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Exploration of the Transformation in Marital Forms in Changzhi County During the Early Years of the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China was promulgated and implemented on May 1, 1950, initiating significant reforms in China's marital system. This study aims to better elucidate the substantial changes in the forms of marriage in China after the promulgation of the Marriage Law. By examining specific cases of marriage trials in Changzhi County, Shanxi Province, during the early years of the PRC, this research delves into the precise transformations in marital forms during that period. It seeks to analyze the profound impact on both men and women in Changzhi County after the enactment of the Marriage Law. Through this examination, it becomes evident that the Communist Party of China made substantial contributions to the liberation of Chinese women, consequently advancing the country's productivity. The Communist Party of China stands as a profoundly influential political entity, playing a pivotal role in China's progress and development towards grandeur.

Keywords

Early Years of the PRC, Marital Forms, Transformation, Influence

Introduction

Around 1950, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the feudal land ownership, representing backward production relations, was abolished. Women were entitled to land ownership, marking a monumental milestone and overturning the historical norm of Chinese women lacking land and property for over five millennia. The subordinate position of women, relying on men for survival due to feudalistic notions, underwent a complete transformation. Women, previously dependent on men due to feudal ideologies, lost their economic foothold. Simultaneously, women gained the freedom to independently manage the land they received, free from interference. They were also encouraged to participate in productive labor and engage in cultural studies in evening schools. Consequently, the economic and cultural status of women escalated rapidly. The traditional notion of favoring males over females faced fundamental upheaval. Feudal marital relationships underwent institutional changes, significantly propelling China forward. Previous studies on early PRC-era marriages predominantly relied on discussions, lacking concrete marriage materials. This paper utilizes marriage trial documents from Changzhi County as historical evidence. By examining specific cases, it explores the specific changes in marital forms in Changzhi County during the early years of the PRC, both before and after the promulgation of the Marriage Law, and the resultant impacts.

1. Marriage Forms Before the Enactment of the Marriage Law

Prior to the enactment of the Marriage Law, traditional marriage practices were generally characterized by complexity. They involved seeking parental approval, mediation by matchmakers, and assessments of the suitability of various aspects between the prospective couple. Additionally, it necessitated approval from relatives and neighbors to formalize a legitimate marital union recognized by society. This union was established based on mutual care and warmth (Guo Dandan, 2022). Chen Peng's work "Draft of Chinese Marriage History" (Chen Peng, 2020) specifically records the procedures for the traditional matchmaking process. Examining cases of marriages that occurred before the promulgation of the Marriage Law provides insights into the prevailing marriage customs of that era:

(1) Jiang Guixiang, a resident of Beidu Village, was a tenant farmer at that time (1942). Wang Yikui's father, Wang Liuzhu, approached my mother proposing that either I or my sister marry his son, but my mother disagreed. Later, he, along with Wang Bingguang (a collaborator with the Japanese invaders) and Wang Dabin from their village, spoke to my mother again, but she remained unwilling. Consequently, they negotiated with my uncle, Jiang Hansheng. The next morning, my uncle agreed to the engagement. The betrothal gifts included 130 catties of grain, two bracelets, and 12 meters of cloth. It was essentially a marriage transaction, but fundamentally, I did not consent (Jiang Guixiang, 1952).

(2) In April 1949, through the introduction by Zheng Jinhua, Zhao Gencheng and Liu Shuang'e agreed to an engagement after two face-to-face meetings. The promised engagement gifts were sixteen catties of cotton, two bracelets, and two meters of cloth. However, in reality, only eight catties of cotton, one pair of bracelets, and one meter of cloth were given. At the time, Liu Shuang'e was 15 years old, while Zhao Gencheng was actually 36 years old. During the engagement, Zhao Gencheng falsely claimed to Liu Shuang'e that he was only 26 years old (in truth, Zhao Gencheng was 36 years old, making him 21 years older than Liu Shuang'e). I had serious doubts about him and repeatedly questioned his age accuracy. He insisted his age was indeed 26. I then expressed that if he truly was 26, I would be willing to marry him. However, after marriage, I discovered through neighbors that his actual age was 36. Subsequently, I requested a divorce (Liu Shuang'e, 1951).

From these two cases, combined with the customs of old-time marriages, we can extract the following information:

1.1 Marriage Mandates Dowry

The traditional practice necessitated the exchange of betrothal gifts, encompassing customs deeply embedded in China's heritage for thousands of years. The prospective groom, representing his family, formally visited the bride's family to negotiate the terms of the engagement, which invariably involved a substantial dowry. In situations where the groom's family was less affluent, the dowry would be modest, while wealthier families would offer more. There was no scenario where the dowry was not given. In adherence to traditional marriage practices, the groom was required to present gifts (dowry) to the bride's family during the engagement, typically consisting of fabrics, silver coins, and provisions. Often, due to the impoverished circumstances of the bride's family, or their urgent need for financial resources, the future and happiness of the daughter would be wholly entrusted to the groom, essentially equating to a marriage transaction. The destiny and prospects of the bride were contingent upon the groom's cultural refinement, moral standards, and depth of emotional attachment, giving rise to concerns about marrying the wrong person. For the groom to successfully marry the bride, it was imperative to prepare a substantial dowry. Once the bride's family accepted a generous dowry, it symbolized their endorsement of the union, making the engagement dowry indispensable before marriage. Approximately a week after the wedding, the bride would accompany the groom on a visit to her parental home, bringing small gifts and staying for a week.

Additionally, it's essential to note that wealthy families (those not experiencing financial hardship) did not emphasize the marriage dowry. In some cases, the dowry was even less, while poorer families had a larger dowry. Regardless of wealth, both the poor and the rich had to spend money to get married. However, the poorer families had to spend more, while the affluent spent less. In wealthier families, the bride's family was relatively affluent and didn't particularly prioritize the betrothal gifts. Instead, they might contribute more as part of the bride's dowry, hoping their daughter would have more confidence and status in her marital home and wouldn't face pressure from her in-laws. Moreover, wealthy families would typically prefer marriage prospects from similar affluent backgrounds, seeking well-mannered, cultured, financially stable sons-in-law. They weren't concerned about the dowry but were more interested in the groom's character and future prospects.

1.2 The prevalence of early marriage still exists.

In present-day China, adulthood is established at the age of eighteen, a time when individuals are considered to have attained a level of physical and psychological maturity. However, during the rule of the Nationalist government (formally enacted in the 20th year of the Republic), the legal marriage age for men was set at eighteen and for women at sixteen in the "Civil Law. Family Section." Nonetheless, at that time, the actual marriage age for women was generally earlier than stipulated by the law of the Republic. This is evident in the case of Liu Shuang'e. At the time of her marriage, Liu Shuang'e was only fifteen years old, which, in today's age reckoning, would equate to a mere fourteen years old. She was still in her early teens, at the age of innocent youth, yet was already engaged in the institution of marriage, deprived of experiencing the joys of adolescent life, and being forced into the role of a married woman.

Further elaboration leads to the conclusion that in affluent families, marriages for daughters were generally conducted at the legally prescribed age, emphasizing matches between families of equal social standing and similar ages to safeguard the daughters' interests. Hence, there was typically no significant age disparity between the bride and groom. Conversely, in impoverished families, scenarios were observed where brides were notably younger than grooms, often termed "May-December" relationships.

2. Post-implementation of the Marriage Law

Following the promulgation of the Marriage Law, marriage customs underwent simplification, advocating for civilized marriage, free love, and reduced parental intervention. The formalization of marriage primarily involved obtaining a marriage certificate. Cases of marriages occurring after the implementation of the Marriage Law provide insights into the prevailing marriage customs during this period:

(1) In June 1951, Zhang Shiying was engaged to Fan Zhonghai through the introduction of Fan Zhongqin. Both parties were acquainted from their adjacent residences (the male and female sides had known each other for a long time and were quite familiar), but they had never spoken before. After their discussion, Fan Zhonghai neither gave anything to Zhang Shiying, nor did Zhang Shiying give anything to Fan Zhonghai. Zhonghai's brother gave a towel and a pair of bracelets to my (Zhang Shiying's) family, which my mother accepted. In 1952, when his father celebrated his birthday, upon returning from Taiyuan, he bought me two sets of clothes and about one yard and three or four feet of cloth. His (Fan Zhonghai's) father gave me twelve silver dollars (Zhang Shiying, 1951).

(2) Wang Jinhua, from Wu Village in the north of Wuxiang, was introduced to Yang Longbi from the New City of Pingshun Village in February 1955 by the neighbor, Wang Xiang. The two sides had met once but were not familiar with each other. Subsequently, on March 29 of the same year, they got married. Concerning the dowry, the man's side did not present anything to the woman's family. Instead, the woman's family provided ten sets of clothes and two pairs of bedding. Initially unacquainted, the man began mistreating the woman immediately after marriage, frequently resorting to physical abuse. This behavior commenced as early as the third day. In the divorce judgment, the woman received 880 square meters of land, 130 kilograms of millet, and 120 kilograms of rice (Wang Jinhua, 1956).

Based on these two cases and previous research findings, it is possible to characterize their marriage features:

2.1 Advocacy for Marital Freedom

Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Marriage Law was promulgated, advocating that marriage should be based on the voluntary choice of both men and women. No one was permitted to coerce marriage, thereby altering the historical dominance of parental control over marriage decisions (Lv Simian, 2019). Through the cases examined, it is discernible that the introduction between the man and woman was facilitated by acquaintances (not in the traditional sense of a matchmaker). Concerned neighbors or close friends played the role of intermediaries, directly arranging meetings between the man and woman, allowing them to assess whether they felt compatible. Notably, the involvement of the parents in these proceedings was absent, signifying a transition from a parental authoritative role in marital arrangements to a subordinate position. Both men and women emerged as principal decision-makers in their marriages. When both parties expressed a mutual intention to marry, they embarked on marriage, with minimal interference from their parents. The ultimate decision-making authority regarding marriage lay entirely within the hands of the men and women involved.

2.2 Simplified Marriage Procedure

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the marriage procedure in our country underwent simplification. Once the man and woman found mutual affinity, the man would proceed to propose formally. Subsequently, they would visit the Civil Affairs Bureau to obtain a marriage certificate, signifying the legal union of the couple, thereby ensuring that their marital rights and interests received acknowledgment and protection from the state. Simultaneously, wedding ceremonies were also simplified, transitioning away from the elaborate customs of the past, such as the ceremonial eight-carriage procession and the ritual of bowing to the heavens and earth three times, to adopt a more contemporary approach. During the wedding, the newlyweds paid respects to Chairman Mao as a gesture of respect. Speeches were delivered by elder family members or village officials, offering blessings to the newlyweds. Through the reforms in the institution of marriage, the ultimate recognition and validation of a marital union by the law and the state culminated in the acquisition of a marriage certificate.

3. Influence

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the promulgation of the "Marriage Law" aimed to emancipate women from the constraints of marriage, safeguard the interests of women and children, ensure equal cooperation and mutual love and assistance between spouses, and foster relationships that strive for common endeavors. Simultaneously, it also took into account the rights of men, parents, and various other aspects (Zhang Zhirang, 2019). During this period, China was undergoing land reforms, enabling women to acquire land ownership and breaking the traditional notion of prioritizing men over women due to economic changes. Women were actively involved in agricultural labor, participating alongside men in fieldwork. Additionally, night schools were established across the country, providing women the opportunity to pursue education, acquire literacy, broaden their knowledge, and transform their traditional beliefs. These transformative changes presented significant opportunities and robust safeguards for the implementation of the "Marriage Law." Following the enactment of the law, it significantly favored women's rights, propelled socio-economic progress, and underscored the pivotal role played by the Communist Party of China in this transformative process.

3.1 The autonomy in marriage

The transfer of the authority in marriage from parents to the parties involved indicates a significant shift, underscoring the robust execution of the Marriage Law after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, rather than mere superficial changes. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, there was widespread publicity and education on the Marriage Law, with ongoing campaigns promoting its understanding, deeply embedding its principles within society. The cases also reveal a diminished parental influence in marriages compared to the pre-revolution era (Fei Xiaotong, 2020). The criteria of 'matching socio-cultural backgrounds to ensure compatibility and easy adjustment' have also evolved, signifying the Marriage Law's deep integration into the public consciousness. This demonstrates that the Marriage Law has resonated with the populace and the Communist Party of China has been dedicated to the welfare of the people by emancipating women from marital constraints, encouraging their participation in labor, and fostering improved economic development in the country.

3.2 Marriage Establishment and Dissolution

During the old societal framework, the establishment of marital bonds between men and women typically entailed numerous procedures, witnessed by relatives and friends, affirming the legitimacy of the newlyweds, thereby formalizing their marital status. However, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, especially the promulgation of the Marriage Law in 1950, the process underwent a substantial transformation. Couples now only require registration at the Civil Affairs Bureau to be recognized as legal spouses, receiving acknowledgment and protection from the state. The customary engagements and wedding ceremonies no longer serve as mandatory procedures for marriage. Moreover, during the registration process, both parties are queried regarding their willingness to marry, ensuring that the decision is based on their personal volition and not imposed by external influences. This modification has conferred upon women autonomy in marriage, curtailing instances of male coercion in the marriage institution, thereby safeguarding the freedom of romantic choice within marriages.

3.3 The change in the status of marital relationships led to equal power between both spouses

The change in the status of the marital relationship brought about equality between spouses, a significant departure from the traditional societal norm of male dominance and female subordination. The 1950 Marriage Law explicitly stipulated that spouses are companions in shared life, enjoying equal status within the household. Both partners were granted the freedom to choose professions, engage in social activities, and wield equal rights in managing family assets. Additionally, women's involvement in labor for socialist production and their participation in night schools to acquire cultural knowledge expanded their horizons and empowered them to independently sustain themselves, no longer reliant on men as subordinates. Consequently, both husband and wife attained a foundational state of equality within the legal framework and in their everyday lives.

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