

The marriage dilemma of involuntary bachelors: the case of China

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Abstract

Involuntary bachelorhood, or what might be called enforced male celibacy, is not uncommon in patrilineal societies (Knight, 1995; Kaur, 2008). This paper analyzes the marriage dilemma of involuntary bachelors in a universal-marriage society, arguably the issue that has not been well addressed. Both historically and today, China has been regarded as an all-marriage society. This universal-marriage tradition is said to be logically linked to a strong partilineal family system, which leads to widespread preference for sons and discrimination on daughters (Andors, 1983; Jaschok and Miers, 1994; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Skinner, 2002). Nonetheless, the universal-marriage practice does not mean that men and women play an identical role and experience same barriers in the marriage market. There are a considerable number of men who fail to secure brides but have little prospects of marriage, even though they are much older than the custom-defined “ideal” age of marriage and have a strong desire to get married as soon as possible (Billari et. al., 2002; Jones, 2010).

Those enforced bachelors face a dilemma in marriage. For them, marriage means a blend of the necessity and predicament. They are already much older than the “right” age to get married but still cannot secure brides. In a country where marriage is the norm, enforced male celibacy is regarded solemnly as a symptom of the failure in the man’s life course and receives a low level of social acceptance. They have fretted over meeting their marriage anticipation. Apprehensibly, those unmarried men encounter many daunting challenges from the Chinese marriage market, which is historically featured by the tradition of women marrying up and is now characterized by the abnormally high sex ratio at birth that leads to a shortage of available women. Even so, they never give up their efforts and still invest a substantial portion of their limited survival resources for wife-searching. Despite they are eager to terminate their bachelorhood, they are not capable of attracting brides and are forced to stay single.

They remain marginalized in the marriage market.

A body of the literature argues that the causation of Chinese involuntary bachelors at a macro level is often speculatively related to the abnormally high sex ratio at birth, arguably a side effect of Chinese one-child family planning policy, which results in a profound phenomenon of “missing girls” (Das Gupta and Li, 1999; Banister, 2004; Bossen, 2005; 2006; Poston and Morrison, 2005; Poston and Glover, 2005; Poston and Zhang, 2009; Ebenstein and Sharygin, 2009; Das Gupta et al., 2010). That is, involuntary bachelorhood results mainly from decreasing numbers of marriageable females. Extending those studies, this paper aims to deepen understanding of the marriage dilemma of involuntary bachelorhood in China from an inequality perspective. In addition to its logical link to relations of reproduction and kinship organization, marriage is also intimately and inevitably connected to social and economic hierarchies (Cohen, 1974; 1990; Watson and Ebrey, 1991; Blossfeld and Timm, 2003; Gould and Paserman, 2003). Theories of marital and family economics have paid attention to the impact of characteristics-based inequalities on gendered difference in marriage rates. Becker’s (1973; 1974) theory of marriage articulates that the gain to a man and women from marriage compared to remaining single is positively related to individuals’ incomes, human capital, and income gaps. Bernard (1982) argues that less educated and lower earning men will be less likely to find appropriate wives, as it is normative for women to marry-up with respect to education, income, and other characteristics. Oppenheimer (1988; 2000) observes that those men who are less competitive in the labor market have the most trouble transforming their bachelor status. Similarly, Wilson and Neckerman’s work (1987) provides evidence that the poor economic prospects of young Black men are responsible for older ages at first marriage and lower marriage rates for urban Blacks. These studies suggest that perhaps a more comprehensive explanation of involuntary bachelorhood should consider effects of a variety of inequality.

Inequalities of many sorts, such as unequal accesses to opportunities and state-sponsored welfare system, long characterize Chinese society and increase recently, as China’s economy and polity have undergone enormous transformation. Inequality can both impact and be impacted by marriage, given the multiple functions of marriage. Marriage is not merely a precondition for the formation of a family. Functionally, marriage both reinforces and is reinforced by forms and relations of economic and social inequalities (Blossfeld and Timm, 2003). The marital relationship (regardless of hypergamy or hypogamy), in effect, involves reallocation of property, status, entitlements and obligations among families, usually in different ways for men and women. In many cases and in the Chinese context of “women as property”, people are not paired and couples are not married simply on the ground of love (Watson and Ebrey, 1991). In her study on the transformation of marriage, Coontz (2005) argues that marriage is primarily and always an economic and political transaction that has little to do with love or the expectation of happiness. In this sense, matters of marriage become part of the system of social reproduction in which class

stratification and inequality are restructured among genders and among generations (Goody, 1976). Treating the mate-selection process as similar as commodity exchange, Lavelly's work (1991) views mate selection in China under rural collectivism as largely explicable in market aspects, i.e. maximize marriage benefits after weighing both tangible and intangible pros and cons in market terms. His finding implies the disadvantages of underclass males in the marriage market. Fong's study (2002) shows that women enjoy several advantages in the marriage market resulted from the demographic pattern produced by the one-child policy. The reallocation function of marriage means that involuntary bachelorhood not only represents a personal failure to attract a bride but also is closely bound up with inequality. Drawing from those scholarship, this paper argues that enforced bachelors, an inferior class at the bottom echelon of the social hierarchy, can be interpreted as the victim of intensifying inequality.

The empirical materials of this research are generated from several national social and demographic surveys and in-depth interviews with enforced bachelors. The surveys include the Annual Chinese General Social Surveys from 2003 to 2008, the Third, Fourth and Fifth Population Censuses. The in-depth interviews were conducted by the authors in August 2010. Based on those materials, this paper contextualizes the marriage dilemma of involuntary bachelorhood into transforming and increasing inequality that associates with China's changing socioeconomic landscape, and be explored through the investigation of following questions. Why are some males marginalized in or excluded from the marriage market? What are strategies that adult bachelors and their families employ in response to their marginalized position in the marriage market when they face the stress of a low level of social acceptance for enforced bachelorhood? What is the motivation that those bachelors are keen to terminate their bachelorhood as soon as possible even they have been marginalized in the competitive marriage market?

The paper is structured as follows. Theoretical theses of involuntary bachelorhood are reviewed first, with the focus on the Chinese context. The review serves as a theoretical frame that guides empirical analysis later. This is followed by an analysis of the marriage dilemma of enforced bachelors. The analysis begins a depiction of the marginalized status and the harsh experience of those bachelors in the marriage market. The depiction will suggest why some people are more prone to failure in the marriage market than others. The stresses that the bachelorhood identity creates and the strategies that old bachelors and their families used for securing a bride are also discussed. We will elaborate how the factors affecting involuntary bachelorhood discussed in the literature can be closely linked to inequality in different forms and various scales, and why enforced bachelors eager to change their bachelorhood identity. Finally, theoretical and policy implications are drawn from empirical analyses.

Our study extends the previous study in three significant ways. First, we use the

notion of the marriage dilemma that incorporates several pertinent, interacted issues of involuntary bachelorhood (such as causes, consequences, and the level of social acceptance) which are fragmentarily analyzed in separate studies. Second, we take an inequality perspective to broaden the theoretical context of involuntary bachelorhood. Third, we examine socioeconomic processes underlying the marginalized status of involuntary bachelors.

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