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Exploration of bare branches in rural china

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Exploration of the bare branches phenomenon in rural China.

HS4008 Literature Review

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Introduction

China's family planning one child policy and hukou system coupled with its culture of preference of sons over daughters has resulted in imbalance ratio between the sexes. The one child policy was implemented in the 19th century in order to curb unchecked population growth. (Wang 2005) Unmonitored population growth would undermine economic progress and country's ability to provide sufficient employment opportunities and efforts to raise the standard of living, hence stringent one child policy was employed. (Wang 2005)

In short, the hukou system is key in defining an individual's opportunities and socioeconomic position in China, and in turn commutates one's status. (Christiansen 1990; Cheng and Selden 1994) Citizens are classified in terms of urban or rural and agricultural or non-agricultural. This system was first put in place by the state to monitor population migration and to ensure welfare provisions are kept in check. (Fan and Huang 2010) It is particularly arduous to change one's hukou's status and it in turn bar the individual from accessing employment opportunities and welfare benefits of another destination. (Fan and Huang 2010) However, as females are expected to join the husband's location of family, marriage became a viable vehicle for women to attain mobility, whereby the husband's corresponding hukou status is transferrable to the wife, allowing access to employment opportunities and welfare.

Culturally, sons are preferred over daughters due to the traditional practice of patrilineal lineage and inheritance whereby only the sons can ensure the continuation of the ancestral line and family name. Hence with the advent of the one child policy and cultural traditions, this phenomenon of having more male births than female babies due to sex preference leads to female infanticide or sex selective abortion in favour of male sons has extensive social and demographic consequences. On the other hand the hukou system was responsible for women using marriage to leave their villages behind in search of better life and access to resources.

The 2000 census reported a highly disproportionate sex ratio of 119.2 boys to every 1000 girls, indicating more than 10% of boys than girls in the population. (Wang 2005)

Focus

One of the most pressing latent manifestations due to the imbalanced sex ratio in China would be the phenomenon of bare branches. Bare branches' are men involuntarily unable to get married over a certain age, and thus have no wife and children. (Jiang & Li, 2009) In this literature review I would attempt to delineate the multiple facets that contribute to this phenomenon of rural men facing difficulty getting married and the social consequences this harbours.

Much literature and study has been done on the trend of bride shortage and marriage squeeze in china that places focus more on women on the topic of marriage. In contemporary china, due to the imbalance of the sexes, there are more women than men and hence it empowers women and they are able to utilise their advantaged positions to achieve upward mobility. (Fan and Huang 2010)

However, lesser focus has been placed on the men in study of marriage in China. Hence in this literature review, I would attempt to paint a clearer picture of what contributes to the men experience of this gendered disparity that is jeopardizing marriage opportunities looking specifically at rural men who are the most disadvantaged due to their undesirable socio-economic attributes that I would explore hereon.

Body

In Fan and Huang's article, "Waves of Rural Brides", the central argument is in modern day China, the fertility decline and resultant disproportionate of female births as a result of preference for male sons has empowered women. Fan and Huang (2010)found that the

demand for women for marriage has allowed women to take advantage of the scarcity of women in comparison to men in order to achieve social and economic improvements and mobility, as they have more choice in husbands available and often have the opportunity to marry “up”, or basically marry to men who’s socio-economic status would be better than their own. Their point is further substantiated by Meng (2009) whereby he uses the phenomenon of bride drain to indicate differential access of men and women to the marriage market, whereby women have better access to marriage market via migration. This practice of marrying in order to improve mobility and status is displayed by the trend of marriage migration whereby women migrate within China to provinces or towns that are more prosperous than their own to enjoy a higher standard of living. However, I would argue that primarily this marrying “up” of rural brides by migrating to more prosperous provinces leaves a gap back in their own village that would create a void, lacking of females suitable for marriage, leaving the rural men back home having lesser chance to get married. This is especially applicable for men from the poorest villages, and already they are starting to form “bachelor villages” in the rural areas that comprises involuntary high percentage of bachelors as a result of their undesirable socio- economic status and serious deficit of women. (Davin 2007)

Moreover, Wang(2005) argues that when brides become scarce due to the imbalance and comparatively lesser number of females in the society, marriage has now become an indicator of social privilege. Any form of privilege would definitely be in favour of the socio-economically more capable societal individuals and hence leaving out the rural men we are looking at in this article. Hence unmarried men are concentrated in the rural areas. (Wang 2005) marriage has then become a highly demanded commodity that is sought after through attributes and men’s socio economic status. There is also an increasing trend of late marriage whereby men get married later due to them saving up more in order to attract a bride for

marriage. This competitiveness to attract brides using socio-economic status and most commonly wealth is through the use of bride price. This led to the resurgence of such a practice. Resulting in modern day, China is increasingly home to extravagant weddings and extensive bride prices in order for groom's family to flaunt their ability to get a bride and for the bride to agree to the marriage, which created a new culture of social pressure for marriage that is based mainly on rational and pragmatic notions as compared to love and emotions. Zhang and Zhong (2005) argues that rising importance of bride price as a determinant factor for marriage places immense pressure on men the exorbitant prices are hard to afford and hinders marriage while Peng (2004) contends that men who cannot afford buying a new house faces difficulty in getting married too.

As established above, monetary means is one important component in influencing marriage in China today. Not only must men have to fulfil certain socio economic requirements, they must also take into consideration whether they are able to afford having a family with rising living costs and child raising costs. Hence, even if the rural men get married, they might not form a family due to the increasing high costs of raising a child in China. This would still render the men considered a bare branch due to him not having off springs to continue the family name. According Sharygin, Ebenstein and Guptaon (2012) their studies show that with an average increase of each additional year of education among men is associated with 0.196 prevalence of women migrating for marriage.

Furthermore, due to rising affluence of china and rising education of women and corresponding participation in the economy, women in China are increasingly more independent and do not necessarily want to get married as they are economically independent and do not have to depend on men like in the past. Hence further reducing the available pool of brides for men in China, since they will not be desirable for the educated urban women and

their rural counterparts are marrying “up”, leaving them with little or limited available potential partners.

Hence the phenomenon of the bare branches in China has far reaching consequences that shall be explored hereon in order to better understand this phenomenon and its corresponding manifestations.

Firstly, when rural men find it increasingly hard to get married, one of the components most affected would be division of labour in the family. Traditionally, one of the most effective division of labour for rural families would be for the bride to work on the agricultural production while the men work in factories to maximise labour capital and potential income. (Fan and Huang 2010) Hence, with this increasing prevalence of the bare branches and inability to get a bride, agricultural families face shortage of labour and hence not able to maximise potential to be upwardly mobile and improve standard of living as the men then has to work on the agricultural work himself.

Secondly, with more bare branches not having off springs, China would face an eminent problem of an aging population whereby a large proportion of its population will not have children to take care and provide for them. This would pose an immense pressure on the state as then it would have to dish out more welfare and social services for its aged. (Peng 2004; Ye and Lin 1998; Zhang and Zhong 2005) with this bride drain and marriage squeeze that basically indicates the deficit of females in accordance to male proportion there would be increasing prevalence for the market of marriage involving foreign brides. This phenomenon is already starting to take off, with starting of a new market for mail order brides from neighbouring countries whose women seek betterment and upward mobility. Another viable potential source of attracting brides would be through trending social media through the use of technology. However, these new markets for foreign input of brides are potential sources

of problem whereby it encourages human trafficking and the illegal selling of women as brides to China.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout this literature review the factors has been explored and studied to understand the bare branches phenomenon experienced by rural men in particular whereby they are doubly discriminated and disadvantaged by their socio-economic status and location. However, there remains areas that further study can be conducted such as the insight of the men's experience using ethnographic qualitative research methods that attempts to delineate the bare branch experience and their corresponding devices used to cope with this phenomenon. Furthermore, with the understanding of what contributes to this phenomenon that has far reaching consequences, it lends an insight to further study how policies can be crafted to combat them to correct the situation, as an aging population of this size would be detrimental to any economy in its provision of welfare and healthcare services for the aged population. As care for the parents still mainly lie on sons, failure to get a bride and give birth to children poses serious threats and provides an area of study regarding the culture that will result from increasing proportions of bachelors in society.

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