

The Cost of Marriage in Contemporary China

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Abstract. In recent years, the marriage rate in Chinese society has shown a depressed state. This paper takes the cost of marriage as the starting point, then analyzes the reasons for the low marriage rate in Chinese society from the four dimensions. First, in China's social norms, owning a house is the premise of an ideal family, and China's high housing price limits the expectations of young people for their future families. Second, bride price and dowry limit the expectations of young people to form a family. The rising price of bride price became a burden for men to bear, and dowry is difficult to truly deliver to women in the actual marriage life. Third, marriage has a huge impact on the career of young people. Marriage means giving up a part of career to pursue family life. In addition, marriage generally has a greater impact on women's employment than that of men. Fourth, the cost of child-rearing also weakens the willingness to get married. The upbringing of children is no longer just providing basic living conditions, but requires a better life and better education. The parenting period of children is increasing, which makes young people more reluctant to get married.

Keywords: Marriage rate; culture; patriarchy; child-rearing.

1. Introduction

According to the China Marriage and Family Report in 2023, the marriage rate in Chinese society had dropped from 9.9 per thousand in 2013 to 4.8 per thousand in 2022. The divorce rate also rose from 0.96 per thousand in 2000 to 3.1 per thousand in 2020, and then dropped to 2.0 per thousand in 2022 after the promulgation of the "cooling-off period" policy. As the marriage rate continues to decline, the average age of marriage had risen from 25 and 224 in 2000 to 28 in 2020.

In general, marriage in Chinese society shows a trend of declining marriage rate and increasing average age of marriage. As for the cause of this trend, the academic research mainly focuses on the analysis on specific factor. For example, Li and Li explained the influence of marriage cost on marriage from the perspective of bride price, while Pan explained marriage with the characteristics of Chinese local soil from the perspective of traditional Chinese marriage customs and culture [1, 2]. Hu explains the high cost of marriage in contemporary China from the impact of the real estate industry on marriage [3]. The above research focuses on the specific analysis of the marital situation and the reasons for the low marriage rate from each individual factor.

This paper tries to form a whole research sort through the cost analysis of marriage on the basis of summarizing the academic research results, so as to have a more logical and overall understanding of the marriage research in Chinese society.

At present, there is still a lack of a sort to analyze the causes of the low marriage rate. The cost of marriage refers to the specific costs that both men and women pay to get married and the opportunity cost of giving up certain benefits. The cost of marriage in different perspectives have different comprehensions. This study, on the basis of summarizing the previous research, selects several more widely recognized factors to analyze, pointing out that factors include property and income, bride price and dowry, employment, after marriage children-rearing and traditional culture for the weakening of contemporary youth restrictions. These factors cannot summarize the whole destination of the marriage in Chinese society, but they can provide an idea and a general analytical sort to understand the setbacks of the marriage rate in China in recent years.

2. Property and Income

In Chinese society, marriage is not only the emotional union of both men and women, but more importantly, marriage represents a pattern of life. In the common concept of marriage in Chinese society, marriage and forming a family means having a house of their own. It requires a couple (or husband) to have a decent job, which can support their own family and provide their children with living conditions that are better than the previous conditions. In these concepts of marriage, the core is whether the couple owns their own family property. Owning a property means that the family has a stable residence, which is also the most important material space for family life. Both the life between husband and wife or the space needed to raise children. Having a decent house also means an increase in social status and social image. Husband can not only occupy a high position in social relations, but also build new social relations based on the community where the house is located. Only by relying on a stable property can Chinese couples have a decent life that complies with the norms of Chinese society.

High housing prices indicate severe housing affordability, especially for young people who usually have low income and wealth. Theoretically, home ownership can bring a variety of benefits and can increase the likelihood of marriage, especially in China, where housing is often seen as a prerequisite for marriage [4]. Rising in the actual development of Chinese society, however, real estate prices in the range of nearly twenty years has exceeded the ability of most young people can undertake. The young people through their diligent work in exchange for a decent house and build a happy marriage has gradually become an unattainable luxury.

In China, the bride's family usually wants the groom or his family to buy shelter for the newlyweds before marriage [5]. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the average selling price of commercial housing per square meter in China rose from 6,274.49 yuan to 10,322.67 yuan from 2013 to 2021, an average increase of about 64.5 percent. The average price of an 80-square-meter home rose from 500,000 yuan to 820,000 yuan. This figure is the average result of data across the country, including first and second tier cities, where young people gather. If only focus on the first and second tier cities, prices will rise by 100 percent to 300 percent. This increase is much higher than the average wage increases in first-and second-tier cities, preventing most young people to buy their homes in those cities in the short term. This, in turn, prevents young people from obtaining the necessary conditions for marriage.

In addition, real estate has a stronger financial attribute in Chinese society, which is also an important reason why China's housing prices can maintain such a huge growth rate. Another important reason why most young people prefer to save and buy their own property is that real estate transactions have been a profitable financial product in the past decade, buying at low prices and selling at high prices, with a considerable difference in the middle. However, in the past two years, the real estate price has no room to rise, and the price has begun to fall gradually. The return rate of investment in real estate has been declining and even become negative. The gradual disappearance of the financial nature of real estate and the persistent high housing prices relative to income enable young people today to view real estate trading in a more prudent way. This has also caused the marriage market to be affected by the real estate shock and become a significant for the age of first marriage.

3. Bride Price and Dowry

Bride price and dowry are also two indispensable factors in marriages of Chinese society. Bride price refers to the deposit given by the groom to the bride's family before marrying her. In real situations, it is mainly cash, and in some cases, real estate and car are added as part of the bride price. Dowry refers to the money the bride carries when she marries the groom, which is usually left to her in married life, but in practice it is often used by the wife for the family needs. Receiving the dowry means that the wife took on more family roles in the family space, and needed to fulfill the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother to comply with the contract norms of the bride price. Women are

restricted to the family domain, restricting themselves to the home and meeting social expectations [6].

When examining the influence of these two factors on marriage, the first thing should be considered is the essence of the two in the marriage relationship. In the 20th century, men were overpopulated, and the bride price payment was common in China. Moreover, the practice of paying bride price will continue to prevail due to the shortage of women [7]. The range of betrothal gifts in Chinese society is relatively broad, ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands or even millions of yuan. In many cases, the betrothal price will also choose some more auspicious numbers in Chinese culture as the amount of the betrothal price, such as "88888" and "68888". In the traditional Chinese social concept, the most ideal pattern is that men work hard outside the family and women deal with all of the housework. For the woman's family, whether the man can pay the bride represents the ability to maintain the expected family life and whether the man has enough will to marry the woman.

In the original meaning of the bride price, the bride price itself is more to show a kind of blessing for the future family life, and to seek a satisfactory life from "heaven" or "destiny" through money as the medium. However, in modern Chinese society, the bride price is gradually growing at a high speed in an uncontrollable way. On the one hand, it is derived from the uncertainty of the woman's family about the future economic and social development and trying to seek a better husband for her daughter's marriage to improve her daughter and her own life. On the other hand, the bride price received will also become the bride price given by the daughter's brother. In this kind of competition of bride price, the price is rising all the way. As a result, young men gradually believe that the price of bride price is higher than their expectations for marriage and family, which makes them think that marriage is a high cost and irrational behavior, and then has a negative impact on the marriage rate.

From the perspective of income, China has had a deep tradition of patriarchy since ancient times. Bride price is often regarded as the money paid by one patriarchal subject to another, in exchange for the possession of women's resources. However, the patriarchy in China today is not as obvious as in traditional society. China's patriarchy gradually changed from establishing an exact authority to silently observing a set of relatively latent social norms.

4. Employment

The various circumstances of the work also add many costs to the marriage. This section is divided into two different situations which refers to the before and after marriage. For the premarital situation, one of the conditions of marriage is that both the man and the woman should have a stable job and a considerable income, as the basis of material life after marriage. For the young people in Chinese society, the work pressure is huge, and the difficulty to meet these two requirements is relatively high. First of all, in terms of the stability of work, young people, as newcomers entering the workplace, do not have a strong competitiveness in both work experience. The competitive pressure of young people who join the market after graduating from universities or technical school every year makes contemporary young people lack sufficient bargaining power in employment. Except for a few elites, most young people can only start from higher alternative positions and gradually accumulate their own work experience. In addition, China's labor law is hard to play a real role and the long-term dereliction of duty by trade unions allows employers to fire young workers more casually, exposing higher wages and benefits to young people. As a result, the work of Chinese contemporary young people in the market lacks sufficient stability, and they are on the verge of unemployment at any time.

Based on similar logic, due to the lack of bargaining power and organized security in the job market, the income is not very high, and it is difficult to meet the requirements of the ideal marriage life.

Marriage can also have a serious impact on their own employment. The heavy work to prepare before and after marriage makes it difficult for young people to devote themselves to the competition in the job market. Once a young person gets married, it means slowing down the pace of work, which

makes it difficult for young people to meet the requirements of their superiors, while other young people who are not ready to get married can replace it relatively easily. This is unacceptable for young people who strive for high pay and decent jobs.

Furthermore, studies must also consider that there are significant gender differences in employment factors. Gender industry isolation and gender wage gap reflected women are generally at a disadvantage in the labor market. It reflects the income distribution of each region in the process of market economy development equality [8].

Women face much more pressure than men. On the one hand, China's workplace is similar to that of those in corporate countries, where there is a so-called "female ceiling", which is difficult for women to be appointed as senior executives in enterprises or government departments at work. This means that women have to spend relatively more effort and time than men in order to break men's monopoly on senior positions. The improvement of the length of education has increased the participation rate of women and gained the opportunity to compete with men. However, because mothers have to spend more time and energy in the birth and upbringing stage of children, the "career window period" during the birth and child-raising of women has caused career interruption [9]. In this case, women may value their careers more than men, and focus more on work rather than love and marriage.

On the other hand, even if women do not seek a job breakthrough, they would only face greater pressure than men in ordinary employment. Many companies ask female applicants if they have plans to get married or give birth in the last two or three years, or, if so, are more likely to reject them. Although such inquiry is explicitly prohibited by law, as mentioned above, it is difficult for all kinds of illegal acts, including such acts, to be effectively prohibited in China. Women face more pressure to return to work after maternity leave after giving birth.

5. After-Marriage Child-Rearing

In the ideal paradigm of Chinese society, having children is an indispensable factor. Since ancient times, Chinese society has regarded raising children as one of the most important things in the family and the family. In the traditional Chinese culture of filial piety, raising children is regarded as the most direct and basic way to show filial piety to their parents. In the traditionally ideal case, the offspring are better to be male rather than female.

In the history of the Chinese monarchy era, the family and the country had similar structures. The male monarch was seen as the father of the state and governed the land by courtesy. In the family, the father is also given absolute authority, relying on the etiquette, to control the affairs of the family, while the mother is like the prime minister under the authority of the father to handle the specific affairs within the family. An eldest son means that the whole family can go on. If there is only one daughter, it means the decline of the family, because the daughter will be married by any other man and become a member of another male family. In this case, the male family represented by the daughter will end.

Despite the Great Revolution in the 1940s and various cultural revolutions in the following decades, Chinese family organizations as entities had been replaced by the grassroots government, but family as a cultural concept continued in the reform of the 1980s. The market economy does not fundamentally eliminate this culture but provides a wide space for it.

In the contemporary marriage relationship, although the concept of son preference has declined, having children is still regarded by many people, especially the previous generation, as the core element of marriage. However, the cost of having children and raising children has made many contemporary young people no longer yearn for marriage. The average cost of raising a child to adulthood (18 years old) in China is nearly 500,000 yuan, and the cost of raising children in economically developed areas is even higher, which has exceeded 1 million [10]. The cost of contemporary parenting is much higher than that of the previous generation. In fact, generational

differences in parenting costs are widening, and the new generation often has higher parenting costs than the previous generation.

In the 50s or 60s, raising a child just means to let the child meet the needs of the most basic food and clothing live line. After entering the stage of compulsory education, many children also only complete the most basic nine years of education (even many children have only received six years of education), and then follow their parents to participate in the production work. Children in rural areas will follow their parents to participate in agricultural activities organized by the people's communes and support the families. Urban children, on the other hand, will choose to receive a period of vocational education and then invest in the factory workshop. The cost of education and life of the children of the previous generation is far lower than that of contemporary generation, and the period of children from childhood to adult to work is far shorter than that of contemporary.

However, the upbringing of children is more complex, and parents should prepare a long-term environment for their children before they are born. Many parents compete with other families in a region with quality educational resources.

6. Conclusion

In general, this paper analyzes why China's marriage rate is so depressed from the perspective of income and housing prices, dowry and dowry, employment, and child-rearing on the cost of marriage. This influence is a mixture of economic elements and social and cultural norms. This influence often has obvious differentiation between men and women. In Chinese society, marriage often requires men to become the breadwinner of the family, but it also gives men more privilege than women in the family life. It requires men to provide a supportive property and a deposit (namely a bride price) to prove their ability to provide a stable and decent life for the family. This undoubtedly weakens the marriage will of many young men, because they are often unable or unwilling to pay. However, it also means that men's voice in the family has been confirmed. In Chinese families, men have higher power to make decisions than women in property, children's education, settlement location and other important aspects. This situation is consistent with the Marxist discourse on the economic base and the superstructure. However, the traditional Marxism pays attention to the production level in the market economy.

The study describes a picture of Chinese social reproduction. For women, the dowry is intended to retain a certain economic independence in the new family, but in reality, the dowry is often used to pay for the specific expenses of the family. Behind the use of the dowry in this way is a complete set of social norms and culture. Women are seen as victims of family life rather than beneficiaries. In social production, marriage is seen as giving up one's career to family life. Young people in highly competitive societies often struggle to withdraw themselves from their work to start their own families. This is even more true for Chinese women. Their employment and income after marriage are often greatly reduced, and the space for improvement in their positions will be significantly limited. In this case, men and women's resistance to marriage is actually a structural problem, not just caused by accidental factors such as short-term economic fluctuations.

In addition, marriage is also an inter-generational issue, and the upbringing of children is an important part of Chinese marriage. With the continuous development of society, raising children is no longer a simple problem. In a traditional agricultural society, the marginal cost of raising a child is very low compared with modern times. The goal of cultivating their children is only to make them a qualified agricultural labor force. For modern China, the parenting period of cultivating children has been continuously extended. Many parents believe that their children should not only receive nine-year compulsory education, but also receive high school, university and even graduate school education, in order to improve their social competitiveness in economic development. Children's education in China has experienced a change from "more and rough" to "less but delicate". The growing cost of raising children in this situation eventually forms a barrier to marriage.

If the society want to change the low marriage rate in China, the government can take the following measures. For young people who want to get married, the government can reduce taxes or provide subsidies to reduce their financial pressure and make them able to get married. In addition, the government should devote more energy to youth parenting and education. In parenting, the government can reduce household taxes and provide subsidies for the purchase of certain daily necessities. At the education level, the government should increase the investment in applied education. For most future development of teenagers, learning a skill is often more important than going to a good university. College should not be a strict indicator of a decent life, which requires the government to devote more energy to vocational and technical education, so that most people can devote themselves to work through relatively short-term training.

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