

# Research Review on Rural Forced Bachelor in China

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**Abstract.** At a time when the gender ratio of the marriageable population is expanding, the current situation of the survival of older unmarried men in rural areas and its negative impact on local economic development, regional stability and social security are receiving increasing attention from the academic community. Based on a systematic review of previous studies, this paper further explores the age and status of the Chinese older unmarried men in rural areas, and figures out the reasons for their being involuntary bachelors at three levels: the marriage squeeze brought about by the imbalance in the population structure of the marriageable age at the macro level, the village culture and the unmarried men's own factors. This research concludes with strategies to address the problem of older unmarried men in the Chinese rural areas and provides references for future research directions.

**Keywords:** Rural older unmarried men; Marriage squeeze; Marriage matching.

## 1. Introduction

According to China Statistical Yearbook 2020, the sex ratios for the marriageable age groups of 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 in rural areas exceed 120, at 123.09 and 120.98 respectively. Nowadays, rural China has faced a very serious gender structural imbalance, making it extremely difficult for older unmarried men to get married.

The absence of a spouse and incomplete family structure can have a significant impact on the material support, mental health and quality of life of older unmarried men in their later years, leading to cognitive deterioration, depression and suicide in old age [1, 2], further increasing the instability of rural grassroots society and the cost of social governance [3].

## 2. Definition and Concept of Rural Older Unmarried Men

The current conceptualization of the rural older unmarried men mainly concentrates on two key points: older and rural. The ages of 28 and 30 are often dividing lines that separate rural men from those who are older and unmarried [4, 5]. It is important to note that the main basis for judging rural males in such scholars' discussions is their household registration, which means that some migrant workers who have left the countryside to earn a living in the city but still retain their rural household registration are also rural males [6]. These migrant workers will still need to return to the countryside in their old age after their working lives are over, so the discussion of the rural older unmarried men also needs to incorporate older unmarried migrant workers. Due to the improvement of social and economic levels and people's changes in attitudes, the age of first marriage and the pattern of first marriage of rural men in China have changed significantly [7]. Therefore, the definition of rural older unmarried men's age should also be dynamic. Combining the above factors and relevant literature, this paper defines older unmarried men in rural China as the rural male household population aged 35 and above who have not yet completed marriage.

## 3. Causes and Underlying Mechanisms of the Emergence of Rural Older Unmarried Men

From a macro perspective, the marriage squeeze has caused rural men to be unmarried. The concept of the marriage squeeze was first introduced by Chinese scholar Yu Xuejun in his study of

the current state of the marriage market in China for those aged 15 and over [8]. The marriage squeeze refers to the imbalance in the number of men and women of marriageable age in the same cohort under the monogamous marriage system, making it difficult for some of them to marry [9, 10]. It is a demographic consequence of the imbalance in the gender structure of the marriageable age population [11]. Currently, the marriage squeeze has exerted serious effects on men in China. The imbalance in the sex ratio has become increasingly apparent since 1982, when China began its family planning policy. The imbalance in the sex ratio at birth has led to a far greater number of marriageable men than women, which, together with a lower fertility rate, has resulted in an imbalance in the gender structure of the marriageable population in China [12]. Therefore, the supply of men exceeding the demand in the marriage market [13], leading to a severe marriage squeeze for men [14]. In rural areas, the preference for sons over daughters and the concept to carry family name are deeply rooted. Thus, the restrictions on births imposed by family planning policies have led farmers to be more inclined to sex determination and sex selection of infants because of their preference for male babies [15], which causes a more severe imbalance in the sex structure of the marriageable population in rural areas compared to urban areas. The rise of the working economy in the 1980s and 1990s has created a massive exodus of rural labour [16, 17], and local marriage circles has been replaced by national marriage circles. Since there are large differences in economic development between rural and urban areas in our country, with the gradual liberalization of restrictions on rural-urban migration, more and more rural women are moving to cities to work, gaining a wider choice of spouses and more diverse marriage options, which further increases the risk of marriage matching due to the shortage of marriageable women in rural areas [18]. Influenced by the one-sided female marriage gradient migration [13], women who move to the city are more likely to choose urban men rather than migrant workers or return to their hometown to choose a spouse [19]. Compared to female migrant workers, men who migrate to the cities for work, on the one hand, have difficulty accumulating the capital to establish themselves in the cities in the short term. On the other hand, they are influenced by the traditional concept of “raising sons for old age”, and are responsible for guarding the family and supporting the elderly [20, 21]. They are often tied to the countryside and less able than women to complete the urbanisation of their personal identity. Therefore, they have no hope of completing a marriage in the city, which further exacerbates the urban marriage squeeze on men in rural areas.

In addition, China is a vast country, and the level of economic development, social structure and culture vary greatly between rural areas in different regions. The imbalance in economic development has resulted in marriage squeezes in the eastern part of China against the central part and the central part against the western part, bringing about a situation where men in rural areas with less natural and economic conditions experience marriage squeezes more severely [15]. Moreover, different rural social structures and cultures have different impacts on older unmarried men and their families in the regions to which they belong. Rural China can be divided by social structure and culture into families related by blood in the north, the atomized villages in central China and clan-based villages in the south [22]. In families related by blood in the north, the local Confucian traditional culture imbues farmers with a quite strong sense of family and responsibility [23]. It has become a mandatory task in the life of local parents to get their sons married and help maintain the stability of their sons' marriage. Hence, they will do their best to facilitate their sons' marriages. In order to do so, they will not hesitate to take on debt for the high bride price, and even provide long-term financial support for their sons' families after their sons' marriages [9, 24]. In contrast to the north, in clan-based and atomised villages, the sense of intergenerational parental responsibility is not as strong, so there is a natural lack of parental willingness to facilitate their sons' marriages, resulting in more older unmarried men in the south than those in the north [22]. For rural villages which are relatively closed and have a preference for local marriage, local women always wait for a high bride price to marry [25], which excites a rapid rise in the bride price, putting enormous pressure on local men and their families, with the rising bride price often acting as a barrier to marriage [24]. Under the pressure of a heavy bride price, it creates a situation that parents take advantage of their daughters' marriages so as to help their sons get married. That is to say, parents force their daughters to marry early and thus

raise the bride price. Then, they use the bride price received from their daughters as funds for their sons to marry [26, 27], shifting the pressure of marriage from one family onto another, thus creating an involution cycle of high bride prices. In multiple-child families, when the eldest son marries and establishes his own family, he will take some of the money away from his family of origin. A second son and a third son will also take some of the money away when they get married. Consequently, for the younger son who establishes his family the latest, not only does he face a reduced source of family assets, but he also has to take on the responsibility of supporting his parents, which induces intra-generational deprivation of the younger son by the eldest son, further reducing the likelihood of the younger son marrying [28].

Apart from external social reasons, conditions of rural older unmarried men themselves are also an important reason. Some studies showed that men in this group are generally characterised by low educational attainment, low economic income, personal physical deficiencies and poor social skills [29, 30]. These individual factors make it more difficult for them to interact normally with young women and to marry. Other studies used family customs and family structure as an entry point to explore morality charging and organization charging in the local marriage market, with the conclusion that men who have a good reputation and an intact family structure in the village tend to marry more successfully [31].

#### **4. Strategies to Address the Problem of Rural Older Unmarried Men**

The current study's recommendations for measures focus on three main areas: national, local government and individual. In the long run, the Chinese government should improve the gender structure of marriageable age by advocating strategies such as balancing the sex ratio at birth and encouraging the birth of more children [32] to fundamentally alleviate the gender squeeze and marriage squeeze on older unmarried men in rural areas. Based on the rural revitalization strategy, local governments should concentrate on developing the rural industrial economy and speeding up infrastructure construction in rural areas, so as to narrow the urban - rural development gap and attract young women who have gone out to work to return to their villages for employment [33]. At the same time, healthy concepts of marriage and childbirth should be actively promoted in the local community, the culture of gender equality in marriage and childbirth should be fostered, and illegal and criminal acts such as trafficking women should be severely combated to effectively protect women's rights. For older unmarried men themselves, it is important to improve their own abilities, change their traditional thinking about marriage and take the initiative in making friends so as to expand their circle of life [34].

Current studies have used the latest census data and built models to describe and predict the number and size of the group of older unmarried men in rural China, highlighting the urgency and need for research on this group. The study in the context of village culture focuses on the influence of the strength of intergenerational parental responsibility and village public opinion on the marriage of rural youth in different regions, and further explores the role of bride price in the marriage dilemma of older rural youth. Articles targeting the characteristics of older unmarried rural men have found that rural young men with incomplete family structures, physical disabilities and personality problems are more likely to find no spouse and become old involuntary bachelors. These findings provide useful lessons for future social services for this group and for policy measures to prevent the problem from continuing to grow. Government website of Xiangyin County, Hunan Province published the county Civil Affairs Bureau on the CPPCC member's Suggestions to Concentrate on the Difficulty of Spouse Choosing for Older Youth in Rural Areas. Committee of Luchuan County, Yulin City, Guangxi Province asked the town and the county Civil Affairs Bureau and other units to count the number of young people who have not married a wife, and analyze the reasons, and put forward countermeasures. In response to the problem of heavy bride price, the government has also launched corresponding policies to combat it. For example, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has confirmed 17 units, including Feixiang District in Handan City, Hebei Province, as the second batch of national

experimental zones for wedding custom reform in 2021, to curb the misconduct of wedding custom by promoting the change of customs and traditions in the field of marriage. The Youth League Committee and the Ministry of Civil Affairs and other relevant departments have jointly set up a dating platform for single youths to help them make friends and interact with others, encouraging older youths to change their thinking on marriage and helping more single men and women to form families. In the future, scholars may also consider marriage reform, policy interventions and social services as entry points to explore the practical impact and effects of these measures on the marriage matching of older unmarried young men in rural areas.

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