

## **Marriage and the Social Mobility of Women in Rural China: 1949-2000**

Jing Song  
Department of Sociology and  
Population Studies and Training Center  
Brown University  
Box 1916  
Providence, RI 02912  
Jing\_Song@Brown.edu

Nancy Luke  
Department of Sociology and  
Population Studies and Training Center  
Brown University  
Box 1916  
Providence, RI 02912  
nluke@Brown.edu

### **Abstract**

This paper uses intensive life history case studies to investigate the role of marriage as a vehicle for women's social mobility in rural China. The period under study covers three historical phases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that provide radically different social and institutional settings for marriage choices. In each period, marriage is a means for women to increase their social connections and improve their family situation. The personal objectives that women endeavor to fulfill through marriage, however, as well as the strategies they use to achieve their aims, vary across time and with women's position in the economic and social life of rural society. We compare and contrast women's diverse marriage strategies, how they are enacted, and their consequences concerning social mobility. Of particular interest is the finding that many women experience frustration over unfulfilled objectives due to the unpredictability of social change in rural China.

## **Extended Abstract**

This paper uses intensive life history case studies to investigate the role of marriage as a vehicle for women's social mobility in rural China. The period under study covers three historical phases—from the Maoist era to the Cultural Revolution to the age of market transition—that provide radically different social and institutional settings for marriage choices. The personal and family objectives that women endeavor to fulfill through marriage, as well as the strategies they use to achieve their aims, vary across time and with women's position in the economic and social life of rural society. We compare and contrast women's diverse marriage strategies, how they are enacted, and their consequences concerning social mobility across these three time periods.

In the first period (1949-1966), the revolution and regime-building process swept away anti-socialist elements in almost every aspect of social life. Under the traditional patriarchal system, women tended to guarantee their future security through arranged marriages. The revolution ushered in a period of greater individual choice in mate selection, accompanied by equalizing occupational statuses across partners and a changing division of household labor. This period was dominated by a theme of “political correctness” in choosing one's spouse, where rural proletariat and party members were the most acceptable marriage partners.

The second period (1966-1976) overlaps with the Cultural Revolution, when the command economy and the urban-rural divide had been established, and political sensitivity increased to an unprecedented level. People with favorable positions in the command economy, such as those possessing urban registration, were considered “ideal” spouses, while cadres and intellectuals, who were dismissed and expelled for political reasons, were now viewed as less desirable partners. During the third period of market reform (after 1980), capitalist values gradually gained significance in social labeling and social stratification. The market transition opened up economic opportunities for women, which provided them with alternative channels of social mobility on the one hand, but put many in an economically vulnerable position on the other.

Early family scholars drew on modernization theories to explain worldwide changes in marriage processes. Marriage was characterized as progressing from mate selection and household

production strategies dominated by family decision-making to privileging individual choice of spouses, the rise of romantic love, and equality between partners. Like other contemporary researchers of family change, we argue that the dynamics of marriage choice cannot be viewed in such a simplistic, linear fashion. In contemporary China, individualism and romantic notions have not been given precedence in marriage decisions to the same extent as the theory would predict. Instead, family ties and prevailing societal values are particularly influential in marriage strategies over each of the three historical periods. This is a consequence of two critical realities in rural China. First, the structure of life chances has been subject to dramatic shifts in policy and social expectations in the last half of the 20th century. In this dynamic context, marriage remains a viable avenue for women to acquire an advantageous family situation (*chushen*) and enhancement of one's social status and reputation. Second, interpersonal ties (*guanxi*) that are often necessary to acquire scarce goods and opportunities have continued to play an important role in individual achievement, and marriage is one key way to increase these connections. Women acquire a new network of social ties upon entering into a union with their husbands, which can be utilized to improve their ascribed family position. In sum, a "successful" marriage is more than the emotional satisfaction of individuals; it is means for women to build a promising and socially desirable personal and family career.

The paper examines how marriage strategies are enacted as well as their consequences concerning social mobility. A strategy of *homogamy* often results in the stabilization of one's position in the rural community, while *intermarriage*—across multiple dimensions—can lead to the betterment of life chances by changing one's political position, rural/urban registration, or economic status, depending on the values of the time period. The consequences of marriage decisions are not limited to social and economic mobility of individual women, but are also realized in the next generation. A "successful" marriage guarantees a respectable social label for the children, while it also provides the social ties and resources needed to invest in their educations, careers, and future marriages.

We also find that the unpredictability of social change can lead to frustration over unfulfilled objectives for some women. In each time period, women married for specific purposes and to achieve a certain status valued in that era. After a dramatic social transition, many women find

that their positions have been dismissed in the new ideological and institutional context. For example, a successful marriage that led to an elevated position in the political hierarchy during the Cultural Revolution loses its relative status and influence in the era of market reform. Thus, many women's long-term objectives—particularly for their children—are no longer attainable.

The data we use for this paper are in-depth life history interviews that have been collected in a rural Chinese village from 2004 to 2007. More than 60 households of different generations and levels of economic status were interviewed to capture trends in family norms and marriage choices. For this analysis, we select 19 women from these households, six of whom were born before 1949, seven in the 1950s, and six after 1960. The three groups of women experienced union formation during the three historical periods under study, and they also vary on dimensions of political and economic status within each group. These women's life histories, as well as their own interpretation of marriage choices and relevant life chances, compose the basic materials for the in-depth analysis. Through this work, we offer a more comprehensive understanding of why marriage decisions differ and how the process of marriage formation responds to changing systems of social stratification in rural Chinese society.