband's village, leading to doubtful approval of the legality of the marriage by the village residents. A marked rise in the bride price has been observed, reinforcing the commercial transaction aspect of marriage.<sup>33</sup> Yan depicts the transformation of the bride price over time before 2000 in rural northeastern China of Heilongjiang Province,<sup>34</sup> and Ji describes the vicissitudes of the bride price before 2000 in Liaoning Province of northeastern China.<sup>35</sup> Below we list some recent surveys in different parts of China.

In Heilongjiang Province (located in the northeastern China), the Provincial Women's Federation conducted a survey on bride prices for rural families across the entire province in 2008. The survey revealed that 31.1% of the bride prices were between 30,000 and 50,000 Yuan, and 39.3% were between 50,000 and 100,000 Yuan, whereas the per capita net income for rural residents in Heilongjiang province was only 4,855 Yuan in 2008. A bride price of 100,000 Yuan is equal to 20 times the annual per capita net income.

Approximately 40% of the bride price was borrowed from relatives, and approximately

15% was borrowed from loan sharks in the rural areas.<sup>36</sup>

In Gansu province (located in northwestern China), bride prices in 2000 were approximately 16,000 to 18,000 Yuan and reached 30,000 Yuan in the mountainous areas with high poverty levels. Between 2004 and 2006, bride prices in rural areas near the county line were 30,000 Yuan and the bride prices in mountainous areas with high poverty levels increased to 50,000 Yuan. In 2008, bride prices near the county line were approximately 38,000 to 46,000 Yuan, while the bride prices in the mountainous areas increased to between 80,000 and 100,000 Yuan. The average Gansu farmer's net income was only 2,724 Yuan in 2008.<sup>37</sup> In Henan Province (located in central China), bride prices in 2000 were approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Yuan, but they increased to 50,000 to 60,000 Yuan in 2010. The current quotes for bride prices in those villages are between 66,000 and 88,000 Yuan. A farmer who had married off a daughter said, "I only asked for 66,000 Yuan, which is not much. Someone in my village even asked for 100,000 Yuan... this is the current quote in our village". The average farmer's net income in the town was between 3,000 and 3,500 Yuan. However, it was still not easy to find a daughter-in-law even if someone was willing to pay this high bride price.<sup>38</sup>

In Shandong province (located in eastern China), bride prices were approximately 100,000 Yuan in 2010.<sup>39</sup> In southwestern part of Shandong province, the bride price may currently fall into three levels, 66,000, 88,000, and 100,000 Yuan. For Shandong province, the rural per capita net income was 6,990 Yuan in 2010.

The above figures of rising bride prices over time indicated seriously increasing competition and huge efforts to succeed in the marriage market. In order to add their own

attractiveness and increase the probability of finding a spouse, men choose to raise the bride price in spousal competition when women are in short supply. One example from Henan province in central China was as follows: one village in Henan married over 40 wives in 2011, which was much more than the surrounding villages. The reason for this was that villagers in this village bid a bride price of 50,000 Yuan, whereas the bride price was 40,000 Yuan in the surrounding villages. People in the surrounding villages blamed the village with the higher bride price for breaking a rule by raising the bride price.<sup>40</sup>

### **E. Wedding banquet**

Marriage ceremony expenses have been rising since the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Of the ceremony expenses, the wedding banquet is the most important part, as the quality of the wedding banquet usually determines the success or failure of a marriage ceremony.<sup>42</sup> The wedding banquet serves two functions. The first is to allow the marriage to be witnessed. Without a wedding banquet, the marriage might not be recognized by village residents.<sup>43</sup> The second function is for social networking. The ceremonial gift exchanges in weddings are important means that rural communities use to maintain, build, nurture, and strengthen their social networking relationships.<sup>44</sup> People now put more emphasis on the scale and grandeur of the wedding banquet with all the trimmings, resulting in a dramatic skyrocketing in expenses.<sup>45</sup> Commonly the number of guests, the cost of each table, the types of cigarettes and wines, the brands of candy, and the grade of the wedding car are all talking points that people use to evaluate a wedding banquet.<sup>46</sup>

In some villages in Heilongjiang province, a wedding banquet often has dozens of tables that seat hundreds of people. In addition, there may be a second round of hundreds

of people who arrive after the first round has finished eating. There are usually two to three rounds, with the total number of guests often numbering over 1,000.<sup>47</sup> In the six marriage banquets in a northern Henan village between 2007 and 2009, there were around 80 tables for each. If each table accommodated 8-10 people, there were 560-800 people eating meals at those weddings.<sup>48</sup> In another case in a village in Chongqing in 2010, 140 tables of guests were invited, with 10 people at each table; the total number of guests was approximately 1,500.<sup>49</sup> For another case in Guangdong Province, a banquet expenditure was 1000-3000 RMB in the 1990s, and rose to 20000-30000 in 2000s, and further increased to 40000-50000 in the 2010s.<sup>50</sup> It is generally accepted that wedding banquets are placing an increasingly heavy burden on families, and are becoming a great waste of resources.

### **3. Causes of High Marriage Expenses**

The increasing marriage expenses are generally thought to be a result of rural economic development and the rise in income.<sup>51</sup> A number of anthropological studies have established a link between the recent increase in the bride price and the economic and social liberalization that followed China's opening-up process.<sup>52</sup> However, marriage expenses have increased dramatically since China has opened up - the standard bride price has increased by a hundred times - whereas the annual income has risen by 30 times only in Heilong Jiang Province,<sup>53</sup> and by 80 times for the bride price in the past three decades in Henan Province.<sup>54</sup> Marriage expenses have depleted parents' resources, led families to incur a heavy burden of debt, and become an unbearable burden for parents, and this cannot be attributed solely to economic development. Recent studies, based on anthropological or sociological survey in different rural areas, have identified the following

three factors that contribute heavily to the distorted rural marriage expenses.<sup>55</sup>

### **A. Parental obligation to get their son married**

Marriage is a sign of adulthood in rural China. Those males who cannot get married beyond the generally accepted marriage age would be labeled as ‘bare branches’, and be despised and not regarded as an adult despite their age.<sup>56</sup> To find a spouse for a son is a general social norm, so parents who cannot get their son married will be regarded as “unqualified” and “shameful” parents. Such families do not gain a “family identity” from the community’s perspective, often feel a strong identity rejection from the community’s norms and values, and become marginalized in the community’s interaction process.<sup>57</sup> From the parents’ perspective, to get their son married so as to carry on the family line is one of the most important responsibilities in their life. If they fail in this task, they consider it their greatest shame and a total failure of parenthood, and they do not feel they have accomplished their mission in life. Parents become so miserable that they cannot even hold their heads up when they walk, and carry a heavy burden of shame.<sup>58</sup>

Only after getting their son married do parents feel that their childbearing responsibilities and obligations have been accomplished. Parents also feel a sense of accomplishment in their intergenerational responsibility, gain face in the village, obtain meaning from life, and earn respect from others.<sup>59</sup> For all this, parents must prepare the material requirements and be responsible for the expenses. Consequently, parents resort to whatever means they can find to provide marriage expenses for their son. Surveys in Anhui province,<sup>60</sup> Henan Province,<sup>61</sup> Shandong Province,<sup>62</sup> Gansu Province,<sup>63</sup> all illustrate how rural parents struggle to meet the financial demands of their son’s marriage.

## **B. Face-related competition in village culture**

Village culture, which is, the culture mainly characterized by sharing and spreading information within one village, is prevalent in rural China.<sup>64</sup> In a context of village culture, the concept of face is extremely important. Any misbehavior can be subject to criticism and losing face. Marriage customs have always been an important topic in village culture and are one of the most important issues related to face.<sup>65</sup>

In some villages, the residents meet almost every day on the main road and discuss the events in the village, and marriage is usually the most important topic. Villagers express envy toward families who pay high bride prices and host extravagant weddings which earn face, but they also ridicule families who pay low bride prices and host cheap weddings which make them lose face.<sup>66</sup> Following the model, farmers want to spend significantly to host a wedding even when their financial conditions are very limited. If not, they will feel they lose face and worry that others will gossip behind their backs.<sup>67</sup> According to an old man interviewed in Gansu province, northwestern China, “In a son’s wedding, you have to spend what you are supposed to, no matter how poor your family is. You cannot spend any less as there is a market quote here!”<sup>68</sup> Another old man interviewed in a Shandong village said, “People will laugh at you if you do not do what you are supposed to do. Other people can do it. Why can’t you?”<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the marriage process, each individual’s social status and reputation are reflected through the rituals, customs, and marriage expenses. People attempt to obtain recognition through marriage expenses and to demonstrate a sense of superiority over others by attracting attention, envy, and jealousy. Such vigorous face competition is a

leading factor in soaring marriage costs.<sup>70</sup> A marriage seems to be a family event, but in reality, it is considered a golden opportunity for a family to show off its financial capacity to the village.<sup>71</sup> Engagement rituals, bride prices, wedding rituals, and wedding expenses all become items for comparison.<sup>72</sup> According to a survey conducted in 2012 in several villages of Henan province in central China, 95 percent of respondents thought that potential comparisons were an important phenomenon in marriage arrangements.<sup>73</sup> In order not to lose face before their peers, villagers compete ostentatiously in extravagant marriage arrangements even at the cost of heavy loans, resulting in skyrocketing marriage expenses.<sup>74</sup>

### **C. Imbalanced bargaining power due to shortage of women**

Another factor emphasized in studies of high marriage expenses is the rising bargaining power of marriageable females due to China's imbalanced sex structure and shortage of women. Since 1980, with the stringent implementation of the one-child policy, vastly more men than women have been born, and for the time being and in the future, China's marriage market will be characterized by a severe female deficit and tight male marriage squeeze.<sup>75</sup>

The relative shortage of marriageable females in comparison with the number of males on the marriage market could benefit women, as they have a wider pool from which to choose spouses who are able to provide them with better living conditions.<sup>76</sup> With males outnumbering females, the law of supply and demand enables marriage-age women to wield stronger bargaining power in marriage negotiation, and gives them market power to exact a higher price.<sup>77</sup> The bargaining power of women in aggregate has been raised,



leading to dramatically increasing marriage expenses. In a seller's market, males, who are at a disadvantage in the marriage market, have almost no bargaining power at all. Parents become worried by the idea that their son might remain single, so they have no choice but try to satisfy whatever the prospective bride asks for, as the surveys have shown.<sup>78</sup> In 2011 in Henan province, a young man said, "My girlfriend and I have been dating for three years. We were planning to get married in the winter of 2010. However, my girlfriend said her parents wanted a house in the city". The young man told them, "Houses in the city are too expensive, and I cannot afford to buy one". The young girl was very mad and said, "You can borrow it if you do not have the money. If you do not have the money, don't even dream of getting a spouse. It is a girls' market now, and not even money can guarantee finding a spouse".<sup>79</sup>

Evidence of spatial hypergamy across long distances supports the notion that marriage is a means for peasant women to move to more favorable locations.<sup>80</sup> Female marriage migration has further intensified the gender imbalance in less developed villages, making it hard for these poor males at the bottom of the social strata to find a spouse. For these males, women have even greater bargaining power, if they take into consideration these males as potential partners.<sup>81</sup> Men's families who are from poor regions or areas with poor agricultural conditions are usually forced to raise the bride price to ensure a son's marriage. An increased bride price has a role-model effect that further increases others' bride prices and the average socially accepted bride price. As the average bride price increases, disadvantaged men must pay even higher bride prices. This vicious circle makes the bride prices in rural marriages increase continually.<sup>82</sup>

#### **4. Consequences of High Marriage Expenses**

The implications of high marriage expenses are far-reaching and diverse. The literature usually focuses on the effect of high marriage expenses on parents and families, on unorthodox marriage as an adaptation strategy, on forced singlehood, and on crimes committed to collect enough money for marriage.

High marriage expenses exert a profound effect on families, especially parents. Men's parents have to struggle for years, scrimping and saving without spending any extra money, solely because they want to host a happy wedding for their son. The increased competition in the marriage market has led to an increase in savings for families with sons.<sup>83</sup> However, savings accumulated over many years may still not be enough. Surveys indicate that besides the family's own income, money borrowed from a bank or from other individuals is the second main source.<sup>84</sup> While the children enjoy a better lifestyle after marriage, their parents have to worry about the debts which they have incurred on their children's behalf.<sup>85</sup> According to an interviewee in a village in Shandong province in eastern China, "In this village, there are not too many folks who have enough money to spend on marriages. Most of them have to borrow. After their sons get married, they still have to live frugally so as to slowly repay their debts. These folks have not really achieved anything in their entire life other than hosting a wedding for their sons".<sup>86</sup> Some parents have to migrate to cities to work when they are in their sixties,<sup>87</sup> and it has become quite common to see elderly people in their eighties still working in the plains of northern China after their sons get married.<sup>88</sup>

The phenomenon of unorthodox marriage (according to Chinese criteria) has been

revived, partly as a result of high marriage costs. Exchange marriages (Huanhun in Chinese) and mercenary marriages (Maimai Hunyin in Chinese), though quite common in Chinese history, have not been regarded as decent in more recent times, especially after the founding of the P.R.C in 1949. However, during the last few decades, 'exchange' marriages and 'mercenary' marriages have also re-emerged and their incidence has increased.

Exchange marriages and mercenary marriages occur in poor families, and serve as an alternative to meeting soaring marriage expenses.<sup>89</sup> Due to high marriage payments, the phenomenon of exchange marriage and mercenary marriage has deteriorated, especially among poor males who are unable to pay the marriage expenses in poverty-stricken areas. Such forms of marriage are an adaption strategy to living constraints for poor families, but may cause conflicts between the partners involved.<sup>90</sup> There have been other negative reports related to marriage, such as marriage fraud (obtaining money from sham marriages) and escape marriages (brides who run away immediately after the wedding); such deceptions are aimed at high-level marriages only.<sup>91</sup>

Trafficking of women is another problem partly arising from high marriage expenses, as those poor males who are unable to pay for the expenses for a generally accepted decent marriage create a vast demand market for trafficked women. Attané observes that: “Sons of some poor families, who are unable to pay for the inflated cost of marriage, find it less expensive to pay traffickers than to marry in the traditional way with the attendant gifts, wedding banquet and bride price, and this has led to a sharp rise in the sale of wives in some regions of China”.<sup>92</sup> In some poverty-stricken areas, buying a wife is even regarded as a normal practice for continuing the family lineage. Taking the reduced cost compared

with a normal marriage, and the convenience of operation into consideration, some single males choose to buy trafficked women to be their wives.<sup>93</sup>

As a result of fierce competition in the marriage market, males in the lowest social strata, especially those who cannot afford marriage expenses, are more likely to remain single, creating a higher prevalence of bachelorhood among poorer and less-educated males.<sup>94</sup> Chinese women have a tradition of hypergamy, through which women escape from a poor family through marriage. Families are also willing to marry their daughters to more developed regions.<sup>95</sup> As females can take advantage of the deficit and marry upwards, it is those poor men who cannot find a spouse. Even though previous studies have mainly blamed the issue on China's imbalanced sex structure in the whole population, the problem of male celibacy among the poorer social classes has been worsened by a sharp rise in marriage expenses.<sup>96</sup> Those unmarried males will be unable to produce any descendants and will suffer the disadvantages of the absence of an heir, such as the extinction of their family line, loneliness and lack of economic solutions for their old age.<sup>97</sup> When bare branches band together and form a bare branch village, the resulting stagnation in farming output influences the economy and production there, and may pose other threats to social stability. But further discussion of this topic falls beyond the scope of this review.

## **5. Three specific issues in marriage expenses**

Below we introduce three specific issues which may be contentious. Though not necessarily interrelated, they are all important aspects of the subject, and each deserves a brief introduction.

### **A. Beyond payment and endowment--inter-family, intergenerational and**

## **intra-generational exploitation**

There are primarily two theories used to explain marriage expenses in China: the marriage payment theory and the marriage endowment theory. The marriage payment theory refers to marriage expenses that are transferred from the groom's parents to the bride's as a compensation for rearing costs and the loss of rights over their daughter, and as recognition of a woman's future labor and reproductive capabilities in her new husband's household. The marriage endowment theory refers to the phenomenon that most of the wealth and gifts associated with the marriage process are channeled to the newlywed couple as a subsidy to help them establish a new family. Recently the marriage endowment theory has gained substantial support.<sup>98</sup> After the 1980s, marriage expenses became more geared toward benefiting the newlywed couple, as can be suggested by the increasing dowry, and the balancing of the dowry-bride price ratio may have proven even more significant in practice than these figures suggest.<sup>99</sup>

There are significant temporal and spatial variations in the nature and amount of marriage expenses and payments. The balance between the costs incurred by wife-givers and wife-takers has been constantly readjusted with changing economic circumstances.<sup>100</sup> These adjustments are the consequences of both changes in the socio-economic environment and strategic or tactical responses of rural Chinese to the rapidly changing context in which they live and work.<sup>101</sup> Recently high marriage transfers from the groom's family to the bride's have transcended the scope of simple "marriage payments" or "marriage endowment". The women's parents, who obtain huge benefits by taking advantage of their daughters' marriages, are the real beneficiaries; they make large profits

because of the shortfall in women.<sup>102</sup> Surveys in Henan province,<sup>103</sup> Gansu province,<sup>104</sup> Hubei province,<sup>105</sup> Anhui province,<sup>106</sup> indicate that some parents spend only a very small portion of their daughter's bride price on their daughter, and put the rest to other uses such as their son's marriage, agricultural investment, medical expenses, and so on. During the matchmaking process, the matchmaker relayed an asking price of 150,000 Yuan to a young man (the average rural Gansu resident's net income was 4,495 in 2012). When the young man tried to decrease the price, the woman's parents said, "We have raised her for so long. It is well worth this much even if you base the price on weight".<sup>107</sup> This obvious strategy of "money making" is a form of economically inter-family exploitation that women's families exert on men's families.<sup>108</sup>

Marriage represents a massive transfer of resources, not simply between families but between generations.<sup>109</sup> Marriage gifts such as a house and electric appliances are channeled to newlywed families, and this practice seems to reflect the marriage endowment theory. However, when comparing the expenses with family incomes, the huge amount spent far exceeds the definition of endowment. In addition, some women have pre-marriage agreements with the men's families that the newlyweds will not be responsible for the old age support of her parents-in-law or the repayment of the debts incurred for the marriage.<sup>110</sup> One interviewee in rural Henan province said, "Currently, daughters-in-law in our village do not take care of parents-in-law, which was agreed before the marriage. In addition, daughters-in-law do not allow parents-in-law to live in the new house with the newlyweds. Poor old parents are so pitiful now. They have not really done anything meaningful in their entire life...".<sup>111</sup> While the children enjoy a better lifestyle after

marriage, their parents have to depend on themselves for old age security, and worry about the debts which they have incurred on their children's behalf. Therefore, young women are in fact manipulating their “market advantage” and bargaining power to maximize their economic benefits from men’s families and to secure their standard of living after marriage. This type of “intergenerational endowment” exercised by women’s families toward men’s families has turned into a form of “intergenerational exploitation”.<sup>112</sup>

Recently, light has been shed on another understudied phenomenon, which has been termed ‘intra-generational exploitation’.<sup>113</sup> Intra-generational exploitation is embodied in two aspects. One is the fact that daughter’s bride price is used for the son’s marriage. In order to collect the bride price from their daughter’s marriage, parents even arrange early marriage for their daughter, so as not to delay their son’s marriage arrangements.<sup>114</sup> The other is related to China’s tradition of marriage and family division. Generally parents arrange first the marriage of the oldest son (or sons in some other order), which may deplete household resources, even including those earned by younger sons. After their marriage, the older married sons usually divide their household from their parents’ one and establish their own family, thus gaining economic independence and leaving the marriage of younger brothers to their parents. Surveys in Henan province,<sup>115</sup> in Jiangsu province and Shaanxi province,<sup>116</sup> in Anhui province and Hubei province,<sup>117</sup> and in Chongqing municipality directly under the Central<sup>118</sup> all identified such phenomena, which surely deserve deeper analysis.

## **B. Change in female social status**

Whether high marriage expenses will raise the social status of women is not entirely

clear. The literature has not attached great importance to the correlation between high marriage expenses and women's social status in China. Instead, some studies relating the rising marriage expenses to the shortage of women in China see a steep rise in bride price as a form of commercialization and commodification of women, which arises out of social inequality and the scarcity of women.<sup>119</sup> In this opinion, women are regarded as little more than consumer goods, and cases of kidnapping or forced marriage are increasingly common.<sup>120</sup>

On the other hand, some researchers believe that a shortage of females will increase female value and social status, and consequently benefit their emancipation.<sup>121</sup> High marriage expenses, partly arising from the female shortage, mean that many families exhaust their entire wealth in obtaining a daughter-in-law, which leads to an obvious change in the intra-household power balance.<sup>122</sup>

In the late 1990s, rising status of the wife in the domestic sphere and a significant change in family relations and gender roles were observed in rural northwestern China. In the village of Xiajia, almost all the males were afraid of their wife's authority. The main reasons for this redefinition of husband-wife relationship in conjugal life were the high cost of marriage and a wife's threats of divorce.<sup>123</sup> Surveys in Aishan village in Hubei province showed that since 2000, the power struggles between husbands and wives have tended to favor women. Women also tend to prevail in decision-making in family affairs.<sup>124</sup> Farmers in Zhumadian, Henan province said, "Currently, everyone is afraid of his wife". Villagers in Daye region, Hubei province said, "70% of the families go with what the women said". Villagers in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province stated, "Currently, most people are



afraid of their wives”.<sup>125</sup> A village secretary in Henan province expressed the belief that currently, rural women have high social status and have the final say in most families. Women are often in charge of family finances, which is significantly different from the previous situation. In addition, a woman officer in a village said, “Women’s status at home has been raised. Women are the decision makers at home. Men turn in the money they earned to their wives”.<sup>126</sup> It may be reasonable to say that as women’s market value has risen, their social status is gradually increasing.

### **C. Attitude towards preference for a son**

Chinese parents prefer sons over daughters, so as to carry on the family line. However, the difficulty of accumulating enough resources for a son and the cruel reality of so many bachelors due to the inflated cost of marriage actually mean that rural parents are waking up to the realization that rearing a son does not actually guarantee “continuation of the family”.<sup>127</sup> Though preference for sons still persists, the motivation of couples to have girls is becoming stronger.

In the past, it was generally acknowledged that it was a blessing to have a son, but now people are beginning to doubt this saying, as it costs so much for the son’s wedding. For rural families with two sons, the parents will have no choice but to spend their lives in a vicious circle of “building a house to get a daughter-in-law”.<sup>128</sup> In Gansu province, a village secretary said that it was three to four years since the last wedding took place in the village. There were approximately 40-50 unmarried men. Whenever villagers see families with two sons today, they say that it is worrisome because the sons will likely remain unmarried.<sup>129</sup> When two daughters are born to the same family, other villagers will become

jealous of the family, as the parents can really enjoy life.<sup>130</sup>

In a village in Henan province, the head of the women's federation claimed that there had been a change in child-bearing and rearing concepts. Generally, families that have a boy as their first child stop without having another child because they worry about the heavy burden of having another boy. If the first child is a girl, people will usually try to have another child. If the second child is also a girl, most people will stop there.<sup>131</sup> In villages in Shandong province, families are categorized into three classes, the first class is 'daughter only' families, in which parents are not concerned with building a house to marry their son so they live happily; the second class refers to families with one son and one daughter, as parents arrange only one son's marriage; families with two or more sons fall into the third class, as parents have to toil all their lives for their sons.<sup>132</sup>

Chinese parents prefer sons over daughters as a cultural tradition, as only male offspring are regarded as carrying on the family line. The traditional Confucian ideology of "Of the three unfilial things, failure to produce a male descendant is the greatest" still plays a prevalent role in daily life. However, due to the inflated cost of marriage, rearing a son does not actually guarantee "continuation of the family".<sup>133</sup> The heavy exploitation for a son's marriage incurred on parents made them over ponder the issue. At the aggregate level, China's sex ratio at birth has been around 120 boys born to 100 girls for many years, indicating a significant preference for sons and a high prevalence of sex-selective abortion. However, men's demand for marriage in the marriage market well exceeds the supply of women, which makes raising girls beneficial. Women's enhanced value may result in an increase in the supply of girls, and lead to more balanced sex ratios because couples will

choose to have girls.<sup>134</sup> Though preference for sons still persists, the motivation of couples to have girls is becoming stronger. With the rising marriage expenses and changing attitudes toward offspring, the sex ratio may balance out, as predicted by Gupta et al. and Guilmoto.<sup>135</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

This review of marriage expenses in rural China has reported on the marriage process and expenses, the causes and consequences of high expenses, and three specific topics related to rising expenditures on rural marriage. In rural areas, male marriage expenses have increased extremely rapidly, and are now far more than an average family can afford. In contrast to the relatively recent past, building or buying a new marriage house has become a current requirement in most rural areas. Bride prices have skyrocketed, and wedding expenses and other related expenses have significantly increased. All of these increased expenses have had a profoundly negative impact, and many rural families find the heavy financial burden and mental stress unbearable. For those who can afford trafficked women, they may turn to this solution, but many men will have to remain unmarried.

One cause underlying high marriage expenses is that parents consider it their obligation in life to find a spouse for their son and so they attempt to accomplish this mission in a decent manner so as to save face. Moreover, gender imbalance and the relative shortage of women have raised women's bargaining power, leading to rising marriage expenses. Rural men's high marriage expenses have led to changes in families' power structure, which may raise women's social status and lessen the deeply-rooted preference

for sons. The high expenses of marriage today have gone beyond the traditional concept of marriage payments or marriage endowments, and become a form of exploitation. For parents whose living conditions dramatically deteriorate due to the marriage expenses incurred by sons, their sacrifice is driven by the deeply entrenched ideology of carrying on the family line and by the face competition and public opinions of villagers.<sup>136</sup>

Work on marriage expenses is a dynamic subfield that should interact with many other disciplines and continue to generate new theoretical, empirical, and methodological insights. There have been abundant studies on China's rural marriage expenses, using ethnographic, anthropological methods to provide a robust picture of the situation, but the correlation between marriage expenses and female social status and the preference for sons has not been discussed sufficiently and convincingly so far. Further studies may consider quantitative data in this area. Moreover, since the studies published have been carried out in different places during different periods, historical comparative study and geographic analysis using GIS means may help us to obtain the big picture concerning rural marriage expenses in China, so that we may obtain not only temporal and spatial trends in marriage expenses, but also find some diffusion effects. Most importantly, the majority of studies are limited to the classical marriage payment and endowment theories. As marriage expenses are inseparable from their context, new localized theories need to be developed which can provide a deeper and more accurate understanding of these emergent phenomena.

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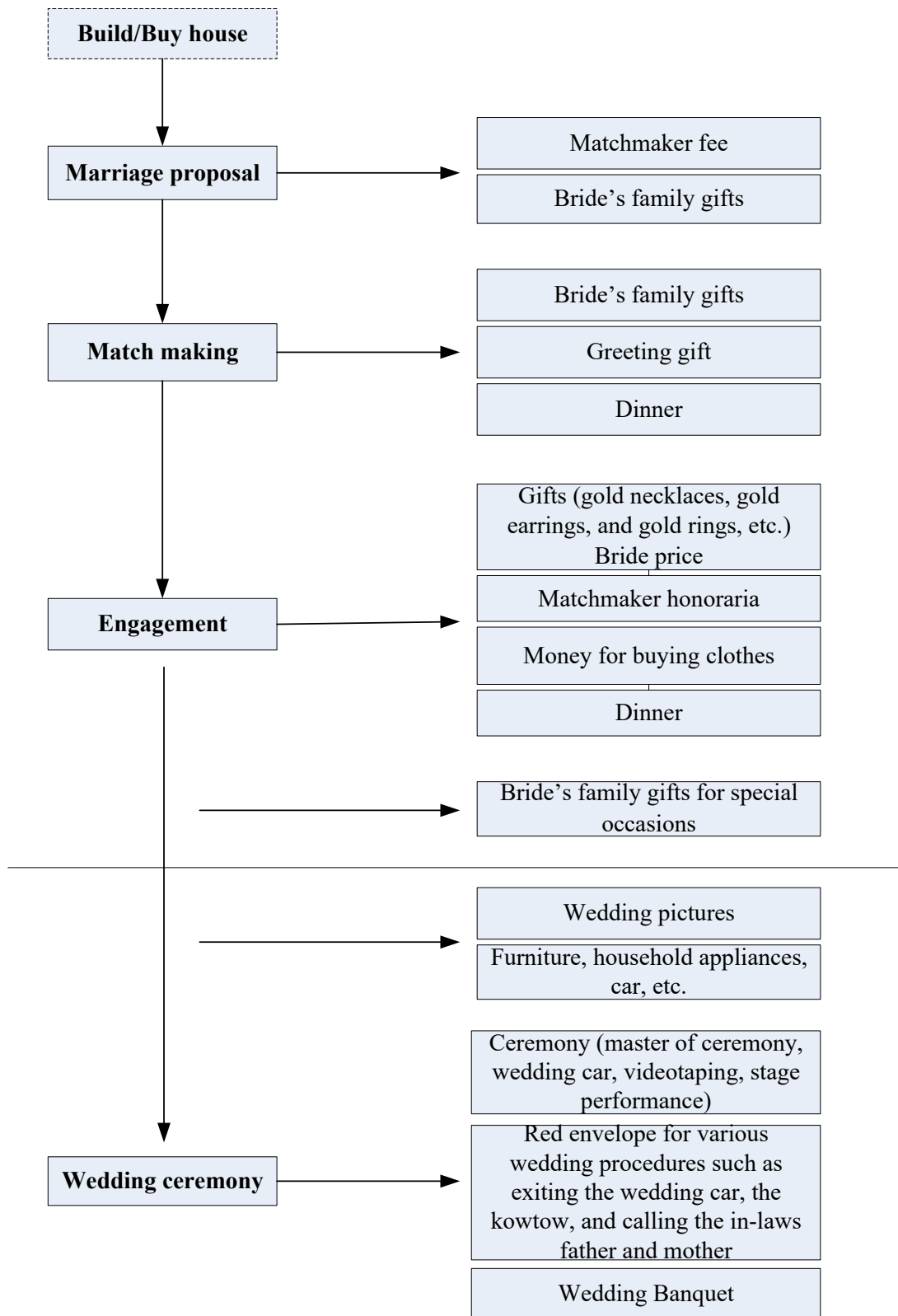
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Table 1 Marriage expenses

Survey No.	Survey Year	Expenses	How many years of per capita annual income or annual household saving	Location
1	2005	28,000-50,000	14-25 (income)	Eight towns in Zhoukou prefecture, Henan Province
2	2010		10 or more (savings)	Zhoukou prefecture and Zhumadian Prefecture in Henan Province
3	2011	150,000 for house and other expenses	10 to 20 (savings)	H town in northern Henan Province
4	2007		10 or more (savings)	Fangjia Village, Linyi prefecture, Shandong Province
5	2009	95,500		364 villages across 28 provinces nationwide
		112,500	18.8 (income)	Villages in Eastern China
		74,000	22 (income)	Villages in Western China
6	2009	98,500 excluding housing	33(income)	Shilong village in Chongqing, Southwestern China
7	2010	76,300 excluding housing	25(income)	

Data Source: See the text below



**Figure 1 Marriage process and expenses**