Study of the Evolution of Marriage Customs: Focusing on Huangchuan (Guangzhou) in the Xinyang Region

Hongliang Yan *
Tea College, Xinyang Agricultural and Forestry College, Xinyang, Henan, China
* Corresponding author Email: 2428484278@qq.com

Abstract: In the period around the founding of the People's Republic of China, traditional and modern marriage customs were in a state of constant flux and change. This paper aims to explore the nature of these changes and the issues that emerged from them. By organizing and interpreting the text, we attempt to present a comprehensive view of these evolving customs and provide explanations. This study utilizes the fifteenth chapter, first section on marriage customs from "The Cultural Annals of Huangchuan County" compiled by the Cultural Bureau of Huangchuan County. It offers an overview of the marital customs in Huangchuan around the time of the nation's founding. A detailed and accurate interpretation of the text reveals that most of Huangchuan's marriage procedures originated from the traditional 'Six Etiquettes', with many similarities to them. With the establishment of New China, local marriage customs in Huangchuan also began to simplify. However, this simplification gave rise to extreme and undesirable practices such as high dowries, ostentation, extravagance, and even the arrangement of ghost marriages. While practical simplifications are welcomed, it is essential to eradicate and change these negative new aspects.

Keywords: Marriage Customs; Huangchuan; Folklore; Six Etiquettes.

1. Introduction

Huangchuan, the birthplace of the ancient state of Huang, has produced historical and cultural luminaries such as Lord Chunshen, Huang Xie, and Chen Yuanguang, the Holy King of Zhangzhou. Lu Yu also acclaimed the tea from Huaimian, Guangzhou as the finest. This region boasts a brilliant culture. However, the local marriage customs have been less studied. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the chapter on marriage customs in "The Cultural Annals of Huangchuan County". With continuous economic development, the exaggerated demands for high dowries in the marriage market have become significantly disproportionate to people's actual incomes, creating an unbearable burden and necessitating urgent change. This study investigates the evolution of marriage customs and interprets textual knowledge, using time as a framework to trace changes in marriage customs and clarify their development, thereby providing a comprehensible narrative.

2. Overview of Huangchuan Marriage Customs

Prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, marriage customs in Huangchuan were very traditional, with officials and dignitaries often having multiple wives and concubines. [Huangchuan County Cultural Annals, April 1987, compiled by Huangchuan County Bureau of Culture] In ancient times, it was common for men with certain official positions or economic power to do so. Conversely, the poor might remain unmarried their entire lives. The intricate relationship between marriage and economics was vividly reflected in marriage practices, with phenomena like mercenary and arranged marriages often leading to fatalities.

2.1. Early Marriage

According to historical records, early marriage was also a problem in Huangchuan, although detailed historical data is lacking. By comparison, in "A Study of Early Marriage in Rural Shanxi during the Republican Period" by Guo Zimin, the economic roots of early marriage are discussed. Given the developmental context of rural Shanxi at the time, early marriage seemed somewhat logical. Early marriage naturally led to early childbearing, which not only added labor to the family but also ensured the continuation of the family line. In the context of underdeveloped rural economies, early marriage could serve as one solution to economic problems. However, the negative impacts of early marriage were more significant, prompting societal reforms in marriage customs, though with limited success. This reflects its strong economic underpinnings. [1] This situation also illustrates the prevalence of early marriage in rural areas across the country, indicative of a uniformly underdeveloped rural economy nationwide.

2.2. The Issue of Child Brides

Prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, the phenomenon of child brides was also present in Huangchuan. As the term suggests, this involved a girl being adopted by her future parents-in-law at a young or tender age, to later officially marry their son when she reached marital age. The root cause of this issue again lies in the economic reality, with poverty in the boy's family being the primary reason. Sometimes it was due to being an orphaned boy with a widowed mother; bringing in a child bride helped sustain the household. Or in cases where the boy was young and the family lacked caregiving resources, a child bride would be brought in as a sort of nanny to help take care of the child and manage household affairs.

Why would a family be willing to give away their daughter to become a child bride, with such an uncertain fate? There are primarily four reasons:

1) family poverty, rendering them unable to support the child.
2) To save on the dowry needed when the daughter marries later, which is synonymous with saving family expenses.
3) Giving away a child bride is not done for free; families would definitely demand certain financial compensation.

4) In rural areas with heavy manual labor and agriculture-based production, males symbolized labor power, contributing to family income. Girls, naturally weaker in physical strength, were at a disadvantage.

This led to the deeply ingrained cultural preference for sons over daughters. On the other hand, the practice of raising child brides somewhat reduced the incidence of female infanticide.

[2]

3. Parental Command and Matchmaker's Word

In Huangchuan before the founding of the People's Republic of China, marriages for men and women were entirely dependent on the words of their parents or a matchmaker. As recorded in "The Book of Rites," "parental command" played a decisive role in marriage relations during the Zhou Dynasty. Similarly, the line "How should one choose a wife? One must inform one's parents," from the "Qi Feng · Nan Shan" in the Book of Songs, directly reflects the significant role of parents in marriage. In ancient society, under the concept of "distinction between men and women," the word of the matchmaker was extremely important. Without a matchmaker's introduction, men and women wouldn't even know each other's names. [3] Of course, this is completely opposite to the modern concept of free love. But what exactly was the "parental command and matchmaker's word"? We can turn to the texts of the Zhou Dynasty's Book of Songs for explanation. The concept of free love was just a beautiful yearning and wishful thinking of ancient people and love-struck men and women. The harsh reality was the obligation to obey parents' commands.

The reality was that although the concept of freedom in male-female interactions was promoted during the pre-Qin period, their fate was not as fortunate as imagined. In matters of marriage, one had to obey the arrangements of the elders and the introduction of the matchmaker. Plainly speaking, what is commonly referred to as a formal marriage required the formal introduction through a matchmaker. If two individuals were mutually attracted, a matchmaker still needed to come forward and propose the match, and only after parental consent could marriage occur. The line "Not my fault in missing the opportunity, but the lack of a good matchmaker," from "Wei Feng · Mang" in the Book of Songs, speaks to the missed opportunity due to the absence of a matchmaker, highlighting the exaggerated role of the matchmaker in marriage rituals. [4] In the ancient Zhou Dynasty, the occurrence of love and communication between men and women was constrained by various feudal ethics, making it extremely difficult for them to freely engage in discussions of marriage. Only by adhering to feudal ethics, under the strict social hierarchy and the influence of feudal ethics, did society form the matrimonial culture of "parental command and matchmaker's word," meaning the marriage of children had to be decided by the parents and introduced by a matchmaker. This was an important procedure in marriage rituals during the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods. "Zheng Feng · Jiang Zhong Zi" in the Book of Songs describes: "How can I dare to love him, afraid of my parents. Zhong Zi, you are so dear to me, but I am also afraid of my parents' words." This line reflects the infatuated yet anxious state of a girl in love, also showing that ancient romantic feelings between men and women needed the permission and approval of the parents. [5]

4. Pre-Revolutionary Marriage Customs and the Traditional Six Rites in Huangchuan

4.1. Huangchuan Marriage Procedures

Engagement (Marriage Promise): Before the age of 20, young men and women in Huangchuan were engaged, with their parents choosing spouses for them. Emphasis was on matching families of equal status and ensuring compatibility of astrological signs, avoiding zodiacal conflicts. As the saying goes, "Since ancient times, the white horse fears the green ox, sheep and rats should never meet, golden roosters should avoid meeting each other, and rabbits and dragons don't last long together."

Once a marriage was agreed upon, an official letter, known as the "Marriage Promise," was sent.

Choosing a Mediator: This step, also known as "setting the date," involved the groom's side proposing a wedding date to the bride's side. A "divine man" was consulted to choose a auspicious day. The groom's side would write the wedding date on red paper and send it via the mediator to the bride's side, known as "reporting the date." The bride's side, upon receiving the wedding invitation and having no objections, would prepare a list of goods and request material wealth from the groom's side. Eventually, both parents would prepare for their children's wedding.

Receiving the Bride: Regardless of weather conditions, on the chosen date, the groom's side would send two married women with children to receive the bride. The bride's side would do the same for sending off the bride. In urban areas, bridal sedans were dispatched at dawn, and in rural areas after daybreak, with a boy inside the sedan for good luck. Upon arrival at the bride's home, relatives would carry the bride across a bridge. The bride, with her head covered and crying loudly, known as "crying marriage," would be taken to the groom's house amid music, drumming, and constant firecrackers.

Wedding Ceremony: The ceremony was held in the main hall with candles brightly lit and incense burning. The ceremony was officiated by a master of ceremonies (commonly known as a 'ritual pioneer'). The bride and groom would first pay respects to heaven, earth, and ancestors, then to the elders, followed by the exchange of bows, and finally, they were led to the bridal chamber. In rural areas, there was also a tradition of visiting ancestral graves. Drinking "joint cups of wine," commonly known as drinking reunion wine, involved setting up a table with food and drinks. The bride and groom would sit at the head of the table, accompanied by relatives who would offer dishes to the newlyweds while uttering auspicious words like "eat some cabbage and have a baby next year," etc. "Room teasing" involved selecting a person to scatter red-dyed nuts, peanuts, etc., over the newlyweds. Each scattering was accompanied by a four-line verse, followed by congratulations and humorous remarks from the audience. Teasing in the bridal chamber was typically done by peers, relatives, or friends.

Returning to the Bride's Home: On the third day after the wedding, the groom would prepare gifts and visit the bride's family with the bride, known as the "third-day home return." After lunch, the couple would return to their home. Upon arrival, they had to cross the "Scholar's Bridge" in the
courtyard to enter their room. (In rural areas, the "Scholar's Bridge" crossing occurred on the wedding day after visiting ancestral graves.) The bridge was constructed with a square table and a ladder, covered with a red carpet, and adorned with items like scissors, dates, and chopsticks. The bride, assisted by the groom, crossed the bridge, symbolizing the hope of having a son who would become a scholar. Midway, the bride was asked to identify scissors or chopsticks, seeking auspicious sayings like "scissors" (interpreted as having a son). Additionally, a poor man marrying a widow was called "receiving an over-married sister-in-law." Such marriages required secret nighttime arrangements due to societal stigma, indicating they were socially unacceptable.

4.2. The Six Rites

The "Book of Rites·Marriage Meanings" records, "The marriage rites consist of the engagement, asking for the name, receiving auspicious signs, receiving the bride-price, requesting a date, and welcoming the bride." Whether noble or commoner, the Zhou people generally followed these six steps for marriage ceremonies.

Engagement: The first of the 'Six Rites.' When a man wishes to marry a woman, his family sends a matchmaker to the woman's family to propose marriage and bring gifts. Once consent is obtained, the matchmaker formally presents the 'engagement gift' to the woman's family. Initially, if the woman's family is interested, the man's side sends a matchmaker to formally propose marriage and bring certain gifts. In ancient times, the gift for the engagement was only a wild goose. The engagement marks the beginning of the entire marriage process. Later, the engagement ceremony generally followed the Zhou dynasty customs, but with different gifts.

Asking for the Name: One of the Chinese marriage rituals. The second rite of the Western Zhou Six Rites. During the name-assembling ceremony, a wild goose was used as a gift. After the engagement, the man's family sends a matchmaker to inquire about the woman's name and her birth date and time, allowing the man's family to consult divination for deciding on the marriage and determining its auspiciousness.

Receiving Auspicious Signs: The third of the Six Rites. After asking for the name and matching the birth charts, the man's family informs the woman's family of the auspicious signs for the marriage and sends gifts to signify the engagement.

Receiving the Bride-Price: Refers to the groom's family sending betrothal gifts to the bride's family. In ancient times, reaching this step meant that the marriage was finalized. It falls within the category of engagement.

Requesting a Date: Commonly known as 'sending the date head,' is the fifth of the Six Rites. Requesting a date involves arranging a good wedding date, writing the birth details of both the bride and groom on red paper, and sending a matchmaker to the bride's family to discuss the wedding date.

Welcoming the Bride: One of the ancient Han Chinese traditional marriage customs, originating in the Zhou dynasty. Welcoming the bride usually involves the groom personally going to the bride's family to escort her back. However, in some areas of Xinzhou and Lviang, a matchmaker or the groom's younger brother leads the welcoming procession, while the groom waits at home. On the day of welcoming the bride, the "Looking for Mother Tray" is carried in the lead. The tray must include a goose, originating from the ancient practice of formally proposing with a wild goose, symbolizing faithful and harmonious marriage due to the lifelong monogamy of geese. Later generations substituted the goose for the wild goose.

5. Modern Love and Marriage

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the new Marriage Law was enacted, advocating for the freedom of love and marriage among young men and women, and mutual choice in marriage. Before getting married, couples would register their marriage with the government, receive a certificate, and choose a holiday (such as Labor Day or National Day) to hold their wedding ceremony. There was no longer a need for a bride price or dowry, and guests were entertained with sweets, cigarettes, and tea. Couples didn't perform the traditional bowing to heaven and earth but would bow before the portrait of Chairman Mao. On the wedding night, leaders and friends encouraged the bride and groom to make progress together. In the 1980s, young men and women practiced late marriage and late childbirth, with some opting for group weddings. Many newlyweds chose to travel for their honeymoon, and some adopted the practice of "reverse marriage" (where the groom moves into the bride's family home). With the development of production and the increase in people's income, many families began to place more emphasis on the grandeur of their children's weddings. They would purchase various types of furniture and electrical appliances, host lavish banquets, and receive gifts on the wedding day.

Contemporary wedding customs in Huangchuan are influenced by historical and regional factors and retain some outdated and negative practices, such as ghost marriage, extravagant celebrations, excessive bride prices, and vulgar wedding pranks. These customs can perpetuate unhealthy social trends. However, overall, there has been a simplification of marriage ceremonies, making it more convenient for people to get married with fewer formalities and more practicality. Among the lingering old customs is "Chong Xi", an ancient Chinese folk practice typically used when a man or his parents are critically ill, in an attempt to change an unfortunate life situation through the joyous event of a wedding.

6. Conclusion

In summary, through a detailed and accurate interpretation of the texts, we understand that the five stages of marriage customs in Huangchuan largely originate from the traditional "Six Rites," with many similarities observed. With the establishment of New China, local marriage customs in Huangchuan have shown a trend towards simplification. However, this has also led to some extreme negative customs like exorbitant bride prices, showy and wasteful practices, and even ghost marriages. While practical simplifications are welcomed, these new negative aspects must be eliminated and urgently changed. As the economy continues to develop, the unrealistic high demands for bride prices in the marriage market do not align with people's actual income, placing an unbearable burden on many. There is an urgent need for change.

The exploration of the evolution of marriage customs and their interpretation of textual knowledge reveal that matrimonial customs have been continuously changing over time, giving rise to new issues. Economic considerations often underpin various forms of marriage. Essentially, it is not
an adaptation to survival, but an adaptation to social outcomes caused by production forces and economic levels.

References


