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Full title: Bride Price in China: The Obstacle to
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Short title: Bride Price in China

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Abstract

Throughout Chinese history, the country's patrilineal family system has led to the practice of paying for brides, a social phenomenon closely related to the issue of surplus males in China. This article attempts to analyze the fluctuations in bride prices over the last fifty years, and at the same time investigate the two vicious cycles involving 'bare branches' and the ways in which they find money to pay a bride price. The following points are concluded:

1. The prevalence of paying a bride price is closely related to China's shortage of females. Due to the difficulty involved in finding a wife, bride prices have consistently risen since the 1980s.
2. Males in poor rural areas are afflicted by two vicious cycles. The first is the "poor—bare branch—poorer" cycle. Specifically, poverty prevents them from finding a spouse; this effectively turns them into bare branches, after which they become even poorer. The second is the "inability to pay the bride price—bare branch—need to pay a higher bride price" cycle. Unable to pay a bride price because they are poor, they are forced to postpone getting married to save enough money. After they become bare branches, they find themselves in a more disadvantaged position, and as a result must pay a higher bride price when seeking a wife.
3. In order to pay a bride price, many families are forced to scrimp and save for decades, to borrow money or to take out other types of loans. In extreme circumstances, they will even resort to obtaining money illegally in order to pay a bride price.

BACKGROUND

A bride price is the amount of money or goods paid by the groom or his family to the parents of a woman upon the marriage of their daughter to the groom; it reflects a cultural value. Worldwide, the payment of a bride price is widely practiced, especially in those areas where patrilineal systems and patrilocal marriage dominate. The bride price occupies a central role in marital customs, and is a reflection of unilineal descent groups (Goody, 1973; Harrell and Dickey, 1985).

China is a typical patrilineal society with a patrilocal marriage system. Ever since the Zhou Dynasty, bride prices have been an indispensable part of marriage. From that period on, the role and function of the bride price has never weakened (Gao, 2006). Having paid the bride price indicates the formal establishment of engagement; otherwise, the marriage will not take place (Hicks and Gwynne, 1994).

The prevalence of bride price in China is closely related to the surplus of males and the lack of females (Caldwell et al., 1983; Chen, 2004). In the marriage market, the side of oversupply will compete for marriage at a cost. In India, even some studies show that the female marriage squeeze can not yield dowry inflation and the fact of females outnumbering males is not a promising explanation for the observed increase in dowry payment (Anderson, 2007), more studies have proved that the female marriage squeeze is responsible for increasing dowries (payment from the bride's family to the groom) (Billig, 1992; Bhat and Halli, 1999). In China, females are in the situation where demand exceeds supply, such that females have a clear advantage in sexual and emotional resources, along with priority in choosing whom to marry (Lv, 2006). As for women in rural areas, economic factors rank first among the factors they value in choosing a spouse. With the view to enhancing their possibilities of marriage in the marriage market, males must pay a greater economic or socio-political price, of which bride price is the most important kind. The competition of males fighting for scarce females drives up the amount of the bride price (Becker, 1991). In many places, the bride price skyrockets, owing to the fact that it is more and more difficult for men

to find a wife (Mo, 2005; Yan, 2005).

Since the economic revaluation, marriage expenses have been increasing rapidly (Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2006), and a great portion of these expenses are directly related to the bride price. The payment of a bride price has become a heavy economic burden for farmers (Wu and Jin, 2007). Whether or not a man can find a spouse is largely determined by his family's economic condition. Although deformity and disrepute can be counted as reasons for being unable to marry, for most men, poverty is the main obstacle to marriage (Zhang, 2006). Because of poverty, many males cannot get married, so they remain single for a long time, and end up as 'bare branches'.

'Bare branches' are those men who are over a certain age but, involuntarily, have been unable to find a spouse to get married, and thus have no wife and children, like a bare branch without leaves (Jiang and Li, 2009). A preference for sons and discrimination against daughters has long existed in China, which has resulted in an imbalance in the population's sex structure: in other words, a surplus of males. In the 1982 census, China's sex ratio at birth was 108.5, rising to 111.3 in the 1990 census, and worsening to 116.9 in the 2000 census. Though some optimistic studies indicate that the sex ratio at birth in China has begun to decline (Das Gupta et al., 2009; Guilimoto, 2009), the 2010 census shows a sex ratio at birth of 118.6, an increase compared with the 116.9 from the 2000 census. When imbalanced cohorts enter the marriage market, especially after the year 2010, Chinese males will continue to undergo a severe marriage squeeze that will last for decades; by the year 2020, 12% to 15% of young adult males will be bare branches (Jiang et al., 2007). At the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, a bare branch class has developed with a population between 40 and 50 million (Chen, 2006). With women choosing to migrate in order to make a better marriage, surplus males, known as bare branches, are more concentrated in poverty-stricken areas, where they form a bare branch class, leading to the so-called bare branch villages, which are often reported in the media (Jiang et al., 2011).

At present, the phenomenon of bare branches in China is attracting extensive

attention (Hudson and den Boer, 2004; Mo, 2005; Poston and Morrison, 2005; Jiang et al., 2011). However, most of the relevant research has been focused on calculating how many bare branches there are, or on the analysis of the potential threat they may pose for Chinese society. On the other hand, little has been done from the perspective of bride price, such as the influence of China's changing bride prices on the marriage possibilities of bare branches, or the ways in which bare branches obtain the funds to pay a bride price.

It is clear that China's surplus male population leads to a large number of bare branches. Given this background, this article analyzes the changes in bride prices in China, explains the difficulties in finding a wife encountered by bare branches caused by high bride prices and illustrates the ways in which bare branches acquire the bride price, on the basis of related literature. The data used in the article are mainly second hand data found in existing literature. Due to the importance of bride prices in China's rural marriages, literature on this subject abounds. This information was obtained from scholarly fieldwork and surveys, and as such can be deemed reliable.

The article includes four sections. The first section reviews changing tendencies in bride prices over the last five decades in the rural areas of China. In the second section, two vicious cycles involving bare branches are examined. One cycle begins with poverty, which leads to bachelorhood or bare branch status, in which case being a bare branch results in greater poverty; the other cycle involves males ending up as bare branches because they can not afford a bride price, then, if they want to escape their bare branch status and get married, they have to pay a higher bride price. The third section analyzes the bare branches' families' means for paying a bride price. The last section will serve to provide conclusions to the material presented.

CHANGES IN BRIDE PRICE

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, various political movements have been carried out to fight against the feudal convention of bride prices

(Parish and Whyte 1978; Croll, 1981). However, women's value has been steadily increasing, such that the groom's family must offer compensation to the bride's family. Therefore, bride price not only exists, but also undergoes great changes (Yan, 2005).

At present, bride prices in China include money and goods (Yan, 2005). A bride price is classified into a formal part and an informal part. The formal bride price refers to the part given during the formal engagement ceremony. Generally, the form of this bride price is unified and fixed, but varies from region to region. The amount of the formal portion is larger, including money and goods given to the bride by the groom, and symbolizes the establishment of formal engagement. The informal bride price is in addition to the formal bride price, and is given voluntarily by the groom's family or by the groom himself during the engagement procedure, sometimes just before or after the formal engagement ceremony (He, 2006).

By the mid 1980s, the marriage expenses of rural Chinese families had increased to several thousand Yuan or over ten thousand Yuan RMB. By the beginning of the 1990s, with the increase of farmers' income and the improvement of their standard of living, marriage expenses for rural young people rose continuously, on average by tens of thousands of Yuan RMB (Wu and Jin, 2007). In the more developed areas of China, this amount may not seem excessively high, but as China's bare branches are mainly from the lowest class of society in underdeveloped areas, obtaining money to pay a bride price has become a major economic burden on farmers in many areas (Wu and Jin, 2007).

In recent decades, bride prices have been steadily on the rise. Table 1 shows the increasing trend of bride prices over the past five decades in the village of Xiajia, in Heilongjiang Province, in northeast China. In 1998, Xiajia village consisted of 381 households. It was reported to the upper administrative unit that the annual net income per capita was 2,700 Yuan, but even the village cadre himself admitted that this number was exaggerated (Yan, 2003).

Table 1: Trends in Bride Prices in Xiajia Village, Heilongjiang Province, China
(1950-1999)

Year	Amount (Yuan)
1950-54	200
1955-59	280
1960-64	470
1965-69	740
1970-74	970
1975-79	1,700
1980-84	2,700
1985-89	7,300
1990-94	11,200
1995-99	28,500

Source: Yan (2003)

Without considering inflation, bride prices in the northern Chinese village of Xiajia have increased by 140 times, from 200 Yuan (US\$30) in the early 1950s to 28,500 Yuan RMB (US\$4,300) by the end of the 1990s.

According to the field work carried out in 2001 and 2002 by Sun (2005) in a mountainous village in the eastern part of Gansu Province, bride prices have increased 70 times over three decades, as indicated in Table 2. The soaring bride price stands in stark contrast to the local economy. The mountainous village consists of 45 households; the villagers' main source of income comes from agriculture, part-time jobs during slack farming seasons, and from raising pigs. Because of geographical and economic disadvantages, local farmers' annual net income per capita was 700 Yuan RMB (\$105) in the year 2000. Therefore, bride prices in the late 1990s were equivalent to a farmer's net income over 20 years.

Table 2: The Trend in Bride Prices in Zhaocun Village, Gansu Province (1960s-1990s)

Time Period	Bride price (including money and goods)	Number of cases
1960s	228	4
1970s	549	3
1980s	2,069	7
Middle of 1990s	6,320	3
End of 1990s	15,720	4

Note: The bride prices cited herein are shown as an average of the cases cited.

Source: Sun (2005)

Some scholars would argue that nowadays, bride prices in China are to a large extent financial support for newlyweds to begin their new family (Yan, 2003). However, in many regions, particularly underdeveloped ones, bride prices are still controlled by the bride's parents; hence, a higher bride price often benefits the natal parents instead of the bride. The bride price is partly used to subsidize the dowry, but the bride's parents can decide how much to retain to meet other family needs (He, 2006; Li et al., 2006).

In Chinese marital procedure, the payment of a bride price is obligatory (Zhou, 2006). As a marriage criterion, it becomes an indispensable component in the local marriage cultural pattern and is generally accepted by the farmers. In a male-dominated society, bride prices are still a symbol of value and dignity (Hicks and Gwynne, 1995). In some places, spousal selection in the marriage market is parallel to a trading market: the parents of both sides bargain over their children's marriage (He, 2006). The negotiation of the bride price itself is a process of bargaining and a battle of wits and courage. The negotiating results are a compromise based on both sides' expected marriage cost and benefits. The bride's parents do their best to strive for a high price, which usually drives the groom's parents into taking on heavy debts (Mulder, 1995).

TWO VICIOUS CYCLES

The phenomenon of bare branches in China is caused mainly by poverty, which makes paying a bride price impossible. The result is bachelorhood, which tends to mean that they are trapped in even more severe poverty (Mo, 2005). To make matters worse, once they are older, they are in an even more disadvantaged position; at that time, if they want to get married, they must pay an even higher bride price. In many places in China, bare branches currently must face both of these vicious cycles.

Cycle 1: “Poor - Bare branch - Poorer”

A. Poor - Bare branch

There is a Chinese tradition that females change their fortune by marriage, and indeed families tend to find their daughters husbands who enjoy a higher social status. Families who seek to escape poverty by means of their daughter’s marriage are also willing to marry their daughters to men from more developed areas, in order to obtain a higher bride price (Davín, 2005). Young women in many impoverished rural areas frequently migrate from underdeveloped rural areas to richer places, from the remote rural areas in the west to the economically developed countryside in the east. Many young women who leave their impoverished hometowns are not willing to marry a young man in their hometown, and hence the young female population is further reduced by out-of-area marriage. This population migration results in difficulties in spouse selection for local young males. Therefore, the phenomenon of the ‘marriage squeeze’ is highly centralized in a few poor and undeveloped areas. When females are in shortage, poorer men cannot find a spouse; thus, poor people suffer from the shortage of females (Das Gupta and Li, 1999; Chen, 2004).

According to some surveys, villages with a high concentration of bare branches are usually located in mountainous areas. Such villages are poor; their farm production relies on manual labor and their agricultural output relies on climate. Their income is low, such that they cannot provide substantial economic support for their young sons’

marriages. Due to mostly geographical and topographical reasons, an undeveloped economy and inconvenient communication and transportation, poor living conditions become a defining feature of such villages (Jiang and Li, 2009).

Case 1: A Bare Branch Village in the Qinling Mountain

The village of Baoshi, in Guanpinghe Township, Zhengnan County, is in the hinterland of Qinlin Mountain, Shaanxi Province. Six groups of villagers, comprising 257 households, are scattered throughout several mountain valleys. Altogether, there are 1,013 people in the village, including 87 bare branches over 35 years of age. The villagers' annual income per capita is around 700 Yuan RMB (just over \$105). As a result of economic poverty and a backward ideology, most of the local young girls leave the village. Some leave for cities, find work, and never come back. Some boys find girlfriends while working outside the village, but when they bring them back to the village, the girls leave after staying for just a few days. It is said that not even widows from other villages are willing to marry into Baoshi Village. Of all the 26 households living in Majia Valley, 13 are bare branch families. Liu Mingxi, 46 years old, is the elder brother of his family; he has three brothers. He pointed to a line of rooms in the front, saying, "This is my second brother's room, and that is my third brother's. My first brother and my ageing mother live in two rooms in the east. The family was divided long time ago. All my brothers received no education and have no wife." (Hu, 2002)

If we measure the economic status with educational attainment, we can see that in the early 1980s, only 0.5 percent of college educated men were unmarried in their forties, but the percentage among the illiterate was 15 percent; in 1990, among poverty-stricken farmers 19 percent of 40 year-old-men were still single. By 2000, among men whose education was elementary school or less, 44.8 percent of men were unmarried by age 30 (Wang and Mason, 2006). Females are able to marry men whose socioeconomic status is higher than theirs, and the men not be able to find a wife are from the lowest socio-economic strata (Hesketh and Zhu, 2006).

B. Bare branch-Poorer

Bare branches, as we have seen, belong to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. They have little or no education, and they have no women to take care of them. They are depressed, discriminated against by others, and their economic conditions are poor. As a result, bare branches generally have no goals to pursue. They spend their earnings smoking, drinking, and gambling, even on prostitutes and illegal drugs. Without families of their own to take care of, they have no responsibilities and no motivation to earn more money, which effectively translates into a waste of human resources, and harms productivity (Yu, 2007). They shoulder heavy physical and psychological pressure. Even if they reluctantly take part in production, their aim is merely to earn their daily bread. Being unable to marry acts as a disincentive to working harder; furthermore, they have no motivation to accumulate wealth, and this in turn impoverishes them (Zhu, 2008)

Generally speaking, bare branches lack life goals and motivations; they have no plan to regulate their consumption. A survey conducted in Henan, Hebei, Shaanxi and Jilin provinces shows, since bare branches have no family and no children, they have no pressure and no responsibility. Moreover, they do not take part in farming, and in many cases will eventually sell the land and idle away the day by drinking or fishing (Mo, 2005). Another investigation on bare branches and their social economic effect carried out in 2007 in Henan province, also found bare branches to have no life goals. Since they do not have a complete home, they do not have the motivation and energy to do other work besides farming. As for their parents, they think that bare branches do not need to make any contribution to the family. Although themselves are poor, they have to support their bare branch sons as well. In this way, bare branches have already become a burden to the family (Luo, 2008).

Bare branches are mainly distributed in the backward countryside, where environmental conditions are poor. Furthermore, they generally hold a negative attitude towards life and lose confidence in their future. As a result, they will become the new

poverty group (Mo, 2005).

Cycle 2 “Unable to pay bride price-Bare branch-Pay higher bride price”

A. Unable to pay bride price-Bare branch

The matching between a man and a woman in the marriage market is in many ways similar to that between an employer and an employee in the labor market. Given that the man’s preferences concerning his future wife remain stable, the shortage in the female population of marriageable age will result in an extension of the time it takes for a man to find a spouse. Market limitations, like the imbalanced sex ratio, will increase the matching difficulty and delay the marriage (Oppenheimer, 1988; Lichter, 1990).

According to a survey conducted in the late 1920s and early 1930s involving 143 rural families in Qingyuan County, Shanxi Province, the average age at first marriage for females was 16 years old, and for males 26.2 years old. There were far fewer females than males in Shanxi, which caused difficulties for males to find a spouse, such that males had to delay their marriage (Qiao, 1947).

However, whether a man can get married at a proper age is largely determined by his family’s economic status. Poverty often leads to a late marriage. In the northern part of the Wan Region (now Anhui Province) during the Qing Dynasty, compared with rich households, poor males had to postpone their marriage age by more than six years (Perry, 1980). For the common people of the lower classes, large numbers of them began marrying after reaching thirty, with some marrying at fifty, for economic reasons. Under circumstances where marriage tended to be wealth-oriented, many lower-status men had to delay their marriage mainly due the reason that they could not accumulate enough money to pay the bride price (Guo, 2000).

Nowadays bride price still plays a dominant role in rural areas. Some reports reveal separation of a potential couple due to the young man not having the bride price.

Case 2:

In a village in Heilongjiang province, a beautiful woman, with the family name Bai, had been dating a handsome man from the same village. However, the man's family was poor and couldn't afford the bride price, 40,000 Yuan RMB (more than USD\$6,000). Another young man in a neighboring village was also in love with the same woman. Knowing that the woman was engaged to a man who had yet to pay the bride price, he offered to pay a bride price of 100,000 Yuan RMB (\$15,000). So the woman married the man who paid the higher bride price, even though he was hunchbacked, and in appearance could not even compare to the man from her own village. Now, the handsome young man remains single. His fellow villagers have begun to mock him with lines such as: "the Bai daughter loves money, the hunchbacked boy isn't ugly, and the handsome guy is still lonely" (Qing and Zhou, 2005).

We can see from the case that the two young people were in love. But due to the lack of 40,000 Yuan RMB to pay the bride price, the women married a higher bidder, even though he was at a disadvantage in looks. Marriage possibility and timing depends on one's economic status and income. With solid economic status and high income, young people in rural areas tend to marry earlier, for they have no economic pressures and have felt the pressure of potential marriage competition, whereas, a decreased or low income will delay the marriage (Ye, 1995; Jiang and Li, 2009). In rural areas, since farming income is quite limited, most families earn the bride price by working part-time in cities. But by the time they accumulate enough money, the son has become a bare branch (Zhuang and Li, 2005).

B. Bare branch-Pay a higher bride price

Marriage and family are the results of a rational resource exchange by the two parties; the resources to be used for exchange are varied (Sun, 2005). People tend to pursue a psychological balance, and the process of spouse selection is no exception. No matter whether they are male or female, people will have an overall estimation

about their potential future spouse before they make the final decision (Sun and Tong, 2003). In India, in order to marry up into a high caste family, one woman has to pay a large amount dowry. The higher status the groom is, the more dowry the bride pays (Bhat and Halli, 1999). In China, bare branches are generally in a disadvantaged position in terms of education, personal characteristics, and social status. If one is lacking a certain resource, they need to make it up by providing another kind of resource. The bride price has a substitution effect over other resources. If the amount of other resources is fixed, the comparatively disadvantaged side can make up for his disadvantage by increasing the value of the bride price, so that a comparatively balanced state is reached. According to the current marital *status quo* in China, the substitution effect of the bride price or trousseau exists objectively (Sun and Tong, 2003). The amount of bride price the female side requires depends largely on individual characteristics such as level of education, career and economic background. The more impoverished the male side is, the higher the bride price the female side requires (Han and Eades, 1995).

Case 3:

There are 1,243 people in village Z. There are 31 males aged between 26 and 35 who are unmarried, as well as 8 males aged over 35. Director Zheng of the Women's Federation in Z village said, "It is more and more difficult for a rural young man to find a spouse. Local young women go to work in the cities and get married when they meet the right man. Young women nowadays have high requirements for men: men need to have the ability to make money, and their family background is also important. Most rural young men make their living by farming in the field; they hardly make any money, so that they can't meet these requirements. Consequently, we have to try our best to introduce local young men to women in other places. However, the expense is quite high. The man's parents will meet any demands of the woman's parents; there are no parents in the world that can bear to see their son being single for his entire life." (He, 2006)

When females are scarce, males will try their best to increase their chance to marry. One way is to give a sum of money or transfer some goods to the female part as earnest money, which actually is the bride price. Since it is easier for the man to be able to provide a higher bride price to win a wife, the spouse-seeking competition between men forces up the amount of the bride price (Becker, 1991). Because of the shortage of female, women have more controlling rights. The male side is usually in a passive position, and men will try their best to meet female demands, which if they go beyond their abilities (Sun, 2005; Sun, 2006).

If a man can not pay a high enough bride price, and has no other resource to be used for exchange, he has to lower his requirement for his future spouse. Many bare branches, at the bottom of social hierarchy and at a severe disadvantage, have no preference for their spouse. They either remain single or lower their standard to marry women with disabilities, either physical or mental (Chen, 2004). According to a bare branch's mother, so long as the bride is a woman, no matter if she is crippled, blind, lame, and is willing to live with his son, the mother will take her with no requirement (Mo, 2005). In this case, the bare branch has to lower his standard to such a low level that he does not have enough resources to exchange.

WAYS TO EARN A BRIDE PRICE

Presently, the following methods are employed to earn a bride price in China's rural areas.

A. To scrimp and save

The marriage expenses of rural youth are high. From the first meeting, engagement, paying the bride price, determining the marriage date, until the wedding ceremony, every step costs several hundred or thousand Yuan RMB, which becomes a heavy economic burden on farmers (Li et al., 2006).

A family's own income is the main source for the bride price. In some places, for the purpose of seeking a wife, youngsters leave the village and work to save money

when they are fourteen or fifteen years old (Li et al., 2006). Having graduated from middle school, rural adolescents go to Shenzhen or Shanghai and work there. In the period from sixteen to twenty-two years old, they can support themselves and save some money for their parents. However, no single man can earn enough money for the marriage all by himself, such that young men still have to rely on their parents (Gao, 2006). For a family whose income entirely relies on their agricultural output, parents need to scrimp and save for decades to accumulate enough money for their son's marriage (Qing and Zhou, 2005; Li et al., 2006).

The most important responsibility for Chinese parents is to carry on the family line, playing different roles in different life stages so as to become a complete person. As parents, saving for their children's marriage is not only a life responsibility but also a social norm. A typical rural family struggles for many years to save for their son's wedding, but the parents hardly spend any money in their daily life (Li et al., 2006). Chinese parents with a son raise their savings in a competitive manner in order to improve their son's relative attractiveness for marriage. The high savings rate by households with a son may also spill over to other households through higher housing prices (Wei and Zhang, 2011). High marriage expenses in rural areas increase the burden on the farmer and wastes social resources. The consumption of luxury goods for the wedding, the building of a decent home for a potential family division of the son from his parents, at the cost of heavy debt, will make the family cut back on the investment in agricultural and sideline production (Ge, 2010).

B. To take a loan

Besides the family's own income, borrowed money from a bank or individuals is the second main source. In order to pay the bride price, many families have to borrow money and consequently go into debt.

Also according to the field work carried out by Sun (2005), compared with their annual net income per capita of 700 Yuan RMB (\$105) in 2000, the amount of the loan

for bride price is exorbitant (See Table 3).

Table 3 Farmers' Bride Price Loans in Zhaocun Village, Gansu Province, China

Farmer	Farmer A	Farmer B	Farmer C	Farmer D	Farmer E	Farmer F
Loan from banks	19000	10400	2000	-	4200	8000
Money Borrowed from individuals	-	-	4000	4800	4000	2400
Years of annual net income per capita	27.1	14.9	8.6	6.9	11.7	14.9

Source: Sun (2005)

The amount in Table 3 is for almost ten years ago. Recently with the imbalanced sex ratio, the bride price has been increasing rapidly, to 100,000 RMB according to a survey, even in those not so wealthy areas, as the competition for marriage is becoming more intense (Ge, 2010). In some places, a son's marriage is similar to a huge consumption, encouraged by contemporary society. This expense of a marriage is not only related to the reputation of a family in a village, but also affects the status of the family in the village, so it creates phenomenon of comparing one family to another, regardless of one's *status quo* (Luo, 2008; Ge, 2010). Even if the family does not have the money, they can borrow from relatives or friends or a bank (Gao, 2006). But in order to collect the huge sums of money required to cover the expenses related to the marriage, comparatively poor rural males also face similar borrowing difficulties. When they borrow from banks, they say it is to make an investment, because the dowry is not exactly a proper reason; and sometimes they have to bribe those in charge of loans at a bank with gifts or money. The greater the wedding expenses are, the more difficult it is to take out sufficient loans, and the harder it is for a bare branch to get married (Luo, 2008). If they borrow from individuals, the repayment or interest rates depend on their personal relationship. Some loans from close relatives may be interest free, but more often is usury with a very high annual interest rate (Sun, 2005; Ge, 2010).

C. Committing crime

High bride price also brings unstable factors into society. Some young people make money illegally in order to pay a bride price or to meet the demands imposed by the bride's family. In recent years, reports of committing crimes, including murder, robbery, and stealing for money to pay a bride price often appear in the media.

Case 4 Robbing and Kidnapping to pay a bride price

In January 2011, a young man in Hengshui county from the Hebei province robbed a young university students couple on their way to bank. The robber only got 6 to 7 Yuan so he kidnapped the female student and asked the male student to pay 50,000 Yuan as ransom. After being caught, the kidnapper said that he had been asked to pay 100,000 Yuan to marry his girl friend by his would-be father in law, so he robbed and kidnapped to get enough money (Liu, 2011).

Bride price is just one pursuit of bare branches. Bare branches, already at a disadvantage and having little stake in the generally accepted system, may be readily inclined to take collective action to improve their own situation and status, with violence and crimes if necessary (Hudson and den Boer, 2004). Recently with more and more bare branch villages being reported, surplus males are more concentrated in poor areas where they form a "bare branch class", whose existence and growth may endanger social stability (Jiang and Li, 2009).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

With a surplus male population in the 20th century, paying a bride price is prevalent throughout China. In addition, because of the shortage of females, the practice of paying a bride price will continue to prevail. Since economic reforms were introduced, marriage expenses have been increasing rapidly in Chinese rural areas. The amount of the bride price has skyrocketed by dozens or even hundreds of times in recent decades. The current bride price can account for the total sum of a family's net income over an entire decade or several decades, which brings a heavy burden to bear on the family.

As for rural females, the primary factor in their spouse selection is economics.

Whether a man can get married at a proper age is largely determined by his economic status. Thus, a man's poverty leads to the ultimate failure of his spouse selection, resulting in long-term bachelorhood. Due to the geographical distribution of poverty and females' marriage migration, bare branch villages appear in many places (Jiang et al., 2011). As bare branches often lack a sense of responsibility, and do not take an active part in production, they become poorer. When bare branches band together and form a bare branch village, the resulting stagnation in farming output influences the economy and production there, such that these areas are poorer.

As an indispensable element of marriage, paying a bride price has become the biggest obstacle for bare branches to get married. As we have said, many males are forced to postpone their marriage, being unable to raise enough money for the bride price. However, when they are older than the average marital age and are hence classified as bare branches, they are demoted to an even more disadvantaged place in the marriage market. If they wish to marry under such conditions, they are required to pay a higher bride price. As a result of the long-standing shortage of females, and the limitations caused by economic conditions in the marriage market, many males are left single, and may turn to other forms of marriage outside the main-stream marriage system. Many abnormal forms of marriage, such as child brides, abducted wives and polyandry have started to appear recently (Liu, 2003). 'Exchange' marriages (Huanhun) and 'mercenary' marriages (Maimai Hunyin) have also re-emerged and the incidence have increased. Huanhun serves as an alternative to meeting marriage expenses for the poorest families (Zhang, 2000). Maimai Hunyin (married a trafficked woman) cost less than marrying a local bride, so some young men turn to this form of marriage in order to cut down the marriage expense (Zhao, 2003). Still there are increasing reports of fraudulent marriage, seeking to get a high bride price and then the bride escaping. In one county of Inner Mongolia, there were over 200 cases of such marriages during 2000 to 2004, causing not only financial loss, but occasional killings (Jiang and Li, 2009).

Many families start to scrimp and save as soon as a son is born, and continue to save for decades to collect a sufficient bride price, while their sons go to work in cities at the age of fourteen or fifteen. This not only affects the family's life and production, but also brings heavy mental burdens. Even in this way, many families simply cannot afford the bride price demanded of them. In many cases, they have to borrow from others or take loans, the value of which may equal the total amount of their net income over ten or twenty years. Under extreme circumstances, people take risks and attempt to obtain the bride price in illegal ways. In today's China, the problem of female shortage is quite marked; it is very difficult for rural males to find a spouse. Even if they can gather enough money, local girls oftentimes want to marry someone from a rich area (Chen, 2004).

Bachelorhood affects one's physical health, psychology and behavior, and can ruin one's life discipline (Mo, 2005). Bare branches will seek opportunities to marry in various ways, threatening social stability, and the stability of their families and communities, as well as menacing social order. This has become a serious problem that Chinese society, and its government, will sooner or later have to address.

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