

Social Lopsided Exchange: On High Bride Price in Rural Areas

—Taking Village X, Town Q in Heze County as an Example

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Abstract—The betrothal gift is a peculiar social phenomenon. The high bride price reveals the some culture. The article analyzed the betrothal gift from the theoretical perspective of social exchange. It is essentially a medium of marriage exchange. With the development of modernization, the price of it in rural areas in China has soared and it gradually becomes a deformed custom. Through the study of the high bride price in rural areas to explore the reasons for its existence and the impacts, it contributes to curbing the rise of bride price, and the rural civilization.

Keywords—rural areas; culture revitalization; high bride price; rural civilization construction

I. PROBLEM INTRODUCTION

The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to implement the rural revitalization strategy which includes the rural civilization. In some rural areas, the conventional rituals and customs are flourishing with the betrothal gift value gradually rising. The irrational high bride price has evolved into a deformed custom and become a heavy burden on rural families. Therefore, the form of high bride price, the reasons for its existence, and the impact on rural areas are worthy of further discussion. With the promotion of the construction of rural civilization, how to change the phenomenon of high price bride price in rural marriage is of practical significance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Marriage payments include betrothal gift and dowry, as well as presents from the bridegroom's family to the newlyweds. However, the study mainly focuses on the male marriage payment, that is, the betrothal gift and the physical presents from the family of the bridegroom.

Foreign scholars like Freidman and White put forward the

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marriage payment theory which refers the bride price paid by the bridegroom's family as a kind of compensation in material to confirm the bride's reproductive and the transfer of labor force. Marriage endowment theory proposed by Myron L. Cohen and others deems that the betrothal gift is the funding for newlyweds, as it eventually flows to the newly combined family.

Domestically, scholars adopted social exchange theory, to explore the exchange motives and purposes through the betrothal gift, with social relations, economic loss compensation, etc. as the primary exchange object of the betrothal gift while social status, emotional loss compensation, etc. as the subordinate objects. Some scholars also analyzed the positive and negative social function of betrothal gift through the structural functionalism. For example, Yang Shanhua and Shen Chonglin mentioned the changes in urban and rural household consumption in their research [1]. Li Yongping used the theory of marriage market to analyze the dynamic mechanism of social competition and class matching, which fosters the formation of high bride price in the northern countryside [2]. Lu Chunping analyzed the changes in marriage circle, gender imbalance, marriage payment habits, etc. from the perspective of marriage payment theory. [3]

From the above review, scholars have adopted different perspectives to conduct a more detailed study of the current situation of the betrothal gift, which has a good theoretical reference for the research and resolution of the bride price issue. However, the current analysis tends to regard betrothal gift as an economical exchange, and there are few studies on the culture and custom. This paper intends to study the high bride price in the southwestern Shandong from the social exchange theory.

III. THE STATUS QUO OF HIGH PRICE BRIDE PRICE IN RURAL AREAS

Village X is located in the center of Town Q, 30 kilometers away from the county. There are 322 households in the village, 1256 villagers, and 90% of the men in the village are out for work, with women left at home growing crops and asparagus and taking care of their children and the elderly. The annual per-capital income of the village is 23,500 Yuan, 70% of which comes from the asparagus industry.

The data collected in this study were from people aging from 20 to 30 in Village X. And 6 people were selected for semi-structured interviews. The research objects obtained by snowballing are the relatives and friends of the author. The interviews were conducted by chatting, and the recordings were converted into text to obtain first-hand information for analysis. The basic information of the research object is as follows: (TABLE I)

TABLE I. BASIC INFORMATION OF THE RESEARCH OBJECT

No.	Engagement Age	Gender	Education	Sibling	Annual Household Income	Spouse Engagement Age	Education	Betrothal Gift
N1	23	Male	Junior College	0	40,000 RMB	24	Junior College	100,000 RMB
N2	21	Female	Junior school	1 younger brother	40,000 RMB	21	Senior high school	180,000 RMB
N3	25	Male	Undergraduate	1 elder sister	90,000 RMB	24	Undergraduate	300,000 RMB
N4	25	Male	Junior College	1 younger brother	34,000 RMB	24	Senior high school	150,000 RMB
N5	25	Female	Undergraduate	1 younger brother	50,000 RMB	26	Undergraduate	200,000 RMB
N6	24	Male	Junior College	1 younger brother	80,000 RMB	25	Junior College	150,000 RMB

All the subjects under investigation have been married for at most 2 years. The spouses of them are all native to the local city except the one who comes from other province. There are gifts exchange and betrothal gift sending in these couples in the process of love and marriage. The characteristics are as follows:

A. Inequality caused by the type of betrothal gift

The betrothal gift consists of presents and cash. The physical aspects include money, and the “three golds” (gold necklaces, gold rings, gold earrings) and hometown specialties. The cash will be about 150,000 Yuan, and the “Gaikou fee”(paid for bride’s admit of the bridegroom’s families” will be roughly tens of thousands of Yuan. The physical gift and cash add up to about 300,000 Yuan.

N3: “My parents sent 60,000 Yuan, and 4000-yuan Gaikou fee, 6 cartons of cigarettes, 10 boxes of wine and 10 boxes of specialty for my engagement. In addition, I paid 210,000 houses in the city. When I got married, I gave her family 100,000 Yuan and also paid the initial 210,000 for new apartment in city. Hey, it’s not easy for parents to save money for marriage. What’s worse, the girl’s parents didn’t give us any dowry.”

N6: “The first time I visited the girl’s family, I brought four boxes of specialty products and some fruits. On the day of the engagement, in addition to 100,000 Yuan, I also brought 24 boxes of gifts and 10 cartons of cigarettes. My dad gave her

6,000 Yuan. My two uncles each gave her 1,000 Yuan. It is by borrowing money that I get married with her.”

During the interview, the author learned that there are so many kinds of betrothal gifts of which tobacco and alcohol become essential items, and the gifts should be prepared according to the customs of the woman’s family. From the theory of social exchange, high bride price is an unequal exchange in marriage. Based on the needs of the male marriage, even if the exchange requests proposed by the woman are demanding, the man will also accept it.

B. Face matter and mind of rivalry

In Village X, the value of betrothal gift given by the man will be discussed by the women’s neighbors. The neighborhoods compare with each other to gain superiority and satisfaction. In this way, many families are even willing to go bankrupt and owe debts to win the “competition”.

N1: “if the money and gifts for engagement is not enough, her family will be looked down upon by the neighbors. The truth is that my wife’s family has been a joke for the neighbors, as her family proposed 128,000 Yuan, while her neighbor asked for 168,000 Yuan on the same day.”

N4: “Her parents said that they must have a new house, but I don’t have enough money. I went home to discuss with my dad. My dad said that he would borrow some money. I also borrowed money from my friends, and later gave it back when his brother got married. I am still in debt now. So I try to earn money and try to give it back to them soon.”

In the context of the request for betrothal gift, the high bride price became an excellent symbol for women and is transformed into the honor of the woman's family in the village. From the perspective of social exchange theory, the unequal bride price is caused by the increasing value of women born in 1990s, as a kind of marriage resource, and the demand of the women's family for the social status of the village and the network of human relationships.

C. Interest in high bride price

In Village X, the per capita income is low, and people feed their families only by crop harvest and part-time job in spare time. Many families regard their daughters as an economic source, as betrothal gift will be reserved for their son's marriage or for the elderly.

N1: "I have given my wife's family 66,000 Yuan and expected she would bring back some on the wedding day. Conversely, she said the money was left for his brother to get married. I got disappointed and uncomfortable. And her brother is too young to plan the marriage?"

N5: "My parents expected my future husband can give a favorable betrothal gift. Because my brother should prepare for his marriage and also take care of the old, the annual consumption is relatively large. They told me that the gift will be used for both house decoration for my brother's marriage and feeding the elderly."

From the perspective of social exchange theory, the request of bride price has become the core of the whole marriage. To maximize of the interests of the woman's family, the bride price has become the core means of the woman's parents asking for the price, so as to obtain the maximum satisfaction. However, the high bride price may increase the gap between the rich and the poor in rural areas. This unequal exchange will even impose a heavy economic burden on the bridegroom's family; however, the economic conditions of the bride's family may be improved.

D. High bride price and rural "leftover male" issue

Through the interview with the matchmaker, the author knew that the number of young men in village X is large. During the Spring Festival, 80% man's relatives hope that the matchmaker can look for the object for their son or relatives, but there are fewer young women around, which makes the men from poor families unable to find love and gradually become older youth. The principle of least interest in social exchange theory embodies the urgent need of men to get married with women. In the case of insufficient women at the appropriate age, the two sides have an unbalanced exchange, and the one with less interest dominates.

N4: "The matchmaker introduced to my brother several objects at different ages. What's ridiculous is that a woman with a child asks for 200,000 Yuan for marriage." When I got married, my family owed a lot of debts. My brother is more sensible and gave up the blind date."

N6: "The family planning has been put in effect here since 1990. During the strictest 1991 and 1992, the newlyweds are not allowed to give birth to another baby, no matter whether the first one is boy or girl. 1993 is a little better."

IV. CAUSES FOR HIGH BRIDE PRICE IN RURAL AREAS

A. Traditional regional culture and social rules

Village X sits inland with bad traffic, which is dominated by agriculture. The farming culture has formed a conservative regional concept. Coupled with the constraints of natural factors, it has caused occlusion in X village. People live in an easy and comfortable life, and have few desires for material and spiritual wealth.

N1: "After graduating from college, I want to go to Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou. My dad said that I am the only child at home, and it is inappropriate to go so far. Instead, he asked me to run a small business at home, and find one to get married and deliver a baby when they have enough energy to take care of the baby."

N6: "When the boy is 13 or 14 years old, his families will build the house for his marriage."

Social exchange theory believes that social culture and rules are one of the important influencing factors in the exchange relationship. In the village X, the men choose to marry the people at the right age, which leads to the custom of high bride price, such as "a colorful green (10,000 5-yuan, 1,000 100-yuan and one 50-yuan)" and "three-jin and three-liang (the weight of about 136,000 Yuan)". A series of social problems caused by traditional cultures have a certain impact on rural social stability.

B. Economic factors in poverty and backwardness

The income of villagers in village X is mainly from crop harvest and odd jobs. For parents, spending decades of expenses on raising children is not easy. If their daughter gets married, they lose a labor and a source of income. So parents hope to make up for decades of hard work by asking for high bride price.

N4: "We invest over 1,000 yuan for one mu of land, and can earn from 700 to 1,000 yuan. When the wheat is heading this year, the weather is unstable, causing a large amount of heading failure. This year's harvest is not as good as that of last year."

N3: "My dad is working in the government with fixed salary. My mom doesn't go to work. I used to run a restaurant to earn some money, and bought a house. My brother-in-law is a farmer who can't afford a house in Shenzhen, so my dad wanted to help my sister who is long for a house in Shenzhen."

C. Backward education concept

Compared with other areas of Shandong, there are many families and children in Heze County, resulting in more life pressure. The backwardness of educational concepts and the difficulty of guaranteeing basic education cause illiterate among rural people and the increase in bride price. The young women in rural areas choose to marry at an early age. As the education investment is like "bottomless hole", villagers chose to earn to support their families.

N1: "As I am the only child in my family, my parents have little pressure. They sent me to school, but I am not interested in studying. I often skipped class and only got 300 points in the college entrance examination. It is better to acquire a skill than

to go to college. If you don't have knowledge, it is better to go to work earlier."

N2: "I am not highly educated. I quit the school because I can't follow the teacher. The junior high school has a ranking of grades. My parents thought that now that I did poor on study, it is a good choice to be a nurse. Parents are illiterate farmers, and place their hope on my brother. Sometimes I need to help my brother with study."

D. Traditional concept of childbearing

In Village X where the concept of most families is to bring up children for old age and carry on the family line, the family without boys will be looked down upon by relatives and neighbors. The preference for boy in the northern countryside is partly due to the traditional concept of "nurturing children for the old age". And it is also derived from the village competition brought about by "small kinship structure", while "having son" is the starting point of participating in the village.

N2: "My parents thought that my relatives all have two or three children but they only have one child. So it is a good deal as I will marry later. When I was in the school, my little brother was born. Though I was very annoying, I have to help look after him. It's much better now as he grows day by day and can take care of the family if I get married. It's good for rearing son for the old age."

V. COUNTERMEASURE ON CURBING HIGH-PRICE GIFTS AND PROMOTING NEW TYPE MARRIAGE AND BREEDING

A. Improve the level of rural economy and achieve economic revitalization

High bride price is an obstacle to achieving comprehensive rural poverty alleviation as it has deteriorated rural poverty. The government should vigorously develop the economy, establish mutual relations between the villages, and make use of local resources. For example, the "Taobao Town" in Cao County, the development of rural Internet e-commerce, has brought great vitality and benefits to the local economy. Only when the rural economy is revitalized and people get rich, they will no longer regard the betrothal gift as an important source of income.

B. Accelerate the construction of rural culture, change the band customs, and establish a new rural style

The revival of rural culture is not simply to return to the past or to make a new start, but to rebuild the new rural spirit and rural ideals on the basis of the revival of tradition, to stimulate and arouse the peasants' cultural consciousness in order to meet the diverse cultural needs of the peasants. Under the background of the revitalization of rural culture, the government must resolutely do a good job in building rural spiritual civilization, form a healthy and correct public opinion towards marriage and change the bandwagon effect.

C. Improve the social security system

The reason lies behind the high bride price is the imperfection of the rural pension security system. The traditional cultural concept, "rear sons for help in old age" reflects the unicity of rural old-age care. With the burden of old-age care brought about by the aging of the people countryside, the government must not only change the concept of fertility of rural people, but also establish pension measures accordingly. To effectively realize the full implementation of the rural social endowment security system, government is required to strengthen the legislation and improve system, and people should cooperate with government effectively. Only then, can the rural social endowment security system play its role.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper uses the social exchange theory to analyze the high bride price in rural areas, and discusses the economic, regional culture, educational concepts and concept of birth behind the luxury betrothal gifts. In the marriage, the woman supplements material, village social status, and relationship network through the exchange of betrothal gift that is not reciprocal. However, poor families may therefore fall into long-lasting poverty, resulting in a decline in the quality of life. Under the rural revitalization strategy, the government should vigorously develop the rural economy, revitalize the rural culture, strengthen the construction of rural civilization, and establish a sound endowment insurance system to curb the high bride price.

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