

Increasing Bride Price in China: An Unresolved Agenda

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Abstract

Bride Price (彩礼; Cǎilǐ) is a form of wealth paid by a prospective groom's family to the bride's family. While the connotations and implications of "bride price" vary from place to place in China, these days newspapers are flooded with reports concerning "sky-rocketing bride price" and associated tragedies. In spite of the measures adopted by the government to curb the high rates of bride price, the practice continues to flourish. The media sees curbs on bride prices as measures taken to increase marriage rates and boost birth-rates. Bride price had been long been perceived as a "domestic issue" until it started adversely affecting the interests of the patriarchal state. While legal measures are being taken to put limits on bride price, the crackdown on bride price does not stem from concern over commodification of women but as a step to address the declining marriage rate in China. Caili is not a privileged position for women as depicted by the media and the State, since the practice of caili views women as "transferable familial properties" The paper looks at debates surrounding caili in China and concludes that high bride prices are the symptoms of insecurities felt by women in Chinese society as a result of growing inequalities in the system, and the inability of the state to address their grievances.

Keywords: *Bride price, caili, gender, society*

Introduction

The Chinese government has adopted several measures to boost the demographics of the country and encourage birth-rates, such as relaxing document requirements and removing thresholds for claiming maternity benefits, letting unmarried couples register children¹, starting cost-effective day care services², letting unmarried women access maternity insurance³, starting fertility treatment under public scheme⁴, and so on. The crackdown on high bride prices (天价彩礼; *tiānjià cǎilǐ*) is just another measure taken by the government to boost birth rates.

Bride Price

A bride price is a form of wealth paid by the bridegroom or his relatives to the bride or her family. It is a traditional ritual but its significance varies from place to place. Marriage payment theory considers that bride price (征纳; *zhēngnà*) is a compensation paid by the groom to the bride's family for raising daughter. Marriage endowment theory, on the other hand, states that bride price is an amount paid by the groom and is returned to the couple in form of dowry (嫁妆; *jiàzhuāng*) to help the newly wedded couple settle down. The “bride price” also acts an assurance that the bridegroom would be able to take care of the bride and the bride would not be mistreated by him.

The forms and amount paid as bride price has undergone drastic changes in the past few decades. Besides paying bride price in form of hard cash, the bridegroom is now also expected to have a house of his own (not on mortgage), cars, pay a correction fee (改口费; *gǎikǒu fèi*), and give three gold (三金; *sānjīn*) i.e., gold necklace, gold bangles (rings), gold earrings. Besides these, regional specialty products (特品; *tèpǐn*) are gifted, such as livestock in Mongolia. There has been a tremendous increase in bride price in rural areas. In the 1970s cycles, watches, and sewing machines were considered enough, by the 1980s, refrigerators, colour TVs, and washing machines became the trend. At present, cash gifts, apartments, and cars are in vogue. In 2017, the average bride price was as much as 16 times the annual per capita income of rural residents⁵. This means marriages have been reduced to “mercenary marriages”, i.e., these marriages facilitate transfer of wealth from one-party to another. This paper enumerates the causes behind high bride prices.

A. Gender Imbalance

Mainstream media reports have highlighted gender imbalance as a cause of surging bride prices. In 2022, the sex ratio of the total population in China was approximately 104.7 males to 100 females. For 15-29 years age group, there are more than 110 males per 100 females. Approximately there are 34.9 million more men than women in China⁶. China's latest national population census shows that there are 17.52 million more men of marriageable age between 20 and 40 than women⁷. Those men unable to find wives are considered “the bare branches” (光棍; *guānggùn*). The issue has become so pressing that even the government has declared that the inability to find women for marriage is no longer a personal problem but a societal problem⁸. Since the number of marriageable women in a stipulated place is less than the number of men, bride prices automatically go up. The imbalance in sex ratio is the outcome China's One Child policy, and practices such as the preference for male children, selective sex abortions, and female infanticides. The shortage of women in comparison to men has led to a fierce competition among men to prove their worth to women. Hence, bride prices have shot up. This analysis of imbalance is based in simple economics: the greater the demand and the lower the supply, the higher the bride price and vice-versa.

B. Hukou System and Migration

The state-sponsored discrimination between urban and rural residents, through the system of *hukou*, which bestows urban residents more rights and opportunities than the rural residents is one of the root causes of high bride prices in the rural areas. Li Jingkui, Professor at the School of Economics, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, concluded that rural men are the main group of left-over men (剩男; *shèngnán*). Since cities provide more scope of employment than villages, men and women migrate to the cities. However, low-skilled women also have the opportunity to marry a man holding urban *hukou* and climb up the social ladder, whereas low-skilled men have no option but to return to their native villages. Thus, the number of unmarried males in the countryside is more than in urban areas. In fact, an article speaks on ‘Leftover men’ in the Chinese countryside and ‘leftover women’ in Chinese cities⁹. An article by *Sixth Tone* reported that Chinese women in hinterlands are unable to find a suitable match¹⁰. This is not because of unavailability of men in rural areas but the unavailability of “suitable grooms” who hold degrees, have jobs in the public sector, and are at par with women in terms

of education and employment. The desire to marry within the same county also pushes up the bride prices in northern China¹¹ .

Rural men have become “unattractive” for urban women as well as rural women. On one hand, rural men have “land” but lack the high status held by urban men. On the other hand, holders of urban *hukou* have better opportunities for choosing jobs and education as well entitlement to social welfare facilities. Marriage migration is one of the by-products of this urban-rural disparity. The shortest and easiest way to access an urban *hukou* is through marriage and thus promises the shortest way to upward social mobility. However, marriage migration has its own problems. For instance, women marry much older or disabled men, whom they look after and consider a burden. The problem of human trafficking is also worsened, since men may have “fake marriages” and force women into prostitution. This rural-urban divide has led to phenomenon of “bride drain”¹²; i.e., movement of women to urban areas for marriage. Although rural women have some power to choose, it does not necessarily mean empowerment.

C. Deprivation of Land Rights

Although the national law bestows women equal land rights as men, legal loopholes, patriarchal mindsets, and slack implementation have left women in a legal limbo. Married rural women are not given rights over land in their native places¹³ . Less than 20 percent of rural women have names on land certificates¹⁴ . Since land is owned collectively and allocated based on the size of the family and the *hukou* system, in case of marriage, divorce, or widowhood, women are left with three no’s- no land, no house, and no money. In such circumstances, women are left in the lurch. Thus, high bride prices have become a way to secure their future. High bride prices act as a financial security for women in case their marriages fall through or they become victims of domestic violence. Bride prices still may not be privileged position for women, since the compensation amount might not reach the women since families may keep it with them.

D. Gender-based Violence

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted to achieve gender equality by addressing 12 areas of critical concern. Even after twenty-seven years of its introduction, substantial action has been taken to alleviate poverty and violence against women. Although the Anti-Domestic Violence Law came into effect in 2016, domestic violence in China remains rampant. In fact, as evident by Article 1 of the law, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law is indeed self-defeating

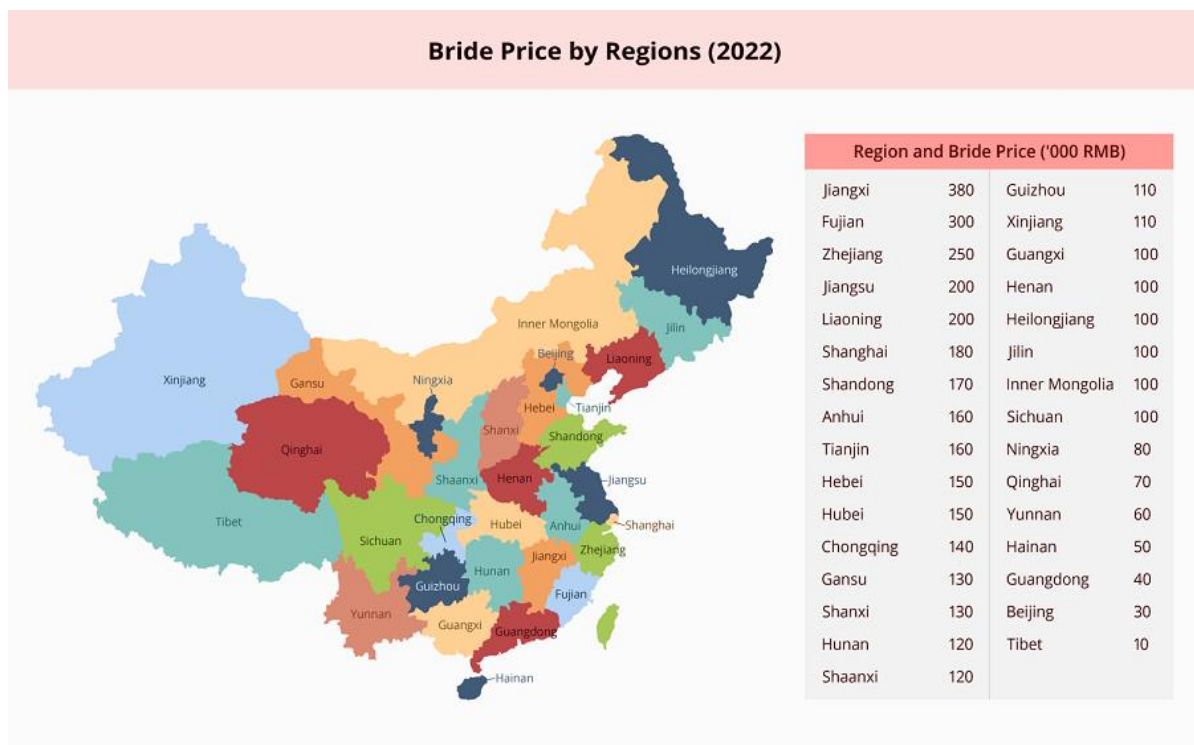
since the main intent of the law, i.e., to prevent domestic violence is hindered by its advocacy to “preserve harmony” and “maintain social stability”. Violence against women has often been justified through the use of sayings such as, “beating shows intimacy and scolding shows love” (打是亲 · 骂是爱 *Dǎ shì qīn, mà shì ài*). The government has also eulogised women’s submissiveness, and extolled roles of women as “good wives and good mothers” in order to maintain the state’s demographics. Moreover, the primary method advocated by the Act for eliminating violence is “mediation” which stipulates that family members, institutions, and workplaces encourage women to reconcile with their husbands. Thus, women become instruments that serve the interests of the state for maintaining social stability and a harmonious society, and women continue to be at the receiving end of gender-based violence. However, abuse and harmony cannot go hand-in-hand and domestic violence cannot be treated as domestic affairs by the state machinery. It needs to be considered a serious violation of fundamental human rights and must be condemned as such.

Chinese society has undergone drastic changes over the past decades. Women want to have careers instead of bearing and raising children. Marriage no longer provides the security that women want as evident from the increase in divorce rates. Statistically, divorce rates were up by 75.5 per cent in a decade¹⁵. Although divorce rates fell after the introduction of “cooling off period” as stipulated by Civil Code on January 2021, critics have attributed the cooling-off period as the cause for death of women at the hands of their husbands¹⁶. In China, there has been a steep rise in domestic violence against women. According to data provided by Women’s Federation of China, every 7.4 seconds, a Chinese woman experiences domestic violence¹⁷. Getting divorces is difficult as judges tend to reject the first appeal¹⁸. According to a study by Prof. Ethan Michelson, the primary variable in cases of divorces due to domestic violence is the man’s agreement for divorce, while women hardly have a say in this regard¹⁹. Chinese judges trivialize intimate partner violence and blame victims, and rarely believes women’s claims of domestic violence in divorce cases. Thus, Chinese women are denied divorce in name of social harmony in the courts.

E. Poverty

It has been observed that the western regions demand more bride price than the eastern regions; demand for bride price is also higher in mountainous regions than the suburbs. Thus, bride price is inversely proportional to poverty: the poorer the region, the higher the bride

price and vice-versa. According to the National Map for betrothal gifts (see map 1), Jiangxi tops the list at 0.38 million yuan followed by Fujian, Zhejiang and Jiangsu. Bride price is relatively higher in Henan, Shandong, Guizhou, and Gansu. Daughters in these regions are seen as assets. In rural areas, bride prices paid to son's wife is settled from the amount received from daughter's marriage. The maxim is that you must marry (嫁 *jià*) the daughter for bride price so that the son is able to marry (娶 *qǔ*). The mainstream media reports that China has lifted 800 million people from poverty. If this is the case, and poverty has really been eradicated, then why are such bride prices being demanded? Bride price is seen as the cause of poverty as evident through phrases such as “marriage leads to poverty” (因婚致贫 *yīn hūn zhì pín*) or “return to poverty owing to marriage” (因婚返贫 *yīn hūn fǎnpín*). Yet, bride price is a symptom of poverty rather than the cause of poverty. In poorer places, daughters are regarded as “labour”. While proverbs such as “a married-out daughter is like spilt water” (嫁出去的女儿 · 泼出去的水 *jià chūqù de nǚ'ér, pō chūqù de shuǐ*) emphasises the uselessness of women, the demand of bride price shows that women are “assets” and “forms of labour” with economic value. The bride price acts as compensation for sending off the daughter. These parents are selling the labour of their daughters. The money



Map 1 Bride Price by Regions (2022). Source: ThinkChina (2023) [Map]
<https://www.thinkchina.sg/china-cracking-down-exorbitant-bride-price-rates-save-marriages>

they receive acts as a guarantee for their old age, especially in the absence of state-sponsored pension system.

Analysis

Gender imbalance and other factors have given created situations in which women have power to negotiate bride price. Women are demanding high bride prices as social and financial security. Women have also reached a position where they can assert their desire to remain unmarried if they do not find adequate bride price. As such, there is no data to determine how much of the bride price is kept by brides for personal use and to what extent it is utilized for family affairs. However, as the Chinese government attempts to regulate bride prices and advocate for zero-bride price, it reveals the government's growing concern over the impending demographic crisis. The decision of the government to put limits on bride price does not stem from the concern that women are commodified, but for the reason that men are unable to find marriage partners, adversely affecting the demographic situation. Hence, the privilege to bargain patriarchal domination enjoyed by women is greatly limited.

It is true bride prices have led to various tragedies such as calling-off weddings; splits between lovers; murders on wedding nights; non-consensual marriages of daughters by parents; brides running away from home to escape marriage, to-be-bridegrooms ending their own lives under financial pressures; and court cases to redress the grievances of beavered parents. "Bride price" is undoubtedly a social evil. But the women demanding these bride prices are not the perpetrators of this social evil. Social scientists are right in arguing that bride price does not promote "gender equality", and instead as bride price can be understood as "commercial transactions" over the rights of the labour of women. However, if such scholars argue that "bride price" is detrimental in nature, then it must also be acknowledged that women face discrimination in all spheres of life, most of them are consequences of government policies. The demand for bride price does not necessarily stems from greed but from concerns over material security, which has been systematically deprived.

The government has adopted several measures to curb sky-rocketing bride prices including stipulating caps on bride price, persuading people not to demand high bride price, conducting propaganda campaigns, instructing unmarried women not to compete with each other in demanding ever-higher prices, conducting free mass weddings (as done for a hundred couples inside a sports stadium in Nanchang), and compelling unmarried women in Daijiapu to sign a

public pledge to reject high bride prices. In response, people have questioned on the legitimacy of the State to meddle in family affairs. However, all the ways that the government has adopted to curb bride price are gendered against women. Such measures limit or restrict women, instead of liberating them. For instance, compelling women to sign public pledges also identifies women as the primarily responsible for addressing the issue. Instead, the primary cause behind high bride prices can be traced to the CPC's birth control policies, especially the One Child policy, which created a gender imbalance. While implementing the One Child policy, the reproductive rights of women were violated by placing the womb under surveillance. Thus, women have always been scapegoated by the government for the sake of social stability. Women have to give up on their rights and make sacrifices for the state, while the state continues to deprive women of their rights. There have been no concrete steps taken to address the roots of the problem by addressing issues of poverty and creating social security policies for the elderly, and empowering women.

The government is not looking at underlying causes of rising bride prices. The government has no intention to get to the roots of the problem, either. It is focused on finding ways to resolve the issue of impending population crisis, be it at the cost of curtailing the freedom of its citizens, especially women, or inflicting life-long trauma. A superficial analysis between increasing bride price and birth policies will not resolve the problem. The surge in bride prices is not "sudden", but the result of long-standing issues faced by Chinese women in society. The government needs to address the genuine concerns of women. The state must work to understand why bride price is being seen as a way out of poverty, why married women are not able to receive land holdings, and how the issue of widespread domestic violence can be resolved. Since the insecurities of women stem from their conditions and position in society, the Chinese government needs to work upon improving their lives. Unless the Chinese government takes concrete steps to improve the living standards of women, empty agendas and propagandas will lead nowhere.

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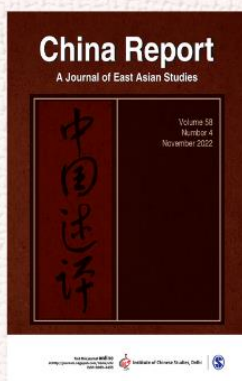


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