CC6307: Literature Review Essay

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Has the Bride Price in China Declined?: The Case Study on Chongqing Zero Bride Price

Literature Review Essay

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HAS THE BRIDE PRICE IN CHINA DECLINED?

Introduction

In June 2013, a Chinese map with bride price distribution and ranking had gone viral on Weibo, a Chinese micro blog site (Chinadaily.com.cn, 2013). Many online citizens (netizens) had expressed their concern on the exorbitant bride price. Some cited that the main reason is the face saving culture in China. Mahapatra and Song (2013) explained that it is the expensive housing price that causes the astronomical bride price in cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin; the top two in the ranking. However, the interesting point to take note is the bride price in Chongqing province, which is 0 RMB. Hence, my research will be on whether the bride price in China is on the decline by conducting case study on Chongqing zero bride price. Prior to the research, a literature review is necessary, as we can understand the rationale behind the bride price and the reasons for the soaring values by reviewing on previous researches done by scholars.

Literature Review

Bride Price as the Marriage Market Institution

According to Mbaye and Wagner (2013). Bride price is a key marriage market institution existed even in developed region and the bride price in China has been escalated in value with multiple implications on poor families.

In the article written by Brown (2009), he cited from Thatcher (1991) that the bride price system had been existed since the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770 to 256 B.C.), and it remained unchanged for the first half of the 20th century. He added that the bride price (pinli) is a form of transfer, either in money or gifts with monetary value, from the groom's family to the bride’s family. In Chinese tradition, the payment of bride price is a formality as well as compensation for the bride’s family as she is leaving them at marriage to join the groom’s family; the bride’s family the loss of rights of their daughter in the process (Brown, 2009).
Jiang and Barricate (2012) highlighted in their writing that a formal engagement required the payment of bride price else the bride and groom are not considered married. In traditional agricultural societies, the bride price is very important to the bride’s family, as women are key labourers in agricultural production (Brown, 2009). Ngutor, Yandev and Arumun (2013) backed Brown’s argument by citing that the bride price can be seen as a repayment to the bride’s parent for the time and money spent on training and raising their daughters.

**China is still a Patrilineal Society**

According to Qiu (2013), China is a typical patrilineal society with a patrilocal marriage system where females are facing several social disadvantages (Yu, 2013). In the society with preference on male, a son is viewed as a hedge for future financial support as well as care for his aging parents. Li and Wu (2010) wrote in their article that men are having a higher productivity in agricultural work in rural areas. In addition, with China’s long history as an agricultural society, men can assume more farm responsibilities especially in the production sector (Ma, 2002; Li & Wu, 2010). Li and Wu (2010) also added that the discriminations against women are prominent in the job markets as females’ wages are substantially lower than males despite having the same credentials. Thus, males will be expected to have higher income and financially stronger than female counterparts.

Moreover, children follow his or her father’s surname has been embedded in the Chinese traditional family system (Li & Wu, 2010). Hence, only male can inherit the family name and continue the family lineage, unlike female, who will be transferred to her husband lineage after marriage (Jordan, 2014) and thus, females are at a disadvantage position in such society.

The discrimination against women got worst with the introduction of the one child policy in 1979. According to Li and Wu (2010), women who failed to conceive a male infant are more likely to be discriminated as well as being abused. They added that this type of discrimination had got worst to the extent that the state had to implement law in order to stop discrimination against women who conceive a baby girl.
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Women as Commodities and Low Status in the Society

Ngutor, Yandev and Arumun (2013) highlighted in their article that the bride price is a commercial transaction in which the marriage is only valid when it is paid and women are like commodities that involved in the exchange for goods. Hence, the association of women to commodities can reflect on the lower status of women in the society.

According to Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2012), China’s long history of patrilineal family system was the main cause to the culture of paying for brides. Upon paying the bride price, the male family would expect the bride to do their bidding. They highlighted that the payment of bride price signified the procurement of women, which further exemplified class inequalities as well as the low status of women. Johnson (1985) quoted from a well-known proverb in most parts of China that marrying a woman is like buying a horse whereby, you can ride or whip them as long as you like. Hence, the male families will have the rights to exercise control and pressure in order to get value returned from their investment and thus, the higher the bride price, the higher the expectation.

Anderson (2007) mentioned that the bride price amount could also be determined on the number of children the woman will conceive. An example cited by him was that women who have reached puberty earlier will get higher bride price whereas for divorced women who already have babies will get a lower bride price.

Anderson (2007) also noted that the bride price could be defined as recognition and valuation of women’s productivity as well as contribution to marriage. However, it also signified the limitation of women over the control on their own bodies. Anderson (2007) added that bride price has always been associated with domestic violence such as sexual abuse. One of the reasons for domestic violence is the fear of women moving back to their home without paying back the bride price given by the men’s side.
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Bride Price has been Escalated due to Shortage of Females

Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2012) wrote that the shortage of females in China is one of the key reasons for the paying of bride price. The escalation of the bride price is due to the difficulty in finding a wife (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). Anderson (2007) added that the valuation of the bride price is based on supply and demand in the marriage market. The bride price is served as the market leading mechanism due to population growth and sex ratio imbalance that results in the less supply and more demand in marriageable women (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). Qiu (2013) stated that since there is less supply but more demand women, the fluctuation in bride price is widely acceptable in China as women relied on the value of bride price as a gauge for selecting the right man.

Qiu (2013) reported that according to the marriage survey from 2012 to 2013, for every 100 women in a group, there would be 206 men. She highlighted that the sex ratio imbalance was very severe as it drove strong competition in the marriage market. According to Dasgupta, Ebenstein and Sharygin (2011), more male babies saturated the marriage market in the 1980s and by year 2030, an approximate of 20.8 per cent of Chinese men from the age of 30 to 39 will be single. Qiu (2013) added that the next generation of Chinese men would be in a trouble if the sex ratio imbalance escalated.

Evidences found by Qiu (2013) had shown that Chinese young women as well as parents of young women today are more diligent in choosing the ideal partner. This is the result of having more male partners for Chinese women to choose (Qiu, 2013). According to Banister (1987), due to scarcity of marriageable women today, young women are valuable assets today. Qiu (2013) also added that the competition in the marriage market created by gender imbalance has indirectly leaded to the high savings rate as well as high housing price in China. This is because parents with a son need to save money to purchase a house for their sons in order for them to have an edge in the competitive marriage market. With the demand for housing rise, the price fluctuated and parents are forced to work hard and save as much as possible.
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Social Status and Social Changes

Qiu (2013) noted that women would most likely choose their marriage partners who are at the same social status level as them. She cited from Muder (1995) that the value of bride price is a gauge on the woman’s personal value. An example given by her is that educated women and women from higher social class families will be entitled to a higher bride price and uneducated women or women from poor families only entitled to a lower bride price.

The value of bride price is directly affected by the Chinese cultural value (Qiu, 2013). The economic situation of the groom’s families played an instrumental role in the rural area as the women or their families associate the value of the bride price with capable and marriageable men. Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2013) noted that in order to market the Chinese men well in the marriage market, they would increase the value of the bride price, as women usually will choose the men with the higher bride price. The payment of high value bride price symbolized the amount of support the men can provide to the bride. The payment of high bride price has become a social norm in many parts of China as families with sons and men have accepted it as a prerequisite to married despite facing the ever-escalating cost of bride price (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012).

Anderson’s (2007) research had noted that local conditions could also influence the bride price and the bride price in northern China, poorer area and area with higher gender imbalance. He added that the bride price is constantly changing in different areas due to either economic or social issues. Dasgupta, Ebenstein and Sharygin (2011) backed Anderson’s points by stating that poorer areas in China have been experiencing higher rate of men not married as brides preferred husband from the richer areas. They added that the poorer provinces in China would be facing an unequal share of the economic and social baggage of unmarried men. They also concluded that the amassing number of unmarried males in poorer provinces could be disruptive socially as brides are seeking for better condition elsewhere.
Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2012) cited that the rising cost of marriage, which the bride price dominated the cost, has become a great burden for young Chinese men. The determinant to see if a man can married a woman is the man’s family’s financial status as most Chinese men today are not able to afford the soaring bride prices quoted to them. Qiu (2013) argued that it is the man’s family financial status that the women are looking at when they asked for higher bride price as it can ensure higher social status.

The bride price today consists of more than just money; gifts with high value (e.g., Gold bars) are mandatory depends on areas and economic conditions (Anderson, 2007). Qiu (2013) backed Anderson’s point by adding that the expectation for bride price has changed today, as besides money, cars and houses have to be included in the bride price. She cited from the 2012 to 2013 marriage survey that approximate 52 per cent of the Chinese women feel that houses are mandatory for marriage. Having a house has emerged as a prerequisite for marriage in China today (Qiu, 2013). As mentioned earlier, with the increase in housing price, more men and their family are unable to afford to buy a property. Banister (1987) classified this system of high bride price with luxury gifts as an advantage for parents without a son.

With the recent trend of having houses as part of the bride price, Qiu (2013) noted that possessing the ability to purchase expensive houses could signify the social status of the groom in the marriage market. Grooms from the wealthier or privilege families are more than happy to show their financial capabilities by paying more for the housings. According to Qiu (2013), this is to increase the groom status in the marriage market. She added that parents with daughter are having higher expectations for their potential son-in-laws and the man must have a house. The parents of the bride have the right to annul the engagement if the prospective groom does not meet the requirements of the bride price and the valuation of the bride price is more than the annual income of the man’s household (Banister, 1987).
The Chinese character for the word ‘marry’ is ‘嫁’ (jia), which literally means giving a woman a home; ‘女’ (nv) means woman and ‘家’ (jia) means house. This can clearly justify Qiu’s (2013) argument that the notion of giving a home to a Chinese woman has been deep rooted in the society, as it will instil a sense of security. This is understandable as report from Chinese marriage survey stated that 32 per cent of the women become full-time housewives after their marriage, which makes them financially dependent on their husbands (Qiu, 2013).

Conclusion

The literature review has shown that the bride price is a market mechanism, which is embedded in China since ancient times. China is still a patrilineal society which son is still preferable by most families especially in the rural areas. Women in China are still having a lower social status as compared to male counterpart. For example, treating women as commodities. The shortage of young women is caused by the patrilineal society as well as one child policy, which triggered an imbalanced male to female ratio and thus, resulted in the escalation of bride prices. Women and parents with daughter have more bargaining power today due to shortage of marriageable women. Social status and changes have also caused the fluctuation of bride prices as women and parents with daughters demanded exorbitant gifts such as houses as the prerequisite to get married, which in fact increased the burden of the men and their families. However, the review does not have the answer for the zero bride price in Chongqing. Thus, a research is needed in order to address this question given that the culture of high bride price is still embedded in the Chinese society.
References


