

Analysis of the Formation Mechanism of High Bride Price in Rural Areas in the Context of Rural Revitalization Strategy

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Abstract: The bride price, as a deeply influential marriage custom rooted in traditional Chinese society, is an important and indispensable procedure in the process of marriage conclusion. The existence of bride price in the rural society is not wrong, but the high bride price has brought many inconveniences to the farmers' life. This paper selects X village in south Henan as the research object, and conducts an in-depth investigation on the marriage culture of the village by using literature research and interview method, and makes a detailed interpretation of the bride price and wedding customs in the village, analyzes the inevitability of the existence of "high bride price", and then concludes that the imbalance of the gender ratio of marriageable men and women, the change of the main body to which the bride price belongs, the parents' The four reasons for this are: the imbalance in the gender ratio of marriageable men and women, the change in the main body of the bride price, the unlimited parental support, and the influence of "face" of rural people. "As a prevalent phenomenon, we should deal with it rationally and find appropriate ways to curb the high bride price.

Keywords: Village X in southern Henan; High bride price; Rural revitalization; Mechanism analysis

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1. Introduction

In the report of the Nineteenth National Congress of the Party, the strategy of rural revitalization was put forward, and the civilization of the countryside is an important element and an important guarantee of rural revitalization. As a marriage custom rooted in traditional Chinese society and with deep influence, the bride price is an indispensable and important procedure in the process of marriage conclusion. There is nothing wrong with the existence of bride price in the rural society, but the high bride price has brought many inconveniences to the farmers' life. The prevalence of the phenomenon of high bride price is not conducive to the construction of rural civilization and hinders the process of implementing the rural revitalization strategy. In the "Central Document No. 1" of 2019, it is explicitly requested for the first time to control the high bride price in rural areas. This paper takes X village in Yu'nan as an example, and through analyzing the mechanism of the formation of high bride price, we expect to find a solution to the high bride price in rural areas.

2. Theoretical review of the literature

The bride price, commonly known as "bride money" or "bride price," is the property paid by a man or a relative of a man to a woman or a relative of a woman at the time of engagement and marriage^[1]. The bride

price plays an important role in regulating the marriage relationship and maintaining the marriage order in the process of concluding marriage between a man and a woman, and is known as the most important component of marriage customs. As an important component of marriage customs in China, the bride price represents not only the exchange of money and goods, but also contains rich historical and cultural connotations. From the perspective of dowry and bride price, Diao Tongju, summarized six main theoretical outcomes: inheritance theory, welfare theory, labor value theory, competition theory, family intention theory and property transfer theory ^[2]. From the perspective of marital payment problem research, Deng Huimin, summarized three theories: marital repayment theory, marital funding theory and marital market offer theory ^[3]. In this paper, we analyze the reasons behind the high bride price from the perspective of marriage payment research and the actual situation of X village in southern Henan.

At the heart of the theory of marital repayment is repayment, which can be understood as financial compensation ^[4] provided by the groom's family to the bride's family to cover the cost of raising the woman and the loss of labor outflow from the woman's family. Because the bride marries into the groom's family, she can contribute to the groom's family's population growth and increase in wealth. The essence of the bride price then becomes the use of wealth by the groom's family in exchange for the bride's family's concession of the bride's right to reproduce and labor ^[5]. To some extent, this theory understands women as "gifts in exchange," using the bride price paid by the in-laws during the marriage of their daughter to compensate for the cost of raising the mother's family over the years. It is the use of money to measure the value of women and the exchange of girls as "goods" that has led to the high bride price ^[6].

The theory of marriage financing holds that "the marriage transaction cannot be seen as a mere 'payment' for marrying a woman ^[7]." In the process of contracting a marriage, both the man's and woman's families spend money on it, although the man's family spends a major part of it. But in any case, the final bride price flows to the newlyweds, and the wealth in the marriage is tending to finance the newlyweds. Wang Yuesheng, reveals the generational shift by comparing the proportion of new houses built when children get married, the bride price spent and the contribution of both families in different generations when he finds that intergenerational property tilts downward ^[9]. In a marriage financing theory perspective, the bride price becomes an important way of exploiting and transferring wealth between generations.

The marriage market offer theory suggests that with the rise of the working economy and the intensification of population mobility, the marriage market is gradually formed, and rural and rural youth are in a disadvantaged position in the marriage market ^[10]. The loss of a large number of rural unmarried women resources has brought a serious squeeze on the local completed male youth, and the problem of "difficulty in getting a wife" has emerged. Under the market price theory, the scarcity of female resources has led to the male side becoming more and more passive in the marriage market and the female side taking the active position in the marriage market, and in the process of marriage exchange, the female side has higher and higher asking price ability, and the male side is under huge marriage cost and pressure ^[11]. Wang Defu, has also noted the asking behavior of the woman in the marriage market and argued that the transmutation of the nature of the bride price is the result of the combined effect of family structure, family planning patterns and intergenerational relationship changes, of which intergenerational relationship imbalance is the root cause ^[12].

In response to the three theories above, the man pays the cost of the bride price regardless of the theory, but exactly why the high bride price exists is more or less tied to these theories (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Comparison of the three theories

	Payer	Beneficiary	Aftermath
Marital solvency theory	Family of the man	The woman's family	Inter-family transfers
Marriage financing theory	Joint payment by the man and woman's family	Small Newlywed Family	Intergenerational transfer
Market-based asking price theory	Family of the man	Women and small newlywed families	Intergenerational transfers, interfamily transfers

3. The custom of high bride price in X village in southern Henan

In the village of X in southern Henan, the bride price is highly valued, and only after the delivery of the “bride price” can a man and a woman enter the marriage hall. In the village of X in southern Henan, it is necessary to go through the process of matchmaking, meeting, meeting the family, sending the date, passing the door, and returning to the door, and this part is mainly to explain the objective fact of “high bride price” in the village of X in southern Henan by sorting out the expenses in the process of custom.

3.1. Matchmaking

In village X, the initial meeting between a man and a woman relies mainly on the introduction of a matchmaker, who, after getting a general idea of the appearance, character and family status of the marriageable man and woman in the village, will go to the families of the man and woman and make inquiries if they think there is a suitable man or woman for marriage.

From the results of the interviews, it was found that the majority of families still welcome this behavior. If a man and a woman are willing to meet, they request a matchmaker to agree on a time. In village X, there are generally three roles for matchmakers.

They do not do this job for the purpose of making profit from it, but from their own point of view, to do good deeds for the good of mankind, so that more marriageable men and women can find the object of their desire as soon as possible.

Relatives and friends: The role of the “matchmaker” is based on the concern for those around them and the desire to get their close relatives to find a match as soon as possible due to their blood ties.

- (1) Families: Generally male families dominate, and families with marriageable men will take the initiative to look for a suitable marriage partner in the neighborhood and will ask someone to make a house call.

Due to social changes, the village of X in Henan now consists mainly of the last two kinds. In this part of the matchmaking process, although a certain honorarium is not paid to the matchmaker, the man's family will show their gratitude to the matchmaker by giving him a certain gift, usually priced at 1,000-2,000 yuan.

3.2. Meeting

The “meeting” is particularly important for the establishment of a relationship between a man and a woman since they have basically never communicated before. The first meeting between a man and a woman is usually the man and the man's parents come to the matchmaker's home with a gift (the price fluctuates from 600-800 yuan), and then the matchmaker, according to the location agreed in advance, allows the man and woman to meet and communicate. The first meeting is mainly to see each other's looks, and will also

get a preliminary understanding of the family situation through conversation. If both men and women agree and intend to continue to get along, the man will ask the matchmaker or personally send a certain amount of gift money to the woman (the amount of gift has risen from 2,000 yuan to the current 10,001 yuan), which is called the meeting gift. The gift money given by the young man and woman after they meet, if the woman accepts the meeting gift, it means that she is willing to establish a relationship, and vice versa.

3.3. The philanthropist

The “house call,” as the name implies, is a visit to the man’s home, mainly for the woman to get a deeper understanding of the basic situation of the man’s family. “This is a crucial part of the process, and plays a key role in furthering the relationship between men and women. In general, the female side sent a representative, under the guidance of the matchmaker, with the girl’s family (for the girl’s aunt, mother, sister-in-law) a piece to the man’s home, the two sides in the meeting on the child’s situation for further communication. The man’s family will prepare the meal and gifts in advance, the meal specifications are the highest in the rural hospitality etiquette “three tables”, gifts are also prepared in multiple copies (one for each person from the woman’s family, each copy is 300-500). Some male families also give each guest a red envelope in order to show that the family is well off and to establish a relationship with their children as soon as possible. The “family phase” is a way for the woman’s parents to get to know the man’s parents better and to make sure that their daughter will not be angry when she marries.

3.4. Send good

“Sending good” in the Six Rites, or “inviting period,” is the time when the families of the man and woman who are betrothed go back and forth before the official wedding ^[13]. At this time, the man’s family will send a representative with the bride money and gifts (half a pig, cigarettes, wine, etc.)

Coming to the woman’s side of the family. Both parties will discuss the specific arrangements regarding the wedding, and the man will politely ask the woman about the requirements of the woman’s side on the day of the welcome and the wedding custom notes on the woman’s side of the family so that he can better go back and prepare. To ensure that the wedding day will be smooth and in accordance with local customs, the man’s family will make adequate preparations during the period from the time of sending the bride through the door.

3.5. Pass through a doorway

“Passing through the door” for the woman means getting married and officially entering the man’s family. “It is an important part of the wedding custom for the groom to go in person and for the bride’s family to treat her with courtesy. On that day, representatives from the groom’s side of the family (the village wedding custom is 13 people) will leave early in the morning in a pre-booked caravan (usually 6-8 vehicles, each costing 200-300 yuan) to welcome the bride to the door. The bridal party will generally arrive back at the man’s home before the auspicious time, before getting off, the bride’s in-laws will also give the bride a red envelope (price varies between 2,000-10,000 yuan), the gift money is agreed upon on the day of delivery. After the bride receives the money, the groom carries the bride into the bridal chamber with the sound of the firecrackers, which completes the process. At noon, the bridegroom’s family also hosts a feast.

All the relatives and friends of the man’s family will come over to ask for a cup of “wedding wine,” and all the relatives and friends who come to attend will give a gift, which will eventually benefit the “man’s parents.”

3.6. First return of bride her parental home

“Returning to the door,” the last item in the wedding custom, refers to the bride’s first return to her mother’s

home after her marriage (the custom in X village in southern Henan is to return to the door three days after the wedding). When the day comes, the woman's side of the family will send a representative to pick up the "daughter" to go home. In X village, those who go to pick up the bride are usually people from the same clan (each family sends a representative), to the newlywed family to pick up the bride back to the bride's family is commonly called "calling guests." The man's side will prepare a banquet in advance to entertain the bride's family, and after a full meal, the woman's representative side will return home, and the man's family side will prepare a red packet for everyone from the woman's side, and the size of the red packet depends on the man's family conditions (usually 20-100 yuan), which, to a certain extent, also adds an expense to the man's marriage.

By combing through the wedding customs of X village in southern Henan, it was found that a large amount of money had to be spent on every aspect of the wedding, which to a certain extent explains the inevitability of the existence of "high bride price."

4. Realistic logic: The motivation for the high bride price in X village in southern Henan

4.1. Immediate causes: Imbalance in the gender ratio of marriageable men and women

The reason why "marrying a wife is expensive" is because "marrying a wife is difficult" and "marrying a wife is difficult" is because there is a mismatch between the number of marriageable men and women, in fact, village X is only a microcosm of the vast number of rural areas in China, and there are more men than women. The problem exists in the vast majority of rural areas. In areas where the gender imbalance of marriageable youth is more serious, the higher the bride price demanded by the woman, the greater the likelihood of success of the demand ^[14]. The reasons for the gender imbalance between marriageable men and women in rural areas are as follows.

Influenced by the traditional "son preference" culture of reproduction, families as individuals do not change their reproductive attitudes because of the huge imbalance in the gender ratio in society. It was found that there was a deep "preference for boys" in X village in southern Henan, which was formed on the basis of "raising children for old age". At that time, China's family planning policy was implemented more strictly, in order to ensure a son to carry on the family, some people would use medical means to identify the sex of the fetus management loopholes, the use of ultrasound to identify the sex of the fetus, if it is a boy to stay, is a girl to abort. In the 1990s, most of the newborns born were male, and almost every family in the village had a boy, with very few families having only one girl in the family. This practice has changed the sex ratio of newborns between males and females, so that there are now fewer marriageable females than males overall. In this situation, women of marriageable age have become a scarce resource and there is a large surplus of men of marriageable age ^[15]. This means that men are of marriageable age but have difficulty finding a suitable match, while women have relatively more room to choose a match.

The outflow of marriageable female resources. In recent years, the rise of the "working wave" has brought about a massive exodus of rural population, especially the cross-regional movement of female resources ^[16]who aspire to the prosperity of life in the city and do not choose to return to the village once they have the opportunity to settle in the city. Relative to women, most men still tend to find a suitable woman nearby to consummate their marriage. As the outflow of local women outnumbered men and the outflow of local women outnumbered the inflow of foreign women ^[17]original intermarriage circle in rural areas was broken, bringing a serious squeeze on the local marriage market, and men were bound to pay more to marry the object of their choice. The exodus of rural female resources has exacerbated the gender imbalance in the local marriage market, increasing the dilemma of rural young men in choosing a spouse and the cost of marrying, and to some extent contributing to the social culture of women demanding high bride price.

As the saying goes, "scarcity of goods is expensive", because women are a "scarce resource" in the

marriage market, men have to pay more bride price to improve their competitiveness in order to get a daughter-in-law, and the competition in the marriage market raises prices for each other, which leads to the phenomenon of “high bride price” [18].

4.2. Root cause: Change in the subject of the bride price attribution

The core of the nature of the bride price lies in the attribution of the bride price, and the difference in the subject of the bride price attribution determines not only the subject of the offer, but also the intensity of the offer, thus jointly determining the nature of the bride price [17]. The nature of the traditional bride price is a financial compensation from the man’s family to the woman’s family, and the bride price flows from the man’s family to the woman’s family and is attributed to the woman’s parents [19]. The woman’s parents, as the direct beneficiaries of the bride price, have the right to dispose of the bride price, part of which will be used to purchase a dowry as a dowry on the day of the wedding, and part of which will be used for the family’s livelihood expenses. In recent years, the bride price in rural areas is no longer a repayment to the woman’s parents, but is used directly to finance the newlyweds [20]. With the change in the subject of bride price attribution, the woman’s parents generally do not keep the bride price for themselves; it is given to their daughter and her small family to be formed. Even some parents of better-off women add dowry to the bride price out of their own money. The survey also found that the subject of the bride price has changed, and the parents have taken off the burden of being “greedy for money” and “selling their daughters” and are no longer worried about being judged by others. Since the bride price demanded will eventually flow to the newly formed marital family and eventually return to the man’s family, this provides some support and justification for the demand for a “high bride price” by the woman’s parents.

4.3. Conditions for realization: Unlimited parental underwriting

In village X in southern Henan, as young people have just gone out to work and basically have no savings to afford the high cost of the bride price, it often still has to come from the father’s generation, which to some extent shows that the extent to which the woman’s asking price in the bride price can be translated into the man’s incentive to pay depends on the parents’ ability. Parents will do their best to help their offspring to consummate the marriage. In order to accomplish the life task of getting a daughter-in-law for their son, the vast majority of male parents acquiesce to the fact of this intergenerational exploitation, and after the woman proposes a bride price, the male parents will meet it as much as possible. They do this either by going out to work, or by compressing daily consumption and saving money, and some parents even go so far as to pay the high bride price demanded by the woman by borrowing money from friends and relatives or taking out bank loans. After the marriage, as the bride price costs and even the debts incurred as a result of the marriage are mainly borne by the parents of the young man, it is the unlimited underwriting of the parents’ payment for the child’s marriage that makes the realization of the high bride price in rural areas possible. Through the interviews, we know why they are willing to spend their lives paying huge bride price for their sons, buying houses, getting married, and even raising their grandchildren without complaint, and we can understand why they are willing to underwrite their children’s marriages indefinitely.

4.4. Enabling conditions: The influence of rural “face”

A central principle that has dominated Chinese social life for the last hundred years has been the notion of “face [1].” The issue of face is also deeply rooted in the process of marriage exchange in rural areas. For the woman’s family, the high bride price becomes a sign of the daughter’s excellence, and the higher the bride price, the better the woman is, which translates into face for the woman’s family in the village [22]. If the woman asks for a small bride price or no bride price, it is considered abnormal and will be discussed

by villagers as “a physical defect” or “a problem,” which will have a bad impact on the daughter’s future life in the village. For this reason, the woman will ask the man for as much bride price as possible to show that her daughter is of high value and in good condition. For the man’s family, if the man cannot pay the high bride price demanded by the woman, the man’s parents will be labeled as “incompetent” and will be looked down upon by other villagers, making it difficult for their son to find a daughter-in-law in the village in the future. For the sake of so-called “face,” the man has to pay the bride price requested by the woman, even if he is heavily in debt, to prove that his family is financially strong and capable.

Under the influence of rural people’s “face,” once the bride price of any family in the village is too high, out of the psychology of “exceeding” and “comparing”, then the family next to the bride. Once the bride price of a family in the village is too high, the family next to the bride will definitely pay a higher bride price than the previous family to gain “face.” The villagers take the initiative to raise the price in order to gain “face,” and the bride price is raised higher and higher, and the amount of bride price is frequently refreshed, which leads to a vicious circle.

5. Concluding remarks

The high bride price has placed a financial burden on the majority of peasant families and has led to a series of bad outcomes. Some families fall into poverty due to marriage, and parents are left with huge debts; newlyweds enjoy the financial support of their fathers, but they refuse to bear the family debts caused by the payment of bride price; they not only transfer the debts to their fathers, but also do not actively fulfill their support obligations to their fathers, which brings more problems to the livelihood of rural parents and family pensions ^[23]. Some parents are burdened with “huge” debts, and going out to work and saving money to repay debts become the main task in their future life, which brings great pressure to their physical and mental health, and brings challenges to their future old age, and the old age of the elderly will become a problem. Some villages are caught in the dilemma of “high bride price,” and they compare each other within the village, using the price of bride price to measure whether the daughter-in-law is good or not, which will turn into a vicious circle in the long run. In the long run, it will not be conducive to the construction of rural culture and civilization.

In recent years, the “high bride price” has gradually emerged in the rural marriage market, and I believe that there are certain reasons behind its emergence to prevalence. We can’t make a generalization to solve the problem of “high bride price,” it will be counterproductive and not conducive to the construction of rural civilization, and more seriously, it may bring some harm to the harmony and stability of the society. But the price of bride price is increasing as an objective fact, we can’t turn a blind eye to it, we should treat this phenomenon rationally, we should try to take appropriate ways to crack it. There are many factors that cause the “high bride price,” and it varies from place to place, so we should take “one place one policy” according to the specific situation of different places, so as to better curb the “high bride price.” In this way, we can better curb the prevalence of “high bride price.” Focusing on village X, we should carry out a good cultural and educational campaign to guide villagers to view the bride price correctly and change the bad habits of marriage; promote the concept of practical marriage consumption and reject irrational marriage consumption; and play a good role in village governance as a group of “new villagers.” Finally, the local economy should be developed vigorously to attract young people to work at home and reduce the outflow of marriageable female resources. Slowly, the phenomenon of “high bride price” will be curbed to a certain extent.

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