

Gender Aspirations in Chinese Marriage Market: A Study of Differences in Gender and the History of the Standards of Marriage

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Abstract: Throughout the history of China, the conception of marriage in Chinese traditional philosophy, such as Confucianism, has remained longstanding and influential even in modern Chinese society. The standards and the social and familial obligations for both sexes that result from such matrimonial beliefs, however, have developed in conflict with modern lifestyles and mindsets, especially for females. This article, through an in depth analysis of the expectations of marriage of both genders, their views on marriage and their expectations of the other spouse, and a variety of current events and movements, aims to further understand the status quo and future outlook in the Chinese marriage market from social, cultural, and economic perspectives. In the current Chinese marriage market, there remain two stereotypical sets of standards for a “perfect spouse” for both males and females, which are both reinforced through prevalent dating attitudes and disapproved of by modern feminism, the new lifestyle pursuits of the younger generation, and the deprioritization of marriage by females.

Keywords: gender equity, Chinese traditional values, marriage, Chinese marriage market, marital expectation

1. Introduction

Xiangqin, a term that has become overwhelming in recent years, refers to matchmaking or searching for a date usually with the purpose of marriage eventually. It is critical to recognize that, “as a traditional Chinese courtship practice with over 1000 years of history,” Xiangqin has explicitly indicated the conventional expectations of Chinese men and women towards their potential future spouses [1]. Additionally, the difference between males and females’ standards towards the spouse in marriage strongly encourages investigation into the status quo in the Chinese marriage market, as well as potential implied gender inequalities. Researchers have noted such a necessity for research and study in the Chinese dating and marriage market. Researchers have surveyed and investigated young adults in China from universities for their attitudes towards intimacy relationships and dating, and how much their beliefs on which are influenced by their parents, their “peers and the adolescent subculture.” [2] Results were shown that the majority from both sex demonstrate a general opposition to “having sex on the first date”, and an inclination of becoming more “modern” as they express their wants for more frequent dating [2]. However, though the study provides a thorough discussion on

dating attitudes, it is not apparent from the study what the trend from the Chinese marriage market is and what its status quo is. The analyses that follow in this paper will place a further emphasis on the marriage market, which sheds light on latent gender inequality from a traditional cultural perspective. Through bringing attention to research on gender inequality in the marriage market, individuals will be more likely to be able to identify discriminatory standards that are contradictory to equity perspectives, such as the views of women that they should be married and give birth to children early in their “best age” at the expense of their careers, and therefore stand against them in avoidance of more future prejudicial actions.

2. Current Expectations

To study the aspirations in the Chinese marriage market for both sexes, the prerequisite is to examine the expectations in marriages. Requirements and ideals per careers, education and family backgrounds, and personal finances are emphasized to different extents depending on the sex. For both males and females, a more prominent development of personal growth, whether financially, in college, or in work careers, usually indicates a delay in the timing of marriage as, particularly for women, their perceived “golden age” of becoming pregnant and giving birth to a child in marriage is at odds with the best time periods of career development and social status [3]. For instance, as female university or college students graduate from undergraduate studies usually at twenty-two years old, they only have five years to pursue their career before turning twenty-seven, while another layer of pressure is placed upon them as in Chinese traditional values, giving birth to a child only before the age of thirty will result in “good-quality birth” [4]. Women generally view pregnancy and having a child in a marriage more significantly than men. Furthermore, other than the expectations of motherhood, modern Chinese society, particularly in urban areas, now looks more favorably upon “*du li nu xing*” (“independent females”), women that generally possess a higher educational background, at least a bachelor’s degree in university, and have obtained a stable job, preferably in government institutions, corporations, or businesses. Moreover, it is important to mention that apart from age and career expectations, Chinese males look more preferably upon females that have a “less prestigious” job and “lower earnings than their husbands,” a discrepancy that is incompatible with the feminism viewpoints that some independent females hold [5]. This is also likely to be the point of divergence in some males’ and females’ interpretations of the obligation of a female in a household after marriage, demonstrating the conflict between a traditional perspective and one that is commonly possessed in modern days.

Different from marriage standards for women, men place a further emphasis on their personal financial achievements and career prosperity. The most popular and most frequently-asked question during dating is whether the male has cars or houses, whether he obtains a stable job that provides steady income to the family once gotten married. Family background information is also reinforced and highlighted, as family of the woman side concerns especially of the relationship between the bride and the bride’s mother-in-law. Regarding expectations in terms of age, the standard is relatively more lax than that of women, since a male who is more elderly in age implicitly and stereotypically indicates his maturity and wealth in general.

Furthermore, parents as well place a significant emphasis on the marital status of their posterities, causing anxiety of young adults as an impact of which. Namely, in recent years, the service of “Rental Boyfriend” or “Rental Girlfriend” has become more popular, especially during the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival, when it remains a tradition that young adults return to their hometowns to reunite with their families in celebration of this long-lasting gala. It is common that during the Spring Festival, young adults who do not possess an intimate relationship or are married can become “fearful” of facing their parents’ “investigation”, when they are asked of their plans for a relationship or marriage. A tactic that young adults have developed is finding rental boyfriends or girlfriends online, on media

platforms such as Sina or Douban, or other online marketplaces such as Taobao [6]. Media and journalism platforms, such as the New York Times Chinese, Business Insider, and Radio Free Asia, have reported on such a phenomenon. Back in 2013, an opinion article from People's Daily, one of the most distinguished and reputable media sources in China, revealed rental boyfriends as a "business" that "went viral on Taobao", where "the rented boyfriends are professionalized" with online marketplaces [7]. These trends highlight the pressure that parents have placed on young males and females regarding their marital status and future spouses. It is vitally important to recognize, as demonstrated in the example of "Dating Corners" in ChaoYang district park, or the People's Park in Shanghai, that parents, especially parents from Generation X (parents born between 1965 and 1978), are anxious and troubled by their children's marriage, a catalyst to reinforcing gender-based expectations in the marriage market as more young adults, under the influence of their parents, apply such standards that are produced from traditional perspectives to their attitudes in finding a spouse to be married to.

A prime example demonstrating such expectations towards males and females in current events is the "Fifty-million Dating Reception." Between October and November 2022, the marketing information for a dating reception went viral on the internet in China; the special requirements for attending such a reception are astonishing, and its controversy has caused plenty of netizens to discuss the legitimacy of such events. As indicated by its title, in the Fifty-million Dating Reception, males who show interest in joining must possess at least fifty million RMB worth of the sum of all their properties, and pay a six thousand RMB "ticket" to qualify in participation. For females who are interested to participate, interviews were conducted by the organizers of this dating event, assessing the family background, educational background, appearance, career, and other soft skills to evaluate and permit their entries and applications [8].

It is worth mentioning the strict requirements for female participants and applicants. It usually takes the organizers and interviewers approximately one month to conduct all of the interviews and select the permitted females for the final list. Particularly, when assessing the educational background of applicants, the interviewers have even asked which high school the females received their secondary education from. Two of the most popularly accepted were Tsinghua University High School, or High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, both institutions offering student sources to top universities in China, such as the Tsinghua University, Peking University, or the Renmin University of China. While numerous netizens have complained of the discriminations that the interviews exemplify towards females with relatively less wealthy family backgrounds or less prestigious educational backgrounds, the founder of the dating reception events has responded that the purpose of such dating events is "originally to select the 'girls from rich families', since they have been competing in countless competitions and examinations — math, second language, ballet, piano — they never perceive the interviews as an offensive action. Only the girls from 'small households and small families' will feel uncomfortable being judged and evaluated. [9]"

As stereotypically portrayed, the characteristic that is most valued in females during the reception is their appearance, freshness, and qualities of youth, whilst the traits emphasized the most among male participants are entrepreneurship and wealth. Males were compared in terms of their age when starting their company, discussing blockchains or fine yoga, whereas females were compared in terms of their actual age, appearance, and hobbies. The fifty million dating receptions, which demonstrate the requirements and expectations of males and females, are just one of many examples in the Chinese marriage market. Even though such dating is widely condemned on the internet, there are still numerous platforms for dating and matching purposes that reinforce such conceptions and ideologies. Namely, "Mo Shang Hua Kai", an online dating and matching platform for graduates from 985 universities (the top universities in China), has invoked conversations on the intensified obsession of society with the education background requirements in the dating and marriage market. At first,

before its influence was spread to more graduates from other top universities, “Mo Shang Hua Kai” was only available to graduates from Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, and Shanghai Jiaotong University — the top universities in China, whose influence and reputation in China are basically the “Chinese Ivy League Schools” [10].

Apart from the reinforcement of conventional values and expectations from such online applications and platforms, artificial algorithms are also universally fed with matching individuals with similar physical conditions — height, appearance, educational background, family background, and personal financial circumstances such as income. Using such computer algorithms, each and every account on the platform is tagged with short facts and information about this individual. The unsympathetic nature of artificial algorithms motivates platforms to search for the individual’s expectations towards his or her ideal spouse or dating partner, which therefore implicitly reinforces the planted stereotypical impression of a perfect boyfriend or girlfriend. ““When I ‘like’ a guy that is 175 centimeters in height, then guys between 170 and 173 centimeters in height will be automatically recommended by the algorithm. The system consistently lowers the standards in terms of height in order to search for and find out the final baseline of mine in terms of my dating partner’s height.”” [10] While current events such as the 50 million dating reception can be daunting as they successfully portray the expectations that males, females, and society often place on a perfect spouse or dating partner — the standards can be perceived as discriminatory and offensive, as plenty of netizens have expressed — they require arduous and strenuous effort and an extensive period of time to be removed from the current status quo.

3. Marriage Market in Urban and Rural Areas

When examining the marriage market in China, it is indispensable to consider the difference between urban centers and rural villages.

In rural areas, individuals generally enjoy fewer economic and financial benefits. They are, speaking generically, less financially powerful and less educated, therefore placing less emphasis on the educational backgrounds of both males and females as such resources are rare in the status quo.

The most prominent characteristic in rural China that separates itself from modern urban cities is the belief of “Zhong Nan Qing Nu,” which attaches great importance to males and looks down upon females. This is mainly because of the feudal ideology that only males can inherit the properties of the household whilst females, after marriage, would lose the family name and therefore be disqualified for inheritance of the last name. Even though this gender bias has already been diminished in the majority of populations in urban areas, the son preference tradition has remained influential and imprinted in behaviors of individuals and households in rural areas, leaving more families abandoning baby girls after birth and valuing the boys more. Consequently, this leaves rural families with the dilemma of a shortage of female population. More and more overage males have not been able to find a fair match for marriage. They are commonly referred to as “Guang Gun” (“Bare Branches” in direct translation, meaning bachelors).

The shortage of female population and a surplus of bachelors entering the marriage market have demonstrated several problems unique to rural villages and counties, such as inter-county marriage, and marriage fraud [11]. Furthermore, marriage expenses for males’ families have significantly risen in recent years due to the limited numbers of women of marriage age, placing a strenuous economic burden on families — in specific cases, the cost of a marriage for one son of the household “is 8-20 times the annual household income” [11]. All the circumstances available in the rural marriage market have presented a serious damage to the status, safety, and security of women, as women’s status is not raised even though the shortage of their population is present due to the gender bias beliefs. In addition, there remains a concerning statistic in the number of women and girls who are human trafficked, kidnapped, and forced into marriage in rural provinces in China after the bachelors’

families pay a fixed monetary amount to “buy a wife.” A study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Kachin Women’s Association Thailand estimated that about 21,000 women and girls from northern Myanmar were forced into marriage in just one province in China from 2013 to 2017 [12].

Different from rural villages and counties, in urban areas, females’ security and status are ensured and guaranteed to a larger extent, with a freer atmosphere in terms of love and intimate relationships. However, it is exactly because of the financial and economical power that individuals demonstrate in urban cities that adults are more inclined to engage in a “selection” process to match with an intimate partner that fits their lifestyles and various expectations. Aside from the disparities in marital expectations for men and women examined in Section II of this paper, the more contentious issue is the “Cai Li” (Bride Price). On the internet, there are two types of active beliefs: those in favor of and those opposed to the presence of the bride price. One may argue that it is necessary to remove the tradition, especially for males whose families are struggling with financial circumstances, since the existence of the bride price simply shows that the female’s family is “selling the daughter.” However, it is of utmost importance, when approaching the controversy, to recognize that the cancellation of bride price relies on the absolute gender equality in the marriage market. In modern society, the meaning of the existence of bride price is for the female’s family to examine the attitude of the man, their respect to the females in a marital relationship.

4. Conclusion

While there remains a drastic difference in the expectations of males and females for their ideal partner in an intimate relationship or marriage, the aspirations of different genders in the Chinese marriage market have implicitly indicated social responsibility and societally perceived gender roles. In the Chinese samples, young adults of both genders exemplify that they expect the women to complete more chores and familial trivial matters, including housework and taking care of the future child, while men are more obligated to “support the entire household” by earning income in their career. For females, it is undeniable that there are more expectations to satisfy, especially when they are forced to accommodate their goals and pursue a career with familial issues and standards. It is a taxing experience, especially when women return to work after maternity leave under physically demanding conditions. In urban centers, the dispute centers on the value of the bride price, whether its implication is “selling the daughter” or a demonstration of respect from males, while safety and status concerns are most prominent in rural villages and counties. Despite the fact that this paper has analyzed various examples reinforcing the standards of marriage from a social and cultural perspective, it is vitally important to examine the current events and examples fighting against the rigid and stereotypical beliefs and the praiseworthy endeavors in mitigating or diminishing such conventions and requirements for males and females in the marriage market of China.

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