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New Perspectives on Postponing Marriage in Urban China: Empirical Evidence from Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen

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Abstract

Faced with a low marriage rate and a rising first marriage age, postponing marriage keeps drawing attention. Various factors have been considered; however, previous studies did not answer the question of whether people postpone marriage to gain more or lose less in terms of emotional, financial, and social involvement in the future marriage. In this study, by comparing women's and men's expectations and concerns regarding future mates and marriage, findings suggest that influenced by Confucian patriarchy, women and men value marriage, and within this context, marital negotiations happen. Moreover, gender stereotypes intertwined with Confucian marital values expose women to marital risks, such as job discrimination, infidelity dilemma, and pretend marriage. These risks endanger women's careers, well-being, and self-fulfillment. On the other hand, men feel exploited to prepare for marital settings, such as housing, vehicles, and living expense, even though female interviewees want to share the financial burden with future partners contrary to male interviewees' assumption. This demonstrates that two genders struggle with different marital risks and lack mutual understanding, which complicate marital negotiation and contribute to postponing marriage as a result.

Keywords: Postponing Marriage, Gender Roles, Confucian Patriarchy, Gender Stereotype

1. Introduction

Based on the Statistical Report of the People's Republic of China on the Development of Social Services 2017, the number of couples registered for marriage is 10.63 million, having declined by 7.0% compared to 2016. The national marriage rate was 0.77% in 2017, the fourth year of persistent decline since 2013. In 2013, the marriage rate peaked at 0.992%.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China¹, the average age of women marrying for the first time has changed from 21.4 years old to 25.7 years old from 1990 to 2017 nationwide and is tending to rise.

In recent years, women and men are under extra pressure to get married. This is especially true for women, since women born after the 1980s had more chances to enter higher education and

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participate in the economy due to the one-child policy issued in the 1970s. Moreover, under the same policy, deep-rooted male preference caused a skewed sex ratio with a surplus male population between the ages of 20 and 49, reaching 20 million by 2015, and is estimated to reach 30 million by 2025 (Chen 2004).

Combined with the current low marriage rate and the rising age of first marriages, postponing marriage has drawn much attention. Various factors regarding postponing marriage have been studied and analyzed, such as economy/finance (Liu 2014; Xu, Qiang & Wang 2003; Jones 2007), education (To 2013; Liu 2014; Zhu & Zhao 2019), personal values (Chen & Li 2012; Liu 2014; Wang 2010), family influences (Jiang, Feldman & Li 2014), and regional differences (Wei, Dong & Jiang 2013; Liu & Gao 2015; Xu et al. 2003). In sum, people, especially women, living in urban areas with higher education and income, are more likely to postpone their marriage.

It is worth noting that existing studies have not answered the question of whether people postpone marriage to gain more or lose less in terms of emotional, financial, and social involvement in the future marriage. In this study, by comparing women's and men's expectations and concerns regarding future partners and marriage, findings suggest that influenced by Confucian patriarchy, women and men value marriage, and it is within this context that marital negotiation happens. Moreover, gender stereotypes intertwined with Confucian marital values expose women to marital risks, such as job discrimination, infidelity dilemma, and pretend marriage. These risks endanger women's careers, well-being, and self-fulfillment. On the other hand, men feel exploited to prepare for marital settings, such as housing, vehicles, and living expense, even though female interviewees want to share the financial burden with future partners contrary to male interviewees' assumption. This demonstrates that the two genders struggle with different marital risks and lack mutual understanding, which complicates marital negotiation and contributes to postponing marriage as a result.

This paper consists of five sections. Previous studies on postponing marriage and Confucian marital values will be introduced and discussed in Section 2. Section 3 explains the methodology, including reasons for selected cities, interviewees' basic information, and the structure of interviews. Findings organized into three sub-sections: Confucian patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and marital risks will be unfolded in Section 4. A discussion, a suggestion to policymakers, and the limitations of this study will conclude this paper in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

In this section, postponing marriage-related research will be introduced and discussed. An introduction regarding Confucian Patriarchy's marital values will be explained, laying the necessary foundation of understanding Chinese marriage from a cultural perspective. These two concepts will help to fill the gap in the existing research and show the importance of this study.

2.1. Postponing Marriage

The age at which women first get married changed from being 21.4 years old in the 1990s, to 25.7 years old after 2000 (the National Population Census 2010). In Shanghai, for example, the average first marriage age has risen from 28.8 to 30.1 for men and 26.5 to 28.1 for women between 2010 and 2013, as reported by the Marriage Registration Statistics Report of the Civil Affairs Bureau in Chinese Women's Research Network.

Wei, Dong & Jiang (2013) and Liu & Gao (2015) state that in the past three decades, Chinese women's first marriage age has become 26 years old from 23 years old before, and the peak age delayed to 27 years old. Chinese women show the urge to marry at the age of 25, and after that the desire will decline, and single life would probably last longer.

According to Liu and Cai (2015), among the elder unmarried population (aged between 30 to 44 years old), the number of men is more significant than that of women. In urban areas, the unmarried population tends to be younger. However, being single is a temporary situation for most unmarried people. Chinese people will get married eventually (Wei et al. 2013; Liu & Gao 2015).

There is an associated social influence caused by postponing marriage. Liu (2014) explains that it will: crush the traditional family system, worsen the unbalanced sex ratio, harm the stability of the society, accelerate changes in the type of population structure and hinder the development of the country and society.

Further, Gong and Li (2015) argue that postponing marriage would: affect the intergenerational transmission and continuity of social culture; raise high demands for reproductive and health-related issues; exacerbate "marriage squeeze" for men in deprived areas; cause women's self-referential of "leftover women" to be younger than the definition.

As for the countermeasures, Liu (2014) proposed improving legislation to encourage women to get married, changing women's conceptions and cognitions of marriage, and introducing social intervention such as matchmaking activities to the community.

In the next sub-section, the factors influencing postponing marriage will be categorized and discussed.

2.2. Influencing Factors on Postponing Marriage in China

Based on previous studies, there are several possible influencing factors behind postponing marriage.

2.2.1. Financial/Economic Factor

People tend to spend more time earning marital settings. Liu (2014) argues that the cost of marriage and child rearing becomes higher with economic development. Similarly, Gaetano (2014: 126) agrees that "postponing marriage allows a man to increase his worth by accruing more income

and assets, which increases his allure to potential mates”. It fits the argument that higher wage likely delays marriage for young people in the cities (Oppenheimer 1988).

Xu, Qiang, and Wang (2003) state that women’s rising economic independence decreases marriage gains. Chinese women have made significant gains in employment, which contributes to delayed marriage (Jones 2007).

2.2.2. Educational Factor

Another contributing factor is education. Liu (2014) argues that the higher the educational level, the less desire to get married. Jones (2007) echoes that Chinese women’s educational gains help them to postpone marriage. Based on To (2013), for women, postponing marriage purposefully happens when they make efforts to attain education and establish careers. Moreover, the increasing difficulty of school-to-work transition leads to late marriage (Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn & Lim 1997). Zhu and Zhao (2019) conclude that college and undergraduate education will delay the first marriage age by 4.5 to 6 years. Overall, better-educated young people tend to get married later in life (Xu et al. 2003).

2.2.3. Personal Value

Apart from the above-mentioned factors, personal value is also worth noticing. Liu (2014) argues that women’s values have changed from being wives and mothers to pursuing careers and self-fulfillment. Accordingly, their mate selection standards changed as well. Liu (2014) adds that women suffer from emotional pain from previous relationships and are afraid of childbearing, and family issues involving disputes with mothers-in-law. Moreover, balancing family and work impedes women’s careers.

On the other hand, Chen and Li (2012: 33–34) criticize women for excessively pursuing the perfect spouse, not overcoming their lovelorn, simultaneous longing for and fear of marriage, and being influenced by extreme feminism. As for men, they are stuck with a Male-centered Psychology and have a cognitive bias (Chen & Li 2012: 34).

Identity transition failure contributes to postponing marriage. People fail to transit from the identity as children in the original families to individuals mature enough to start their own families (Wang 2010).

2.2.4. Family Influencing Factor

As for the family influencing factor, Liu (2014) thinks that the younger generation is spoiled by their original family and not independent enough to start their own lives. Moreover, parents’ educational level has an impact on the first marriage age: the higher the level, the older the age (Wei et al. 2013; Liu & Gao 2015).

2.2.5. Social/Cultural Factor

Based on Liu (2014), women's independence and older childbearing age are widely accepted. Moreover, urban workload and monotone lifestyles worsen postponing marriage since limited social circles lead to fewer possible mates. In addition, on account of the imbalanced sex ratio, people born in the mid-to-late 1980s (especially men) will be forced to postpone their marriage (Jiang, Feldman & Li 2014).

2.2.6. Differences Between Rural and Urban Areas

The difference between rural and urban areas is worth noticing. The first marriage age is older in urban areas (Wei et al. 2013; Liu & Gao 2015). Rural marriage markets are characterized by higher search costs (Xu et al. 2003).

In other words, there is an open-minded atmosphere and friendly environment for the single population in cities. People move much in cities due to work relocation and it is difficult to settle down for a stable relationship. The pressure of life and work is more severe in cities, and people can find other ways to alter marriage, for example, living together.

The factors mentioned above have covered most aspects. However, in Chinese society, Confucian patriarchy plays a significant part in marriage as well and may offer a new perspective on postponing marriage. The next sub-section will introduce previous studies on Confucian patriarchy and explain why it is essential to examine in this study.

2.3. Confucian Patriarchy

China is a patriarchal society, and due to Confucianism's influence, Chinese patriarchy has Confucian characteristics. Confucianism evolved through time and covered an extensive range of Chinese culture, including politics, economy, management, and family. In traditional Chinese thinking, marriage is the basis for building a family. Therefore, the marital values of Confucian patriarchy have been influencing people's lives (Zhang 2019).

To begin with, Confucianism views building a family as a base for ruling a country and managing a society as the saying goes “修身、齐家、治国、平天下” meaning “practice self-cultivation, then families can be in unison; after that, a state will be governed. After achieving this, peace will reign on earth.”

Therefore, Confucian patriarchy set several rules to run a good family by dividing gender roles. For example, Littlejohn (2017) explains that Women's Analects request women to be soft and obedient to their husbands while their husbands should oversee the family as the masters (Bary and Bloom 1999: 827-831). It shows a separation of genders by granting men with authority and women with domestic chores in family life (Schuman 2015). Confucianism maps how two genders should associate, and, how women should behave. A woman should obey her father before marriage, obey her husband in

marriage and obey her son if her husband dies², which is also known as the three obedience.

In addition to gender roles, Confucian patriarchy also creates a hierarchy that dominates young generations with the concept 孝 (filial piety). It means that people must submit themselves to family authority: father, mother, and other elderly relatives. Moreover, Confucianism strengthens filial piety and emphasizes the most important one: continuity of the family, which in specific means giving birth to male offspring. There is a famous Confucian saying “无孝有三，无后为大”，which originally means that there are three forms of unfilial piety, among which the worst is not fulfilling the responsibilities of the younger generation. However, the meaning changes afterwards to the worst unfilial conduct is not having male descendants. This saying contributes to Chinese son preference to some extent.

Combined with three obedience and filial piety, women face dual oppression inside a family: to obey male authority (father and husband) and the elders (firstly the male elder and then the female elder). Confucian patriarchy depicts a traditional and ideal gender relation in marriage: women are submissive to men and shoulder the responsibility to continue the family line.

Even though China's modernization and urbanization have gradually changed the traditional family structure, Confucian patriarchy's influence remains strong, especially true in terms of marriage. According to Gu (2019), despite women's rising employment and social status, Confucian culture is still prominent in Taiwanese immigrant families as a tool for husbands and mothers-in-law to conduct traditional gender practices. As Wang (2018: 79) states, there is a social and political base in Chinese traditionally marital cognition, and Confucianism is essential in order to understand Chinese marriage.

When studying marital violence, Liu (2003: 137–142) finds out that among research subjects, urban men are more filial than rural men. This is different from ordinary stereotypes that rural people are more filial than urban people since rural areas retain more traditional culture and customs. Both Wang (2018) and Liu (2003) show that Confucian patriarchy have more influence on urban people than commonly assumed.

Most research on Confucian marital values focused on their roles within marriage (see Wang 2013, Liu 2003, Littlejohn 2017, and Zhang 2019), whereas people's mindsets have been formalized long before marriage. It might help to reconsider how Confucian patriarchy impacts on people's attitudes regarding marriage and if it contributes to postponing marriage, especially in urban areas. Therefore, this study will take Confucian patriarchy into account.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

In previous studies, scholars agree that well-educated, high-income people who live in big cities and come from better-educated families are more likely to postpone their marriage. Their socioeconomic status offers more choices and narrowing down choices takes time, hence marriage postponement, which is often translated into being picky in a negative tone, especially so for women (see Li and Chen

2012). Zuo and Xia (2011) stated that women pursuing individual benefit was the reason they cannot find a match. Xu et al. (2003) point out that women's economic independence decreases marriage gains. Similarly, Liu (2014) criticized women for chasing too much material profit than affection in marriage.

According to resource exchange theory, men and women exchange tangible and intangible resources to maximize benefits (Edwards 1969), to which the above-mentioned perspectives agreed and assumed that women, in particular, want to benefit from marriage since overall women maintain a lower socioeconomic status. On the contrary, Xu and Wang (2014) argue that women view marriage as their most important choice in life, thus they demand stability and avoid risks in marriage. However, scholars did not specify risks, nor was there empirical evidence.

Do women postpone marriage to gain more, or lose less in terms of emotional, financial, and social involvement in future marriage? What about men on this matter? These questions remain open.

Moreover, previous research on postponing marriage has not progressed much beyond the stage of mate selection. Their research objects are single, struggling to find suitable matches with diverse standards. However, finding a suitable match does not necessarily link to marriage. Many couples are satisfied with their matches, yet they might break up during marital discussion.

Being picky in mate selection and collapse in marital discussion might be because people pay extra attention and consideration regarding marriage, and it can be a power negotiation for both families since marriage is not simply a personal matter in China (Sun 2013; Fei 2019).

This study will consider people's expectations and concerns regarding mate selection and marriage negotiation in order to understand whether people want to gain more or lose less in future marriage and discuss possible reasons. The study argues that people face marital risks, therefore they willingly postpone marriage to lose less, and due to cultural and social gendered norms, women face more risks than men do.

3. Methodology

This study is qualitative, using in-depth interviews as primary data and official information online as secondary data. Snowball sampling starting from friends and acquaintances is employed. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face, online video, and audio chat on Wechat (a Chinese online communication application). To protect the interviewees, their personal information and contexts mentioned in the following content will be anonymized and under pseudonyms. Before the interviews, the purpose and methodology of this study were introduced. Recordings of conversations are done based on their consent. This section will introduce interviewees' necessary information, target cities, and the interview structure.

3.1. Interviewees' Basic Information

Previous studies have shown that well-educated, high-income people living in large cities tend to postpone getting married. Therefore, to find new perspectives on this issue, fixed factors should be well-educated, above average income, and working in big cities. This study targeted women and men working in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen with at least a bachelor's degree, a salary above average³ and age between 25 and 35, single or in a relationship.

This study interviewed 50 people. It aimed to interview 25 women and 25 men. However, only 23 men participated. Therefore, the final gender distribution is 23 men and 27 women. Twenty-two of them hold a bachelor's degree, and the others have a master's degree. As for yearly income, 27 people earn less than 200,000 CNY (1 CNY equals around 18 JPY), 16 between 200,000 CNY to 500,000 CNY, and 7 more than 500,000 CNY.

The follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 people (6 women and 4 men) based on their willingness, available time, and opinions regarding the topic this study focuses on, including 5 people in Beijing, 3 in Shanghai, and 2 in Shenzhen.

3.2. Target Cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen

The followings are the reasons for choosing these cities.

Beijing is the political and economic center of China. According to a study relating to Beijing's population structure, a more highly educated (bachelor and above) population has occupied more than 30% of the total migrant⁴ population. Similar to Beijing, Shanghai has a 4.55 million migrant population (by the end of June 2017), of which 80% is under 40 years old, and 30% hold a degree equivalent to bachelor's and above (《上海市来沪人员就业状况报告》⁵, 2017). As for Shenzhen, the city attracts IT industry enterprises such as Tencent, Huawei, Baidu, and other big names in this field. Based on data from the Statistics Bureau of Guangdong Province, there is a 130.2 million migrant population of which 42.3% hold a degree equivalent to bachelor's and above (《深圳市人口与社会事业发展“十三五”规划发布》⁶, 2017). These three cities have established policies to attract a highly educated population by offering them Huko.⁷

On the other hand, these three cities also have been struggling with low marriage rates, high divorce rates, and older first marriage age, which relates to this study's concern. Take 《2018中国结婚产业发展报告》⁸ as a reference, the top three cities in terms of divorce rate are Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen with the rate of 39%, 38%, and 36.25%, respectively. The first marriage age in Beijing is 28.2 years old for men and 26.1 for women. According to Shanghai Women's Federation, the first marriage age is 31.1 for men and 28.4 for women in 2015. As for Shenzhen, the number is an average of 30.8 for both genders in 2018.

These three cities attract highly educated people with older first marriage age. Therefore, they are the appropriate targets for this study.

3.3. Structure of the Interview

The interview includes an in-depth conversation regarding the interviewee's personal history, mate selection standards, expectations, and concerns regarding future marriage. After that, ten interviewees participated in a follow-up interview in person or via video/audio chat online, and were asked questions about their work, life, and family.

The first in-depth interview took an average of one hour, conducted through video, audio, and message chat on WeChat. Ten people were interviewed by video, 30 people were interviewed by audio (25 of them agreed to be recorded, and the other 5 preferred not to be), and the other 10 interviews were conducted by messages.

The following groups constituted the first interview: Basic Information, Ideal Picture (mate selection), Ideal Marriage, Reality (single, being in a relationship and ready to get married), Concerns regarding future marriage, and Parents' and relatives' influence.

The follow-up interview with ten people had no intended questions or plans. The conversation was mainly about personal history, family influence, current living environment, and their thoughts on marriage.

4. Findings

This section will analyze findings in three categories: Confucian patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and marital risks.

4.1. Confucian Patriarchy Stands Strong

As stated in 2.3, Confucian patriarchy depicts a traditional and ideal gender relation in marriage: women are submissive to men and bear the duty of childbirth to continue the family line.

This study asked questions regarding family planning, childrearing, and house chore distribution in a future marriage. The outcome shows that men feel obliged to continue the family line. When asked about family planning, both men and women agree to have kids. However, men hold a strong sense of responsibility to have descendants. This matches “不孝有三，无后为大” and shows the influence of Confucianism. (In the following quotations, F/M stands for female/male. The number after M/F is the time sequence of the interview. The second number shows the interviewee's age.)

“Of course, I want kids. Two, if possible. If I don't want kids, why on earth do I get married?” (M18, 27)

“I don't know how to face my parents if I can't give them a grandchild.” (M7, 29)

“It's men's duty to have children. This is how society works. I don't like children, but it doesn't matter. Duty is duty.” (M8, 30)

Men, influenced by Confucianism, believe in and value their roles in continuing the family line. They combine marriage and descendants. On the other hand, women tend to have an open mind regarding the same matter.

“I like children. I will have at least one. Two if affordable. It’s so expensive to raise kids these days.” (F3, 29)

“I wouldn’t call myself a kid person, but I don’t dislike children either. I just don’t think it’s necessary or a duty to have children.” (F2, 28)

“If I want to get married in China, the children issue will haunt me forever. People would urge you to have children. Even if you don’t care about other people’s thoughts, the husband would want one. Ironically the husband doesn’t need to bear all the pain.” (F22, 30)

Women consider more about childbirth since they will experience pregnancy and suffer from various side effects caused by giving birth. However, during the interviews, no men discussed these topics. Childbirth seems natural and non-negotiable to them. Five male interviewees think that letting women decide whether to have another child is moral and thoughtful because having one child is essential in marriage.

Interestingly, both women’s and men’s parents insist on continuing the family line, although only the male descendant is considered the one to continue the family line. Nevertheless, women’s parents agree with Confucian filial piety and push their daughters to execute it. Ironically, these parents are criticized for ending the family line since their next generation are women only.

On the other hand, women do not have the final decision-making power in childbirth. Many of them are not fond of having children and taking care of them, yet they are afraid that their future partners would leave them if they do not agree to have children.

Along with childbirth, male interviewees treat marriage as essential, since heterosexual marriage is seen as the foundation of a family. Only the child born within a marriage is considered offspring. Female interviewees showed a desire to get married, but they seek a companion and a sense of security as primary needs irrespective of having offspring or not.

Furthermore, Confucian patriarchy encourages women to pay more attention to family issues and play their roles as virtuous wives and mothers. Nowadays, women’s labor markets’ participation rose to 69% (the Economist Corporate Network 2018). Modern Chinese women bear two layers of burden: work and family. It is especially true for female interviewees in this study.

Based on data collected, both men and women are influenced by Confucian patriarchy. Men tend to believe and tie with these rules more than women do. Therefore, if men want to get married, they either must find women with the same belief or understand women’s dilemmas and change their values. The reality is that female interviewees value emotional needs more and keep a relatively open mind. Finding matching mindsets takes more time and inevitably postpones marriage.

4.2. Gender Stereotypes Remain an Obstacle

One part of the interview looked intended mate selection standards, such as age, physical appearance, education, career, family background, and personality. Forty-eight interviewees value personality the most. Only two interviewees valued other factors more: one woman paid attention to the future partner's income potential, and one man valued physical appearance.

Even though the modern well-educated population seeks emotional and spiritual needs in intimate relationships, several deep-rooted gender stereotypes remain. The following shows how women and men perceive future partners' age.

"The future partner better be older than me. Older means he is mature and be able to take care of me. I think boys in this society turns mature much later than girls." (F18, 27)

"I want to find a younger girl. That would make her look even younger when she stands right next to me. Girls want to seem young and beautiful, don't they?" (M4, 25)

"I don't care much about the partner's age. If I can choose, I would like a mature man, older than me within ten years old." (F14, 27)

Among 50 interviewees, only 2 women revealed absolutely no criteria against age, and the other 48 agreed with traditional mate selection standards: men should be older than women. Despite this fact, women do have a relatively open mind for younger mates; on the contrary, men tend to demonstrate their maturity by selecting younger mates.

Other than age preference, the following statements appeared when it comes to a future partner's career and income.

"I appreciate independent women. I think they are very great. But I would not date them or even marry one. Just my opinion, independent women are too aggressive. They probably don't want to spend much time with family. I am a family person, and I want a wife who can take care of the family." (M17, 28)

"I think women better have a lower income than men. High-income women can be very tough." (M8, 29)

"I don't want my future partner to have a career like a sales rep or start her own business. Women who are used to active social life can be hard to control." (M6, 28)

Stereotypes regarding independent women as "aggressive", "not a family type", and "hard to control" are mentioned repeatedly. Working women are seen as threats to masculinity and not dedicated enough to family life. Contrary to this commonly held stereotype, more than half of high-income female interviewees would like to adjust their workload for their future families. This shows that the two genders lack communication and men hold a biased view toward women.

4.3. For Women and Men, Marital Risks Differ

In this study, marital risks refer to the energy, emotion, and finance one has paid or/and must pay before/during/after marriage (mate selection, marriage maintenance, and divorce).

During the interviews, marriage-breaking concerns were asked, including but not limited to domestic violence, infidelity, and in-law relationships. Interviewees reacted in surprise, saying that no one had ever asked these questions. In traditional thinking, marriage is sacred and should be maintained whatever it takes as the saying goes 宁拆十座庙，不毁一桩婚 (Better to demolish ten temples than to destroy a marriage). Marriage endangering issues are seen as impolite and vicious and barely touched in previous studies.

During the interview, interviewees shared their concerns and hesitations. From the men's side, they are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, it is conventional for men to prepare housing, vehicles, and betrothal gifts. By doing so, they are seen as future breadwinners. On the other hand, they feel the financial pressure and view the burden on them as discrimination against men.

"Nowadays, men can't get married without a house. Even if the future wife doesn't care, her parents would."
(M14, 31)

"I thought men and women were equal. But still, men must prepare the house. I don't understand that." (M17, 28)

However, female interviewees are not critical of financial and material settings.

"It is too expensive to pay for a house in Beijing. Also, relatives and friends understand the difficulty I face. I don't mind buying a house with my future partner." (F16, 29)

"I don't like men saying they bought the house. Nowadays, most people buy a house by paying a mortgage. Women within marriage help pay the mortgage. Then why do men feel like they bought the house on their own? They even say they bought the house for women. Ridiculous, they live in the house too." (F22, 30)

Living costs in big cities is expensive already, let alone real estate purchase cost. Most female interviewees said they wanted to buy cars and houses with future partners, showing that material settings are not as important to women as men assume.

Compared to the male dilemma, women are struggling with more practical issues. To begin with, discrimination against women in job opportunities is getting worse.

"As an HR and a woman, I feel upset when I am aware of recruit discrimination against women, yet I am not capable of doing much more than not asking women questions regarding family planning. We all know the company would not like a female employee to be pregnant and leave the job after a short time of recruiting her."

(F15, 30)

F15's concern was echoed by seven other female interviewees. If the women want to get married and have kids several years after entering their company, their chances of getting a promotion decline. According to a survey conducted by All China Women's Federation in 2017, 49.1% of companies focus on applicants' gender and marital status when recruiting new employees. 54.7% of female applicants were asked regarding marital and fertility status in job interviews.

In China, current paternal leave is considered and conducted mainly for women, which opposes companies' financial pressure for hiring women since there is a lack of social welfare support from the state to compensate for the financial loss during the paternal leave. As a result, many companies would indirectly turn down female applicants. Job discrimination caused by marital and fertility status endangers women's career and financial independence. Women face more obstacles in seeking a divorce since they might be dependent on their husbands for financial help, even more so after childbirth.

What is more, when asked in terms of infidelity, men and women reacted differently. Men agree that infidelity is fatal to marriage, and they would end the marriage immediately.

"I think no man can live with a green hat (绿帽子).⁹ I definitely would get a divorce." (M21, 31)

"There are double standards for men and women. If a man cheats on his wife, people praise him for being capable. But if a woman does the same, she is a slut. As for myself, I would end the relationship if my girlfriend cheated on me." (M3, 26)

Male interviewees showed their courageous decision-making power regarding the topic, yet females' consideration is complicated depending on whether they have kids.

"That is why I don't want kids. I don't want to be tied with kids and to consider if divorce would have a bad influence on them if my partner cheat on me." (F16, 29)

"I think it depends on how long he has been cheating on me and what did he do during that time. I would want a divorce if I did not have kids. Kids would change the situation. I have to consider all the influence on them." (F9, 29)

When faced with infidelity, two female interviewees said they would maintain the marriage for their children's sake, one mentioned she would deal the divorce more carefully to avoid bad influence on children and eight female interviewees would respond depending on how serious the affair was. Seven female interviewees and four male interviewees mentioned there were double standards for men and women in terms of infidelity, and they agreed that women are facing more severe criticism from society

when committing infidelity. Four female interviewees said their parents would suggest they tolerate future husbands' infidelity. Two are quoted as below.

"My parents probably will encourage me to give him another chance if he can change." (F18, 27)

"My parents are peace-makers. They would reconcile us. I shall stick to my principles" (F27, 26)

Apart from infidelity, one hidden subject was brought up by two interviewees. One female interviewee was deceived into a relationship with a gay who pretended to be straight. She felt hurt and confused. After doing research online, she found out that there are around 70 million gay men in China and many of them prefer to remain in the closet and get married. Another case was a male interviewee who stated he was bisexual and concerned that his parents would be devastated to know his sexual orientation. He hesitates about coming out.

In heterosexual marriage studies, researchers focus on heterosexual relationships. However, the reality is complicated. As stated in 2.3, Chinese people are deeply influenced by Confucianism. Coming out as gay is viewed as a man's failure since they cannot continue the family line. Instead of fighting for their free rights, choosing to hide their sexual orientation in order to get married and have kids is the easier way to live in Chinese society.

According to Tang and Yu (2014), even though gay men are more likely to pretend to be straight and get married, lesbians also choose the same. However, due to the male dominated society and culture, pretend wives of homosexual men live a more challenging life than pretend husbands of lesbians in several aspects. For example, pretend wives can catch STDs more easily and suffer from childbirth while pretend husbands have higher social status due to a male-centered culture. Moreover, pretend wives face the difficulty of finding new spouses if gay husbands leave them later in life due to age discrimination against women. Therefore, although both women and men can be victims of being pretend spouses, women struggle much more than men in the same situation.

At the time of writing, the setting of a cooling off period for divorce in the Civil Code is being discussed online. Considering 73.4%¹⁰ of divorces are initiated by women, Web-users argue it would only result in people, especially women hesitating about marriage instead of decreasing the divorce rate as intended.

In these interviews, domestic violence was the least concerning issue. All interviewees claimed they were decent people and would never conduct such behavior. In-law relationships was rarely concerned since interviewees live in big cities, physically remote from their parents.

Marital risks mentioned above, including job discrimination, infidelity, and fake marriage, are crucial perspectives in studying postponing marriage. They reflect people's grave concerns, which are often disguised as picky in mate selection and sometimes result in a collapse in marital discussion. Since women face more marital risks, they tend to consider thoroughly and postpone marriage. It explains

why in previous studies, women are criticized more for the postponing marriage phenomenon and most suggestions to address this issue are made specifically to women (Liu 2014; Chen & Li 2012; Gong & Li 2015).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on both women's and men's expectations and concerns regarding future marriage in order to find out whether they postpone marriage to gain more or lose less and discuss possible reasons, which have been overlooked in previous studies. Based on interview data, it can be argued that both women and men try to lose less in the future marriage. However, due to cultural and social gendered norms, women face more severe risks than men do.

Influenced by Confucian patriarchy, people value marriage and reproduction to continue the family line, which is the foundation of Chinese marriage. It is within this context that marital negotiations between the two genders occur.

Furthermore, gender stereotypes intertwined with Confucian marital values expose women to marital risks, such as job discrimination, infidelity dilemma, and pretend marriage. These risks endanger women's careers, well-being, and self-fulfillment. On the other hand, men feel exploited to prepare for marital settings, such as housing, vehicles, and living expense, even though female interviewees want to share the financial burden with future partners contrary to male interviewees' assumptions. This demonstrates that the two genders struggle with different marital risks and lack mutual understanding.

In conclusion, women and men willingly postpone marriage in order to lose less in the future marriage. However, they face different risks due to cultural and social gendered norms, which complicate negotiation and in return, contribute to postponing marriage.

As a suggestion to policymakers, instead of pushing people to step into marriage via policy, social criticism, and pressure, opening dialogue measures to both genders to discuss their expectations and concerns with an open mind and gender-equal cognition might help.

This study faces certain flaws. It focused on people working in large cities with high educational backgrounds and income. Also, the sample size is small. For future research, more interviewees from developing and rural areas should be considered in order to determine whether the aforementioned perspectives are universal in China or only valid according to specific criteria.

Notes

1 National Bureau of Statistics of China: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>

2 The original Chinese is “未嫁从父，出嫁从夫，夫死从子”。

- 3 According to China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2019 (《中国劳动统计年鉴2019》), the average salary is 5,750 CNY across the country; and the average salary in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen is 10,910 CNY, 10,231 CNY, and 9,443 CNY, respectively.
- 4 Migrant in this article means migrating from rural areas to urban areas and from less developed areas to developed areas.
- 5 Shanghai Floating Population Employment Status Report 2017 by Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security of the People's Republic of China.
- 6 The 13th Five-Year Plan for Shenzhen's Population and Social Development 2017 <http://sz.people.com.cn/n2/2017/0112/c202846-29586873.html>
- 7 Hukou: A Chinese system for household registration.
- 8 2018 中国结婚产业发展报告 China's Marriage Industry Develop Report <http://www.hunjia520.cn/analysis/22956.html>
- 9 绿帽子(green hat) is an insulting name to call a man because his partner cheated on him. 戴绿帽子 (wearing a green hat) means being cheated on by one's partner and is seen as losing Face and lack of masculinity.
- 10 Source: 中国司法大数据专题报告离婚纠纷2018 http://www.court.gov.cn/upload/file/2018/03/23/09/33/20180323093343_53196.pdf

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