Implications of China's Contemporary Marriage Market on Gender Status

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this literature review is to understand how China’s contemporary marriage market has affected gender statuses of men and women across China. We are trying to ascertain generally if men’s status has decreased and women’s status has increased. Traditionally in China, women have always played a subservient role to men especially in terms of their relationship in a marriage. Essentially, the main reason for this is because Chinese practice a culture of hypergamy. Young women eligible for marriage had always characteristics emphasized such as how beautiful and obedient she was but the men on the other hand will always emphasize how much wealth and talent he had to support the women (Zhi Zhou 2003). This has always been the culture of Chinese people in which the women always marry up her social station. However, because of high proportion of men in China, women’s status has now increased relative to men, although in general there are still traits of women being subordinate to men.

China’s One Child Policy has led to increase sex selection. Males were preferred over females because of a variety of reasons such as cultural biases and need for Chinese males to contribute to human labor in agrarian fields. The Chinese census in 2005 showed a steep sex ratio at birth of 119 which meant that there are roughly 1 million more boys than girls born annually. For the cohorts born between the years 1985 and 2005, there has been estimates that there are 27 million more men than women which inevitably implies that there are many men who will fail to marry (The World Bank Research Development Group 2010). This indirectly would presumably transcend to women having more power over mate selection and thus may lead to an increase in status while some men who fail to marry could lead to a decrease in status for men.
IMPLICATIONS

Men with lower educational status have lesser chances of getting married

According to the World Bank Research on Chinese marriages, using education as a close proxy for status, there is almost universal marriage for highly educated men but lower rates of marriage for those men with lower education (The World Bank Research Development Group 2010). Generally speaking, those from urban areas tend to have higher education than those in rural areas. Thus, there is an issue when there is a marriage crisis occurring in rural areas. On the other hand, the marriage market for women is clear. Women across different educational distribution enjoy mostly universal marriage and are able to engage in hypergamy, choosing spousal mates which of a higher status and income then them. In addition, many of these women migrate for marriage purposes and it seems very plausible that in the near future the collapse of marital prospects for men will occur crucially in poorer regions of the country with low educational attainment. The statistics speaks for itself when over 98% of college graduates marry by age 35 but the proportion of men with less than a primary education who marry is under 90% (The World Bank Research Development Group 2010). Thus, in this instance, there is a tendency for women in rural areas to have a higher status than men seeing that they could eventually get married off while men may risk being bachelors for the rest of their life.

This is also supported by the status attainment hypothesis. This hypothesis states that people place great value on education in spousal selection. The paper has found that the earning gap between highly educated individuals an uneducated individuals has increased and the respondents were less likely to cross any educational barriers and more likely to avoid downward mobility which only puts increasing pressure on the lowly educated males in finding a spousal
mate (Hongyun 2010). The much wider earning gaps across educational distribution in urban areas provide possible reasons for the greater degrees of social closure in urban areas further restricting poorer rural males from interacting with wealthier female from urban areas.

**Marriage law and their implications on women**

It is very important to discuss on the PRC’s Marriage Law (*hunyin fa*) when debating about the issue of women’s status. It is evident that the intention of the state is to “liberate” women from the shackles of what it deemed “feudal oppression” (Diamant 2000). The New-Democratic marriage system which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children is put into effect. (*Marriage Law, 1950, General Principle Section, para. 1-2*). There are always instances of time lag for cultural practices to change especially in the rural areas. A study reported that the rate of parent-decided marriages was as high as 74.9% in rural areas of Gangsu, a northwest province, from 1967 to 1976 (Xu, 1998). However, for the most part of the Marriage Law, people were responsive to the changes. According to Whyte, 1990, the new Marriage Law promote gender equality and encouraged women to join the labor market. Encouraged by the government’s policy of “equal jobs and equal pay,” many women, particularly unmarried women, began to work outside the home. Job opportunities were rife for these young women and they were allowed to interact in a broader social circle and these placed greater freedom of choice in whom they dated. All this in all helped to increase the status of women by some extent.

**Trafficking women for Marriage**

The increase of males in China has one very insidious consequence which is the abduction of thousands of women and young girls who are either forced into prostitution or coerced in
marriages. One reason for the trafficking of women for marriage is the large poverty that exist in the rural countryside which causes families to sell of their daughters. There is a huge gulf in wealth between the rural and the urbanites in China. In 1994, the average annual net income per person Shanghai was five times greater than those living in Guizhou province (Zhao 2003). With the prospects of increasing one’s social station with social mobility, there inadvertently resulted in a large demand market for brides in rural arena and even more opportunities for traffickers. The Chinese government made it a priority to punish criminals who abduct and traffic women or children, however, this policy has only limited effects. The government tried its hard-style campaign enforcement to educate the public on the consequences of trafficking. However, these campaigns are ineffective due to limited resources in only targeting certain designated areas and many Chinese have a poor understanding of their individual rights and thus, these women have no idea what recourse is available for them. As a result, these gender-based violence and all the forms of sexual harassment and exploitation inevitably lead to women having decreased statuses.

**China men marrying foreign brides**

According to the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that the number of couples registering a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China has increased almost tenfold between the years 1979 and 2010 (Jeffreys 2013). The increase in Chinese-foreign marriages suggests that it is a recent phenomenon. The foreign marriages are also highly gendered. The marriages are usually between mainland Chinese males and foreign brides. Data also suggests that there are more of these marriages existing in developed regions in China rather than in rural provinces. The areas with the biggest number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010 were the regions of Guangdong (approximately 370,000 marriages in total), Fujian (nearly 227,000) and Zhejiang (approximately 57,000) and the city of Shanghai (nearly
63,000). These regions have close geographic proximities with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan and the trade volume between main China and these countries have increased substantially over the years which leads to suggest more interaction between couples in these regions. On the other hand, the number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in poorer provinces of western China is insignificant. Between the years 1979 and 2010, there were approximately 1,900 Chinese-foreign marriages registered in the province of Gansu, 690 in Ningxia and 360 in Qinghai. Fewer than 200 Chinese-foreign marriages were registered in the Tibet Autonomous Region during the same period. So from this we can infer that while women are in demand in China for marriages, Chinese males can look for alternatives outside of their country. This may lead to women statuses to stagnate.

_Drop in consanguineous marriage_

One of the rationales for creation and enactment of the Marriage Law was to abolish arrange marriages as they are deemed to limit individual freedom and are manifestations of oppression. As a result, many women in rural areas do not feel obliged to marry out of custom and may desire to marry those in urban areas. Thus, one unintended consequence is a drop in consanguineous marriages. China has a very long history of consanguineous marriages. This custom is particularly practices amongst rural Manchu communities. Although the Marriage Law specifically bans ‘marriages between collateral relatives by blood’ as it often produce children with congenital defects (Wang et al. 2002). However, even this eugenic measure stipulated that ‘because of certain traditional customs, especially in certain remote mountains these provisions should be implemented gradually.’ Thus, while it is enforced that couples should not engage in consanguineous marriages, the real reason for the decline is that women prefer inter-ethnic
marriages. In this instance, we can infer a decrease in status of men while there is an increase in status of women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is very difficult to determine if Chinese male and female status have increased or decreased because of the contemporary marriage situation. There are so many considerations to take note of and it is difficult to ascertain what the results should be. However, the literature review suggests that because of the contemporary nature of marriages, women status have increased in general while men’s status has decreased especially in rural areas. In addition, to better understand this phenomenon, I would like to do a research proposal to see how men’s status has decreased and women’s status have increased especially in rural China.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


