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Bride Price and Masculinity in China

BY

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Abstract

This article explores the bride price system in China and its impact on masculinity. Bride price is an important part of the Chinese marriage tradition, resonating with the patriarchal system where men dominate in family, society, and politics(Sangwha 1999). Using web crawler techniques and thematic analysis, the paper analyzes discussions related to bride price on HUPU forums and answers two questions: how Chinese men view bride price and how they display and construct masculinity in the practice of bride price. The study found that bride price is seen as a financial burden, and many men feel unfair. Men should show their economic ability, and maintain their dominance over their wives while conforming to the image of filial sons. Despite the significant economic pressure that bride price puts on men, they still adhere to it in order to maintain patriarchy and the traditional gender order. The bride price controversy reveals the inherent contradictions between the traditional and modern gender order, and how Chinese men construct multidimensional male identities within this contradiction

Key words: bride price; masculinity

Introduction

The bride price in China, consisting of money or gifts from the groom's side to the bride's, is a traditional part of Chinese weddings, representing approval of the marriage and respect between families. Its value and

presentation differ across regions and families. Established in the Western Zhou era, it has continued to evolve until the Qing Dynasty and remains a topic of debate today(LI 2008).

Men and women are arguing about bride price on the Internet. Women seek bride prices as recompense for gender inequities, including disproportionate domestic duties and labor market discrimination like wage gaps and glass ceilings¹. While women perceive this as a remedy to systemic oppression, men argue that progress in women's rights negates the need for such individual compensation.

In public discourse, men are often portrayed as victims of the bride price tradition. For instance, rural China witnesses millions of elderly bachelors unable to afford hefty bride price ², young men forced to break up due to financial constraints³, or women committing fraud by deceiving men through the bride price tradition⁴. In a word, Women extract economic value from men through the bride price.

Bride price not only reveals gender relations within marital relationships but also unveils the competitive relationships among men. Not all men agree that a lower amount of bride price is better. On the contrary, in online communities primarily dominated by male users, HUPU, many men mock those who pay too little bride price, calling them stingy or greedy. In post-socialist China, masculinity is increasingly influenced by capital accumulation, whether in economic, social, or cultural aspects(Song and Hird 2014a). Having more wealth and being generous are considered more masculine. The bride price in China poses economic and

¹ https://www.sohu.com/a/762532696_100160903

² http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-06/15/c_129062433.htm

³ https://m.cyol.com/gb/articles/2023-01/25/content_Pbbg4Vcx9J.html

⁴ https://www.bj148.org/sa1/yasf1/202307/t20230717_1654018.html

social pressures on young men, reinforcing their role as providers and affecting their self-perception of masculinity.

This study intends to engage, observe, discuss, and gather information on the Chinese HUPU forum using internet ethnography and web scraping methods to analyze (1) How do Chinese men view bride price? (2) How do Chinese men demonstrate and build masculinity in the practice of bride price?

Literature Review

Masculinity

Connell identifies four approaches to defining masculinity (Robert William Connell 2020). Essentialism suggests that male traits have a core characteristic that explains men's lives. For instance, initiative was once considered central to masculinity. Positivism posits that masculinity is a summation of contemporary male behaviors and cognition, revealing what men are actually like. Positivism relies on disciplines such as biology, psychology, and sociology to reveal differences between men and women, thereby defining masculinity. Both categorization strategies reveal the traits of masculinity from a static perspective, while normative definitions and semiotic perspectives offer a more dynamic interpretation. Normative definitions consider masculinity as an ideal of what men should be, demanding men to conform to a standard to varying degrees. These norms vary by culture and region. The most widely accepted norm is that of hegemonic masculinity, which reinforces

its authority and prestige by opposing feminine traits and marginalizing other male characteristics, becoming the cultural ideal of masculinity (R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, normative definitions reflect the cultural-political structure's definition of men, lacking the personal level of experience. Lastly, semiotic theories suggest that masculinity is defined as non-femininity and can only be delineated within a binary gender relation.

Tim Edwards posits that the study of masculinity has undergone three waves: from the gender role paradigm to the study of hegemonic masculinity, to research into the normativity and performativity of male gender, and into the third stage that focuses on the cultural, post-structural, and global media's shaping of masculinity (Edwards 2004). In recent years, the definition of masculinity has become increasingly diverse within specific cultures; on the other hand, local diversity is compatible with the uniformity of global hegemonic masculinity. Masculinity is not only socially constructed but also part of the social institution.

Chinese Masculinity

Kam Louie contends that ancient Chinese masculinity was composed of two attributes: Wen and Wu. Wen, translating to 'culture', signifies a man's cultural refinement and is associated with the Confucian scholar-gentleman, highlighting the hierarchical structures of ruler-subject and father-son espoused by Confucius (Louie 2014a). Wu, translatable to 'martial prowess', denotes physical strength and emphasizes

horizontal bonds and mutual identification among men within their community(Louie 2014b). Although the ideal is to possess both qualities, cultural accomplishments are always esteemed above physical prowess since Wen is a marker of power. Traditionally, aside from aristocratic inheritance, the only avenue for men to gain official posts and enter the ruling class was through the civil service examinations, making literary achievements tantamount to a man's societal rank. Although martial examinations were also a path to advancement, their significance paled compared to the imperial examinations. The precedence of Wen over Wu does not imply femininity. Instead, both Wen and Wu's traits were exclusive to men and highlighted mutual recognition among men. Women represented the threat of temptation or loss of control. In other words, Wen and Wu are both traits and mechanisms for creating and validating the hierarchy. Men were ranked based on these two dimensions, with women excluded from this order, positioned at the lowest level.

The post-Mao era's social transformation significantly undermined the legitimacy of Maoist male ideals and traditional Wen/Wu masculinity(Hinsch 2013). With China's opening up since the 1970s, the image of Chinese men has become increasingly diversified. The characteristics of hegemonic masculinity have assimilated aspects of consumerism(Wong 2020), Chinese filial piety(Lui 2021), and patriotism(Hu and Guan 2021), emphasizing the attainment of status, power, and wealth.

Consumerism plays an increasingly significant role in the construction of masculinity. On the one hand, masculinity is more and more defined by monetary means, with the image of a successful businessman

becoming a collective projection. Economic achievements are prioritized, while cultural or political success is downplayed. On the other hand, a more gender-equal, non-patriarchal image of the middle-class gentleman has emerged. Educated, white-collar middle-class men can also be seen as inheritors of Wen's masculinity. Within heterosexual relationships, men adhere to the hierarchical order of the market economy, with economically successful men being more favored by women(Luo 2017). Men are viewed as breadwinners, and shouldering financial responsibilities for the family is their duty. At the same time, a modern man should support marital equality. Considering reality and gender values, most men believe supporting their wives' careers and personal development is necessary and that expressing emotional care for the family is essential. Their understanding of men as providers transcends the notion of merely meeting the family's basic material needs(Liu 2019). However, wives who are highly educated and engaged in professional work are gaining power and status within the family, leading to some men's anxiety as providers(Song and Hird 2014b), masculinity anxiety. Their anxiety stems from the notion that the rise of women's rights implies the decline of male power. Love becomes a highly tense political stage, with many men lamenting that women seek gender equality and independence yet pressure men to economically support them. Progressive domestic men mean navigating the collision between traditional gender expectations and new gender norms.

As a husband, a man balances the relationship with his wife in modern gender value. As a son, a man needs to balance the relationships between his wife, and his parents. Filial piety is part of Wen's traditional

masculinity and remains an important aspect of modern Chinese masculinity. Confucian filial piety requires respecting and providing for one's parents and establishing a complete hierarchy based on blood relations. Filial piety is tightly intertwined with the familial kinship system, composed of two authoritative axes: the intergenerational axis, where elders are superior to the young, and the gender axis, where men are above women. Sons are expected to support their parents, continue the family lineage, and respect family elders and ancestors(Watson 2004). This authority system is built on strict moral norms and an economic system where males inherit family property. Filial piety is severely gendered, with women excluded from the system. In marital relations, filial sons still heed their parents' advice, as marriage in traditional culture is not an individual choice but a family duty(Gui 2017). Therefore, when conflicts between a man's mother and his wife occur, the filial son is expected to support his mother(Lui 2021). Although individualism and egalitarianism have impacted filial piety, factors such as the inheritance of three-generational household structures and housing shortages in urban areas mean parents remain closely involved in their married children's lives, including child-rearing. Parental authority may be weakened, but the characteristics of parents and the family influence young people's choices of dating and marital partners(Blair and Madigan 2019).

With China's opening to the world, the country as a nation is full of masculine anxiety in a globalized world. Faced with a history of foreign aggression, resisting enemies, military violence, and upholding national dignity are manifestations of patriotism and the best stage for displaying masculinity. Nationalism is closely linked

with Chinese masculinity(Song and Hird 2014c). As demonstrated in the famous Chinese patriotic movie 'Wolf Warrior 2', male soldiers represent the national stance, performing hostage rescue missions with their exceptional physical abilities and advanced military equipment. Military action films glorify China's military might and tough soldier image, showcasing violent, confident nationalism(Hu and Guan 2021). The nationalism of masculinity inherits the pursuit of Wu, protecting the interests of the China through political action and personal sacrifice.

Wong summarizes the multi-layered Chinese masculinity as responsible: a true man is responsible to society, his parents, and his family(Wong 2020). However, responsibility is a hegemonic ideal, goal, and fantasy that others respect and desire within a hierarchical system. The ideal masculinity does not exist in any real man. Many are aware that only those with abundant resources and capital can afford to be capable and responsible, and pursuing this ideal brings immense anxiety to men. A man's responsibilities within multiple structures are filled with contradictions. While there is a pursuit of equality and freedom in spousal relationships, there is a quest for traditional hierarchical relations in father-son interactions, causing men to waver between traditional and modern paradigms.

Bride Price in China

Many scholars consider the bride price a form of marriage payment and employ theories of marriage

compensation and marital assistance to explain its origins(Jiang, Zhang, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2015). The theory of marriage compensation emphasizes its economic and emotional implications. Economically, when a woman marries into the groom's family, it adds to their labor force and population, resulting in a loss of labor for the bride's family. Hence, the groom's family compensates the bride's family for the cost of upbringing and the reduction in labor(Jiang, Zhang, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2015). Emotionally, traditional Chinese beliefs consider women as leaving their families to live with their husband's family after marriage. Therefore, the bride price is seen as compensation to the bride's parents for "losing a daughter"(Wei, Xiong, and Xie 2008).

The theory of marital assistance suggests that the bride price reflects the transfer of wealth between generations, where newlyweds receive financial support from both sets of parents as initial capital to establish their new family (Li 2020). The bride price flows from the groom's family to the bride's family, and the bride's family returns it as dowry to the newlyweds, dividing family property among children(Yan 2003), representing a unidirectional flow of wealth. However, this theory fails to explain instances where some newlywed families do not engage in property division through the bride price practice. Despite the tradition of leaving one's family after marriage, the bride often joins the groom's original family instead of establishing a new household, leading to the acceptance of the bride price as an independent action.

The bride price increase for several reasons. Economic developments have increased Caili, particularly where

men's incomes have stagnated, pushing them to offer higher bride prices to remain competitive for marriage prospects (Jiang, Zhang, & Sánchez-Barricarte 2015). Cultural expectations add pressure, as families view securing a marriage for their son as a critical goal, leading to increased bride prices. Social status also plays a role, with the bride price being a symbol of family standing. Additionally, China's imbalanced gender ratio, which intensified since the 1980s, has given women greater choice and bargaining power in marriage, fueling the surge in bride prices (S. Li, Jiang, & Feldman 2014).

Marriage and parent-child relationships in China have undergone significant changes, with a move towards more equal gender relations. In 1950s, the socialist revolution encouraged female participation in the workforce, promoting the employment equality. From 1949 to 1952, the proportion of women engaged in paid labor increased from nearly 0 to 74%, while the proportion of men was 87% (Nan and Xue 2002). One-child policy led the parents invest all resource into the only child, regardless of gender, breaking the son preference and promoting gender equality(M.-H. Lee 2012). What is more, the one-child policy and urbanization profoundly changed the family structure. More and more extended family changed to nuclear family(Yu and Kuo-hsien Su 2006), breaking the tradition of wife lives with husband's whole family. The economic reform has increased employment opportunities for women, thereby reducing gender inequality(Cohen and Wang 2009).

The changing financial status and family structure weaken the traditional gender value, both women and men

support the family and are responsible for supporting their elder parents, which weaken the compensation theory. For the new situation, Wu argues that the bride price is compensation for women's reproductive role and the loss of personal life due to family care responsibilities(Wu 2003) Yet the new compensation theory reveals that man exchange women's fertility ability and family duties through money. The new theory still contradicts with modern gender value.

In general, Although China's family structure and gender relations have changed greatly, the bride price tradition has remained. Therefore, contradictions arising from the bride price are increasingly common due to marriage customs, family conflicts, and personal preferences. Men are confronted with the variability and diversity of modern marital forms and the masculine responsibilities demanded by traditional marriage institutions. The practice of the bride price profoundly reveals the contradictions individuals must face in a society interwoven with tradition and modernity.

Most studies on Chinese bride prices focus on the causes and policies of it and rarely discuss the interaction between individuals in the practice of bride prices. Because the bride price involves multiple parties, it reveals the interaction of multiple relationship structures. Including the intimate relationship between husband and wife and the family relationship between children and parents, from the micro-level analysis of men's views and behavior on bride price, reveal the diversity of men's roles in different relationships.

As West and Zimmerman said, gender is an ongoing process, not a fixed state(West and Zimmerman 1987).

Masculinity is also an ongoing process. This study not only shows the specific situations and contradictions encountered by men in the bride price practice but also analyzes from a dynamic perspective how Chinese men display and build masculinity in the gap between modern society and traditional marriage traditions.

This study uses a normative framework to analyze how bride price, as a social institution, embodies and shapes masculinity. The bride price reflects the power structure in marriage and the family, and is a stage for testing the extent to which men match the cultural ideal of being husbands and dutiful sons. The bride price negotiation prompts men to seek a balance between the expectations of all parties, thus forming a new masculine identity in the interaction. Thus, normative frameworks help to understand how diverse standards of ideal masculinity in betrothal habits are negotiated and reshaped.

Methodology

This study qualitatively analyses Hupu Forum posts related to the bride price. It examines how Chinese men construct and display masculinity within this context. Using web scraping technology, the study extracted relevant discussion posts and conducted a thematic analysis of the content.

Hupu (www.hupu.com) is a renowned sports website and community platform in China that provides news coverage, event information, and columns on various sports, including basketball, football, and tennis, as well as discussion forums. Beyond sports content, Hupu also features numerous discussion sections covering

society, entertainment, technology, and gaming, drawing in many users for participation. Topics related to the bride price are typically posted in the site's "Street" section or the Love and Relationship section. As of May 2020, Hupu has over 100 million users, with an active user base of 80 million⁵. According to the 2020 report released by Analysys Qianfan, 93.7% of Hupu's users are male, predominantly aged 18 to 40, with the majority being basketball fans⁶. Since sports are often viewed as a significant arena for establishing and challenging masculinity(Wellard 2009), Hupu, a sports community primarily attracting male users, is an ideal internet community for studying Chinese masculinity.

In the study, "bride price" was used as a keyword to filter the latest 250 discussion posts up until March 18, 2024, which contained 55,282 comments. The dataset comprised post titles, main text, comments, the number of comments and recommendations, and information on the gender of the posters. On average, posts received 240 comments, and 53 of them had a higher count than this average. The average number of recommendations was 19, with 72 posts exceeding this average. These metrics suggest that the quantity of comments and recommendations mirrors user interest in specific topics, indicating richer textual content and a variety of perspectives in such posts. Consequently, 64 posts with comments or recommendations above the average were selected, which included 12,758 valid comments.

Thematic analysis was utilized to examine patterns recurring in posts and comments about bride prices. These

⁵ https://www.baike.com/wikiid/7181233568668032143?view_id=2nh1c0960xo000#reference_7_detail

⁶ <https://www.analysys.cn/article/detail/20020024>

patterns shed light on how discussions around the bride price can mirror the construction and representation of masculinity. Analysis of the content from 64 posts identified three primary thematic categories: sharing of personal love and marriage experiences (43 posts), questions concerning the universality of the bride price (14 posts), and comments on news events, legal statutes, and local policies related to the bride price (7 posts). Further coding and theme recognition demonstrated how discussions contribute to forming and maintaining a masculine identity.

The discussions among Hupu users on the bride price reflect male perspectives and behavioral practices within the context of traditional marriage systems. At a micro level, these views and behaviors are evident in men's interactions with their partners and family members. On a macro level, they demonstrate how men construct their masculinity within the framework of China's traditional marriage system.

Finding

Objectifying Female and Male with Bride Price

In discussions about the bride price, a prevalent view among men is "not worth it." Taking Hu's case as an example, after two years of a relationship, his girlfriend demanded a price that included expenses for a house renovation, a new car, a first-meeting gift, cash, gifts for her relatives, and the total cost of the wedding, amounting to over 70,000 dollars, with no reciprocation from her family. Hu felt the demands from his

partners were greedy, and he felt anger and betrayal as his girlfriend was unwilling to compromise on it.

After detailing her demands, he compared both parties' conditions in a form, including age, height, appearance, and both parents' occupations and incomes. Hu expressed dissatisfaction towards his partner, with statements like "she treats me like an ATM" and devaluing remarks such as "she is already thirty and certainly in a hurry," implying she did not deserve a high bride price.

	Male	Female
Age	1999	1994
Height	176	163
Appearance	3/10	5/10
Monthly Income	8,000	7,500
Parents	Retired, Pension >5,000	Father: 8,000 Mother: Pension 2,800
Sibling	0	1 younger brother: 6,000/month
Property	One apartment living with parent; One car	One apartment living with parents and brother;

Other users assessed the family backgrounds and resources of both parties based on Hu's shared information.

Some felt Hu and his girlfriend were a suitable match and offered him negotiation advice. There were also criticisms of the girlfriend's family's greed and suggestions to end the relationship, often couched in demeaning language toward women.

Male users on the Hupu forum often list each party's attributes and seek other users' evaluations of the match.

In such discussions, the bride price is a financial transaction where the woman's "qualifications" are considered an investment for anticipated future economic returns. Specifically, a woman's age, appearance, and professional prestige are treated as indicators of her "value," with younger, more attractive women of higher professional status typically expected to command higher bride prices. The perspective that women who accept bride prices submit to objectification is evident, and the language used to describe women also reflects objectification.

(1) I do not understand why a '99 is worth a 94

(2) 30 years old still think you are a treasure? Let her go on a blind date to see how much she is worth

Additionally, the social capital of the bride's family members is considered an investment in the bride price.

If the bride's parents can offer benefits to the groom's career development and social status, such an investment is deemed worthwhile. Furthermore, the number and gender of the bride's siblings are also factored in, with a

preference for families with fewer siblings and caution towards those with brothers because fewer siblings imply a larger inheritance for the bride. In contrast, families with brothers are less likely to support the daughter's married life economically.

(1) Her parents are civil servants; I am not in the civil service, and her father's network is useless to me

(2) The bride price is for the younger brother to marry a wife

When forum users discuss the bride price, they reveal marriage as a transaction of family resources, trading women's economic value. Men dissatisfied with the bride price often voice it from the standpoint of financial imbalance. Traditionally, the bride price might compensate for the bride's family's loss of labor or serve as part of the new family's communal funds. Under the compensatory theory, once the bride's family accepts the bride price, the bride is expected to dedicate herself to her husband's family, relinquishing rights to her children's surname and elder care duties for her parents. In other words, the bride price is a transaction of ownership of women under the traditional patriarchy.

However, with the One-child policy and feminist movements, traditional female roles are challenged. As social security systems fail to fully guarantee elder care, daughters begin to assume responsibility for their aging parents. Simultaneously, women's independence in the job market has increased, with more seeking greater

equality within the family and imposing additional expectations on their spouses. The changing society has led to substantial ideological shifts in spousal relations and the definition of masculinity. Responsible husbands now support the family financially and take on more household and emotional labor.

Overall, the practice of the bride price reflects men's contradictions between traditional and modern gender orders. On the one hand, men are expected to bear the costs of patriarchy—namely, paying the bride price; on the other, they have to face the reality of more women are taking charge and being afraid of losing the male privilege, mainly the male authority in family.

Men Need Bride Price

Why do many Chinese men continue to pay the bride price even though it no longer guarantees male privilege?

Three posts explored men's perspectives supporting the bride price. In one post, 'Why do some men oppose not giving a bride price?', the author suggests it is incomprehensible that men, as victims of the bride price, would support it.

Three main viewpoints gained wide acceptance and approval. The first is the "winner-takes-all" theory, where some men believe that in China's context of more men than women, women have more choices, making the bride price a key factor for men to succeed in the competition. Economically strong men uphold the bride price tradition to display their hegemonic status.

(1) Many men like to put others down for what they have, but others do not have it. It does not matter if it is worth something.

(2) Because the bride price is their advantage in choosing a mate, otherwise what can it be

The second viewpoint posits that men who have already paid the bride price desire to continue the system to preserve the stability of their self-identity and values.

(1) After buying things, I do not want to reduce the price; you and I said free?

(2) People who spend all their life funds plus loans of 800,000 to buy a house, who cannot sell or buy a second house, see the price cut and swear online that the house should rise.

Lastly, some men hold that those who support the bride price system are its beneficiaries. Male members of the bride's family, such as brothers, rely on the bride price received from their sisters to establish a material foundation for their marriages.

(1) You cannot get married without your sister's bride price

(2) Of course, the younger brother agrees to the bride's price

It is evident that from a macro-social structure perspective, men generally perceive themselves as the ultimate beneficiaries of the bride price custom. Within this tradition, women are a transaction medium, with their value transferred from one man to another. The bride price serves as a display of economic capacity and a means for internal power struggles and social status contests among men, where the victor gains the appendage rights to a woman. However, for most individual men, being the victor in this system is a minority; they do not necessarily oppose the system itself but are dissatisfied with not being among its victors.

Various roles

When male users talk about the bride price, two scenarios are often brought up: a scenario in which men discuss the bride price directly with their girlfriends or fiancée and a scenario in which men negotiate with their original families. However, men often mention their parents' opinions with their girlfriends and fiancée's demands in discussions with their families. Men play the role of the husband in the former field and the role of the son in the latter setting. Men who traveled through the different arenas needed to manage the differences between the roles and adjust their negotiation strategies according to their roles. If a man does not adjust their roles according to the field and merely acts as a sounding board between his family and his fiancées, it will

easily lead to conflicts between the two families.

In Peter's story, Peter's mother, Zoey, dominated the pre-engagement negotiation of the bride price and was intimately involved in the conflict over the bride price after the engagement. Peter failed to participate in the previous negotiation and made his mother speak for him after the conflict happened, thus escalating the conflict in the new family into a conflict between the families of both the groom and the bride.

After having sex with his fiancée, Peter went home and asked his mother, Zoey, for the housing contract.

When confronted with the inquiry, he only said in general terms, "We had that thing, and the woman asked for her name to be added to the contract." Zoey felt it was not that simple and did not agree to pay the bride price and add the name immediately, thus triggering the conflict. However, Peter did not take the conflict seriously.

He is late for the negotiation with his fiancée. They agreed to meet at 10 am, but Peter drove to the station to pick up his sister and another coworker. The fiancée waited until about 10:50 and left, and Peter did not arrive until 11:00 am. To make amends, Zoey heads to the bride's house with the housing contract in the afternoon, and the conflict escalates into an argument between the two families.

While Peter and his fiancée are the main characters of the situation, Peter struggles to reconcile the demands of being both a husband and a son, unable to navigate the conflict between these roles effectively. As a husband,

Peter is responsible for meeting his fiancée's financial expectations. However, the final decision on the bride price rests in his mother, Zoey's, hands, and his plea for property potentially compromises his parents' interests.

As a son, Peter is expected to exhibit filial piety and protect his familial assets; requesting property from his parents contradicts the archetype of an ideal son(Yeh et al. 2013). With these dilemmas, Peter was indecisive, prompting his mother to intervene and inadvertently exacerbating the tensions.

Peter's dilemma underscores a core conflict in bride price practices: the groom's dependency on his family to fulfill his bride's family's expectations. When he leans on his parents for support, he is doomed to be trapped in the conflicting duties of both husband and son. Through the lens of patriarchy, a man who relies on his parents' resources to set up his own home remains a dependent son in his birth family. Concurrently, a man utilizing paternal wealth to lay the foundations of his new home may someday become a parent, controlling resources for the next generation. The transition from son to father — the incumbent patriarch to the prospective one — lies at the heart of this role conflict. When a man faces the contradiction between his roles as a son and husband due to bride price practices, he also confronts conflicting demands on his masculinity.

Ideal Husband

Chinese men regard the ideal husband image as being responsible. However, the definition of responsibility is quite ambiguous, and men navigate the meaning of an ideal image through specific practices.

In the practice of bride price, the ideal husband can navigate the issue between his birth family and the bride's family, steer the course of events, and become the actual decision-maker. The user Alex shared his bride price story, which garnered over 300 likes, and he was hailed as a real man by other users.

My wife and I met on Mao, bonding over our love for the same band despite being in a long-distance relationship. We dated for a year and then lived together for another year to get used to each other's habits before marriage— a relationship born out of freedom of choice. When we got engaged, my mother gave 20,000, which I felt was not respectful enough, so I topped it up to 100,000. For the bride price, I gave 188,000, and my mother-in-law returned 88,000 of it, after which I handed over the 100,000 to my wife. Exchanging three or five pieces of gold jewelry is customary, but I didn't insist on it. I thought it was outdated, and she didn't want it either, saying it's all in the family now, and the money would be better spent on things she likes. My wife and I argue sometimes; after having our child last year, we both struggled with the transition in our identities and even considered divorce. But we talked it through. Marriage isn't simple. One has to stick to principles, but speaking softly can help, and there's always a way to work things out.

Alex's story revealed three traits that men aspire to (1) economic success, negating the need to rely heavily on parents for the bride price; (2) maintaining independence and autonomy within his original family, making marriage decisions free from parental control; (3) shouldering financial responsibilities in the new family,

occupying a dominant position. These traits reflect the male's leading role in society, the family, and gender relations, with masculinity closely linked to a position of dominance.

Alex's marriage showcases a blend of responsibility, duty, and romantic love, aligning with the public's idealized expectations of modern matrimony—where marriage is a natural extension of romantic affection.

This idealization of romantic love emphasizes attention to intimate relations and authentic emotional experiences, representing an individual level resistance against objectification (Papadaki 2007). However, as a patriarchal institution, the bride price objectifies individuals, with men as providers of economic support and women as human resources exchanged for those resources. Thus, in contemporary marriages, there is a coexistence and conflict between modern and traditional values.

In today's society, there is an increasing expectation for the ideal husband to be a responsible gentleman in matters of sex and romance. The image of the gentleman underlines the importance of equality, focusing on expressing emotions and caring for the family, and it is closely linked to consumerism, indicating the high moral standards of middle-class male traits (T. K. Lee and Song 2017). This image of a gentleman retains the traditional male role as an economic pillar, while discarding the characteristics of not caring about appearance, being poor at expressing emotions, and acting as a patriarchal decision-maker. Therefore, to some men, women who seek the protection of patriarchy and enjoy economic dependency while demanding equality in other family matters are considered greedy, wishing to enjoy rights without corresponding responsibilities.

Consequently, an ideal husband is perceived as having the ability to discern a good woman. In male users' narratives, women involved in bride price practices are categorized as the understanding wife and the greedy gold-digger. The former prioritizes emotions and does not put her husband in a difficult position over the bride price, epitomized by Alex's wife, who returned part of the bride price and declined jewelry, earning her the title of "the right one" from other users. The latter sees the bride price as an opportunity for monetary gain, a greedy scammer. An ideal husband can discern women's motives accurately, forming a household with an understanding wife rather than being duped by a gold-digger. Claro's example showed that a man who submits to a woman cannot become the ideal husband:

Claro spent over a million on his marriage, including purchasing a house, renovating, and giving the woman's family a cash bride price of 288,000. However, after buying an engagement ring, his fiancée demanded a more expensive ring worth 80,000. Despite his dissatisfaction, Claro feared his fiancée might call off the engagement, so he posted online to vent his emotions and seek advice. Most comments ridiculed Claro for getting what he deserved by marrying a greedy woman, questioning his masculinity:

(1) Honey, my best friend just got a Ferrari (mocking Claro's fiancée's sense of comparison).

(2) You chose your idea; Jesus can't change that.

(3) Turtle man can't be saved. No need to save him.

(4) You're marrying this? You love it.

Even though Claro has substantial financial resources and autonomy in his marital decisions, he was shamed by other users, labeled as a "turtle man" who is too soft to say no to the high bride price. To some male users, Claro's reluctance to challenge his wife and his inability to lead in the new family equated to a lack of masculinity. Although he dominated in social and familial contexts, possessing the ideal masculine qualities, he failed to transform these advantages into power within intimate relationships.

The attacks and humiliation directed at Claro indicate a fear among men. For some, being dominated in an intimate relationship is more daunting than in other areas. In different contexts, dominance is dynamic, and submission is fluid and relative to the counterparts. Due to the fluidity, a dominant position is never assured.

A man's dominant position is more promising in traditional Chinese marital relations. In other words, regardless of external changes, every man is expected to enjoy power and control within the family. However,

Claro's story reveals that even men who hold dominant positions in other spheres may not have a secure leading role in the family, and the fear of losing such privileges can trigger aggressive behaviors among some men(Umberson et al. 2017).

Marrying into a wife's family

In traditional society, domestic authority exemplified male privilege, sustained by traditional ideology and women's economic status. However, with the rise of gender equality and women's financial independence, this male privilege has lost its legitimacy. Facing the potential loss of patriarchal privilege, some men attempt to maintain their traditional rights by paying a bride price they can afford. In the dispute over domestic authority, the bride price has become an important tool for men to seek power.

In some cases, marrying into a wife's family occurs when the wife's family lacks a male heir and needs to bring in a man through the daughter's marriage to continue the family lineage. Typically, this happens when the wife's family's economic and social status far surpasses that of the husband's family⁷. Within the context of a patriarchal society, marrying into a wife's family is seen as a failure for men to fulfill their traditional roles, lacking in masculinity, and thus carries a certain stigma. On social forums, users often employ terms like "man relying on his wife's family" or "matrilocal man" to mock men who cannot dominate the marital relationship. Soft rice refers to gained without hard work, suggesting that such a man maintains his livelihood not through his efforts but by opting for an easier lifestyle. This notion carries criticism for their lack of independence and against traditional male roles.

Cho's marriage case illustrates the social implications of marrying into a wife's family. Cho's former wife, Q, came from a distinguished background; her father was an entrepreneur, and her mother was a piano teacher.

⁷ <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%85%A5%E8%B4%85>

Cho hailed from a small-town civil servant family. Although Cho's parents offered a bride price, it was returned by Q's family, who asserted that Shanghai does not have a bride price. Cho's parents were dissatisfied with the return, worrying it would affect Cho's status in the marriage. Cho's friends ridiculed him in private conversations, suggesting he had essentially married into a wealthy family and could not control his wife. Ultimately, Cho and Q divorced due to incompatible lifestyles and views on consumption. Comments on this marriage were divided: some believed Cho's situation resulted from his choices, while others morally judged Q, suggesting she used her family's wealth to control Cho.

(1) The woman herself is wealthy, the 660,000 bride price has been returned, and she does not want men's money

(2) The article said that a woman is very beautiful. That is the price?

(3) The woman did not want the bride price. There is no right or wrong

(4) Not just a surname

In many cases, not demanding a bride price is seen as a woman's virtue, symbolizing that she marries a man out of pure affection rather than for financial reasons. However, Cho's perception of not asking for a bride price was the opposite. Cho's parents and other forum users saw it as a worrisome sign. According to Hupu users' standards, Q was deemed superior to Cho due to her family background and personal appeal. However,

Cho lacked control in the marriage, even lacking the traditional tool of the bride price. When the woman's family is more advantageous, men feel their status is threatened and fear being labeled as having married into the wife's family, attempting to gain some power through the bride price. Men are caught in a dilemma: they worry that women might be interested in their wealth and fear that women are indifferent to it, reflecting their anxiety about a subordinate status. In the view of Hupu users, economic strength in modern society is the cornerstone of ensuring male dominance and masculinity; when women do not expect to receive economic resources from men, the men's dominant position becomes unstable.

Forum users expressed sympathy for Cho's actual situation of marrying into a wife's family but disdain for Ji's circumstance. Ji and his girlfriend F were only children; F did not demand a bride price but made three non-traditional requests. First, F wanted one of their future children to take her surname, even though the boy would take Ji's surname. Second, F planned to retain her pre-marriage household registration and not transfer to Ji's. Lastly, she expected their children to call her parents "Yeye" and "Nainai," terms usually reserved for the father's parents, not the mother's. Ji saw F's demands as akin to marrying into her family, leading to disputes, despite his reluctance to give up the relationship. Comments on the forum mainly urged Ji to break up and mocked his attempt to compromise.

(1) What conditions ah, still want a soft rice man?

(2) This still not break up? Turtle man's world I do not understand

(3) The first time I see someone rushing to get married to wife's family

Other men mocked Ji with terms like "man relying on his wife's family" and "matrilocal son-in-law," suggesting he lacked a firm sense of masculinity. Hence, the term "matrilocal son-in-law" extends beyond its institutional definition and has evolved into a pejorative label, deriding men who fail to maintain gender hierarchies. As the custom of children taking their father's surname, the woman moving into the man's household, and the associated terms of address are traditional Chinese practices without legal obligation, F's requests, although untraditional, did not violate any laws, nor did they directly demand that Ji marry into her family. However, to other men, F's family conditions were not superior enough to justify Ji relinquishing his traditional privileges; they considered F too greedy and exaggerated this as an assault on male dignity.

The differing reactions from male users to Cho and Ji's cases reveal that they still view rights like surname inheritance and household status as intrinsic male privileges closely tied to masculinity. In their view, men who cannot resist or voluntarily surrender these privileges are deemed losers. Although modern men may still attempt to purchase traditional patriarchal privileges through the bride price, a woman's renunciation of the bride price does not directly result in gender equality. On the contrary, women may need to pay a steep price to acquire privileges traditionally seen as inherently male, such as becoming a matrilocal husband. Men like

Ji, who easily give up male privileges, face criticism from other men.

Nonetheless, some men understand and support the act of matrilocal marriage, seeing it as a rational choice for men to improve their economic status through marriage.

(1) Being good at living off a woman is a skill, too.

(2) You are lucky; you get money from both your father-in-law and your parents.

(3) Her family pays for the house and car, and you avoid 30 years of hard work. Keep your wife happy, and if her dad is willing to give money, isn't that great?

(4) Some guys can't make their own money and can't find a wealthy wife either. They are just jealous of you.

The comments above reflect that some men are willing to trade masculinity for economic benefits. In all the posts about bride price, mentions of both the groom's and bride's fathers are rare. However, the term 'father-in-law' is frequently mentioned in discussions about matrilocal marriage. Men see matrilocal marriage as dependent not on one's parents but on the father-in-law. The essence of matrilocal marriage remains a financially dependent man leaning on another dominant male, with the wife serving merely as a matrimonial link between the two men.

Greedy schemers

Greedy schemers cannot afford a reasonable bride price and try to suppress it by derogating their fiancée. The financial situation of the groom determines the price. If one man can afford the bride price, which is usually no more than the average amount in his region, but refuses to do so, he will be labeled as stingy.

David's fiancée asked for 9,000 dollars for the bride price, less than the average amount in David's city. However, David insisted on putting the money into a joint account as the startup fund of the new family. David believed the bride price was outdated; he was trying to break the bad tradition for all men. If his fiancée agreed, he put 13,900 dollars into the account as compensation for his fiancée's kindness. However, male users criticize him fiercely:

- (1) *It's amazing how just about anyone can find a wife.*
- (2) *A poor man full of cunning schemes.*
- (3) *Brother, it's one thing to deceive others, but don't fool yourself.*
- (4) *If my daughter married a man like that, I'd break her legs.*

The comments indicate that other men look down on David and view him as a poor man. A husband should provide for the family, and while David failed to do so, other users think he does not deserve a wife. Also,

David is trying to hide the real intention of not giving the bride price with far-fetched excuses. People are offended that he is too cheap to admit it.

A greedy schemer is different from a soft rice man. Neither of them supports the family as authoritarian masculinity expects. However, the soft-rice-man admits his dominant position, while the greedy schemer is hypocritical and tries to enjoy the privilege but does not take the obligation.

A Filial Son

In most instances, the groom's family pays the bride price, placing the relationship between the son and his parents at the heart of the bride price practice. Particularly during disputes over the bride price, men are compelled to arbitrate conflicts involving their close kin and spouse, acting as mediators between the new family and the family of origin. An ideal son is filial. Filial piety entails supporting and respecting parents and adhering to the parent-child hierarchy and parental authority. In bride price conflicts, a filial son should prioritize his parents' interests.

The concept of filial piety has a long history in China. During the Qing dynasty, it was not only a social moral norm, but laws were also established to uphold parents' authority. For instance, those who defied their parents' marital choices could be convicted of adultery, and harming parents for self-defense could result in the death penalty at most. State-led intergenerational relationships were central to imperial rule; rulers, like parents,

cared for society and were a significant source of regime legitimacy. Filial piety was deeply ingrained in society due to centuries of mutual reinforcement between imperial sovereignty and family order(Du 2021).

Throughout China's transition from empire to nation-state, the relationship between the state and its citizens underwent dramatic changes, shifting from a parent-official to a child-citizen dynamic. Starting with the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century, people began to re-examine relationships between the empire and its subjects, fathers, and sons, creating literary and artistic works that resisted patriarchy and initiating social movements against authority. For the youth, resisting birth fathers (and mothers) was also seen as opposing the feudal system, marking an important symbol of building a new democratic and modern era(Chen 2015).

Young people's resistance achieved significant success in the public and political-cultural sphere, yet within the family's private domain, norms and orders of filial piety were preserved and transmitted(Lui 2021). In traditional society, conventional norms superseded the influence of relative resource distribution on power allocation. Regardless of resource allocation, traditional norms shaped parent-child and even marital relations, with filial piety governing family relationships. Just as sons were to be filial to parents, daughters-in-law were expected to obey their mothers-in-law. The vitality of cultural tradition is robust. In modern society, which advocates egalitarian gender norms, the concept of filial piety still constrains the relationships of sons and daughters-in-law with the older generation. When conflicts arise between wives and their husbands' parents,

most sons demand that their wives yield to maintain their filial identity(Kung 2019).

While filial piety may diminish young men's authority in front of their parents, men undoubtedly enjoy the privileges it affords. Most men rely on their parents to provide the funds for the bride price. After marriage, men continue to benefit from long-term parental support, including financial backing and childcare involvement(Song and Hird 2014b), with father-son relationships remaining largely unchanged post-marriage(Zuo 2009). Therefore, in most cases, when facing conflicts over the bride price, men stand by their parent's side, fulfilling the role of the filial son.

When men cannot accept the bride price demands posed by their fiancées, they often exert moral pressure on the women by invoking their status as filial sons:

(1) My parents are almost sixty years old, and you are trying to bleed them dry. What do you want people to think of me

(2) At the age of 60, he has to help his son repay the bride price loan, which is a great filial son

(3) I cannot use my parents' pension money as a bride price. You are forcing me not to be a man

If men cannot independently afford the bride price and need parental support, they act as agents of their parent's property when discussing the bride price with their fiancées. Filial piety serves as the most potent bargaining chip. Demanding an excessive bride price is considered unfilial; if women persist, they are labeled

as gold-diggers, and if men agree to an excessive bride price, they are deemed unfilial sons, subject to public scorn and offensive language.

(1) Some stupid men can give themselves to women as dogs but also kiss parents together on their knees to serve women

(2) Can't you live without a woman? Pity your parents for raising you, for keeping you in your coffin.

(3) The turtle man himself kneels and licks it. Mom and Dad raised you for 30 years, raised a eunuch, and the whole family became a eunuch

In the forum, other users are offensive towards men willing to pay a high bride price, accusing them of surrendering male privilege and being submissive "turtle men," as well as vehemently criticizing them for being unfilial. Posts do not mention whether parents object, yet other male users readily assume the role of the groom's parents, accusing him of being unfilial. Even men who can afford the bride price independently are susceptible to accusations of unfilial behavior.

MJ is a software engineer in an internet company, earning an annual salary of 400,000 yuan. His parents are farmers with unstable incomes but receive pensions. Knowing his family's circumstances, he saved 400,000 yuan for marriage. MJ's fiancée comes from a very wealthy family, and after learning about MJ's background, they did not demand a bride price. However, MJ voluntarily offered all his savings as the bride price, not

wanting to be misconstrued as marrying into his wife's family. As previously mentioned, facing wealthy parents-in-law, MJ used the bride price to "purchase" his independent status and masculinity within the family. He used traditional marriage customs to safeguard traditional family relations, including children carrying the father's surname. MJ's actions received mixed evaluations. Some regarded him as "Tough, a real man," while others viewed him as an unfilial son:

- (1) After over three years of work, you have saved 400,000 yuan, focusing only on your so-called surname rights and playing the big spender, never considering your parents' retirement needs.*
- (2) All your earnings are now for your wife; do your parents not need money for their old age? How much is a farmer's pension? Even minor illnesses require hospital visits for the elderly, which costs money. Do you want your parents to just wait for death?*
- (3) There are major rights and wrongs in life. A wife might not always be your wife, but parents will always be your parents. Parents pity their son working hard outside, not expecting money for themselves, but to give it all to another woman. Could you bear it if you were in their place?*

The allegations of unfilial piety centered on MJ allocating his savings to his marriage rather than his family of origin. In MJ's narrative, there is no mention of his relationship with his parents nor of regular financial

interactions with them. The judgment against MJ is not based on fact but is a broader critique of masculinity.

Compared to men who need their parents' financial support, MJ is an independent, responsible man with a good job and income, resolving the bride price independently. Knowing MJ's social success, other men choose to criticize him from the perspective of filial piety.

The critique of MJ by other users is not an evaluation of the facts but instead displays some men's fear of the disappearance of the filial piety system. Filial piety is a hierarchical system privileging elders and males; upholding it maintains power relations. Even if a young man is not currently at the top of the hierarchy, he is not the lowest—that position is reserved for his wife. With age and the parents' eventual passing, the family's husband can ultimately become the supreme ruler within the filial system. Male privilege within filial piety is derived solely from gender. Filial piety is the moral standard by which men gain legitimacy of power. As moral norms change with modern society, some men devoid of assets will forever lose power privileges in family and gender dynamics.

Filial piety is not just an attitude and behavior but a social system maintaining male privilege, into which the practice of the bride price is embedded. Being filial is a moral expectation of men and a significant weapon against the tide of egalitarianism.

Conclusion

The bride price commodifies everyone, where money can buy the appearance, fertility, and domestic responsibilities of women, while men's value is reduced to socioeconomic status. Wealthy men, deemed as embodying true masculinity, consider their wives as trophies (Ueno 2010). Put starkly, rich men can afford the bride price and get married, while poor men cannot. Despite recognizing the oppression of men within the bride price system, many still support it as part of China's patriarchal system. The bride price reinforces the role of men as the family's financial foundation, upholding a gender power structure where husbands lead and wives follow. In other words, the bride price is the cost of gender privilege. The escalating bride price also reflects the rising cost of maintaining male privilege as women's power increases.

The bride price conflict is not all about economic but a stage for power negotiations between partners. Bride price negotiations are the initial foray into decision-making for a new family and a prelude to the future dynamics of familial authority. Hence, the bride price is a negotiation men feel compelled to win, with those unable to meet the demands being labeled as loser, because ideal masculinity dominates gender relations.

In the practice of bride price, the ideal image of the husband is concrete: a family leader, financially robust, and generously spirited. However, the standard for an ideal husband is changing—traditional gender roles require economic robustness, while modern expectations demand a romantic and gender-equal partner.

The image of the filial son is also specific. In the practice of bride price, the filial son protects the economic interests of the parents and accepts their marriage advice. Overall, an ideal man is both the ideal husband and

the filial son. Society has created an almost unattainable template for the ideal man, judging men in various dimensions for "not being masculine enough."

Masculinity is constructed within various power dynamics and social structures, becoming an institution. In the practice of bride price, masculinity is not only intertwined with Chinese traditional marital customs and filial piety but also engages with contemporary values of consumerism, egalitarianism, and romanticism. This interplay forms a multidimensional and imbalanced ideal of masculinity that stands at the crossroads of traditional and modern values.

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