

Choose to Be More Individualistic or Collectivistic? A Reflection on Marriage Practice in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolving dynamics of individualism and collectivism within the context of Chinese modernization, particularly in the realm of marriage practices. Drawing upon Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, this research conducts two case studies of nominal marriage and marriage migration among rural migrants to assess whether social value in contemporary society reflects a shifting balance between these two values. It finds that there is a trend of departure between biological small self and societal greater self under the modernized environment. Though emerging attention has been paid to individualistic desires for seeking true loves, people still value their social identity when the small- and great- self conflict with each other, possibly through making a compromise to orthodoxy or wrapping themselves in the cloak of individualism to integrate into the so-called modernized urbanites group. Thus, it also indicates that it is hard to define a certain national culture whether appears more individualistic or collectivistic since it depends on what scale it would be measured.

Keywords: individualism, collectivism, marriage practice, national culture

1. Introduction

In Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory[1], which is an analysis framework for cross-cultural communication, individualism and collectivism is one of the five dimensions to reflect the culture of a specific society effecting on people's value. This category serves to be an index to evaluate the behavior of societal members that to what degree people tend to be integrated into groups. In his theory, individualistic behavior considers oneself related to their immediate families but gives little significance to ties among the whole group. Collectivism presents reversely. From this definition, it can be deduced that family is regarded as a point of junction between group and individual. Additionally, since marriage is a primary approach to generating offspring, thus forming a family, it might be interesting to see whether one national culture behaves more individualistic or collectivistic from people's perception and practice of marriage. In the case of China, many have believed that Chinese society shows more collectivistic feature mainly because of great attention paid on interpersonal relationship with both the consanguineal and the non-consanguineal. However, this kind of value of society, though relatively steady, might be changed with socioeconomic or political transformations since the changing behaviors may reversely penetrate and thus influence value. Some

researchers argue that Chinese society has had a nuance shift from more collectivism orientation to more individualism orientation due to the introduction of market economy and CCP's ideological transformation[2]. It is fair to portray the picture of behaviors and value changes in Chinese marriage contemporarily in some way. For instance, women liberation advocated by the CCP since Mao era like outlawing arranged marriage and female labor employment, though condemned as party patriarchy which serves revolution, has promoted gender equality, making the marriage more out of individual will than family stress to some extent. Moreover, economic success since reform era like increasing individual wages and maturing welfare system could cause younger individual's less financial reliance on family and the elder's less dependence on children's support. Consequently, these factors have the potential to undermine family collectivism in marriage. However, this does not necessarily mean that modern Chinese marriage is prone to show individualistic traits as individualism and collectivism might not be excluding opposite to each other. So based on these considerations, this essay is going to investigate a research question: In term of individualism and collectivism, does Chinese modernization stimulate a value shifting in Chinese people's marriage practice? To further explore this question, it will discuss two common marriage practices in contemporary China that can reflect certain social value.

2. CASE 1: NOMINAL MARRIAGE

Homosexuality long has been hardly accepted by Chinese traditional society. Due to male's predominant role in Chinese sexual relationship, gay men, usually called "cutting sleeves (duanxiu)", were particularly stigmatized and marginalized by society because they violated ethical doctrines under the patriarchal rule. This kind of social perception can be explained from the perspective of family formation. According to the anthropological definition, family can be regarded as a reproductive community composed of parents and children. In the case of traditional China, as Fei delineated that, different from western family pattern which takes a heterosexual couple as the horizontally main but temporary axis to manage childbearing affairs, traditional Chinese family prioritizes the vertical connection between father and son, which serves to be a continuity of patriarchal family enterprise, over that between husband and wife [3]. This indicates that marriage under this family is a person's obligation to be responsible for collective interest of family and even the whole clan instead of a simple combination of two individuals in society. As a result, homosexuality, especially among gay men, blocks the vertical reproduction model to a large extent, just like the monk. The failure to reproduce offspring also makes these homosexual individuals fail to take moral responsibility, to more specific, to reach the goal of family group. Consequently, this kind of sexual orientation out of self-biological and emotional preference would not be acknowledged by traditional social orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, this social perception has gradually changed with broad environment of Chinese modernization in recent years. Researchers has noticed a value or attitude shifting that individual's more emphasis on fulfilling self-desire and more tolerance towards sexual orientation diversity, partly because of economic security for basic needs and the influence of multicultural education [4]. More media exposure of LGBT and the development of homosexuality cybercommunities are additionally promoting destigmatization of homosexuality in Chinese society. All these factors indicate that the individuals in homosexual community now tend to position themselves as a independent and self-expressive unit other than one who sacrifices one's own interest to maintain the integrity of social collective contract, namely the morality. However, one quantitative research result [5], which collects data from college students in Beijing, shows that though young generation do not think homosexuality as a sin, they give less tolerance for formal social institutions of homosexuality. This indicates that the increasing acceptance of homosexuality is more like a cognitive change on the surface than a real value shifting from collectivism to individualism.

Under this circumstance, nominal marriage (xingshi hunyin) is an example to reflect Chinese social value in marriage pattern. Just in accordance with its name, nominal marriage usually refers to the situation that a gay man marries a lesbian woman just in a mutually legal agreement, usually a childbearing contract, while the gay man is still living with his homosexual mate. This behavior can be considered as a compromise between filial piety required from family and individual freedom. Why do these homosexual individuals in China need such a compromise? The reason can be given from a tripartite approach of personhood proposed by Yan[6]. In this analytical framework, personhood is composed of three factors: biologicistic “individual” which emphasize intuitive desires, moralist “self” which makes judgement about the outcome of satisfying one’s desire, and relational “person” which stands for a social approved role based on relational action. Chinese personhood is a dynamic process of interactions among these three factors [6]. Guided by this approach, it is clear to see both inner struggles and external pressure of Chinese people in the case of nominal marriage. On one hand, homosexual individuals value their own desires and feelings and want to be accountable for themselves free from societal judgement. They refuse to cheat themselves to forcefully cater to social mainstream. On the other, they cannot leave behind their own moral judgement standard and their social identities. Firstly, though social stereotype for homosexuality has been broken in some degree, there is no legalized institution to justify this sexual orientation in China, which means it is still marginalized. Consequently, a straightforward homosexual identity may put a person at the risk of being stigmatized as a weirdo, thus harming one’s reputation in an orthodox society. Add to the social perception that individual’s behavior is collectively tied with family’s honor and disgrace, the homosexual identity might also make the family shamed. Such a person would be condemned unfilial if overlooking the face of the whole family since he or she neither takes the obligation of childbearing nor valuing family’s face in society. In this way, nominal marriage is a compromising way to retain a role of good child in family and a good person in society with less sacrifice of one’s desire. Overall, from the case of nominal marriage, it shows that in contemporary Chinese marriage there are some emerging individualism features, which is that untraditional individual desire is acknowledged and valued, and people are willing to struggle for a negotiation space with social orthodox value. But this negotiation also indicates that a marriage should take a person’s position in society and their relational network into consideration and have to sacrifice a full fulfillment of desire, which shows more collective characteristics.

3. CASE 2: MARRIAGE MIGRATION FOR NEW GENERATION OF RURAL MIGRANTS

There is a prominent phenomenon in China since the reform era that marriage migration, which usually refers to demographic inter-regional mobilization caused by marriage, happens frequently. Evidence has shown that female with rural hukou is the major constitution of inter-provincial marriage migration and there is an obvious trend of inland-to-costal mobilization [7]. Hence, this section will focus on these female migrants’ perception of marriage to see if there is value shifting from collectivism to individualism.

It can be argued that females in traditional marriage pattern in rural areas are often strategically utilized to serve the collective goals of kin group. Because traditional Chinese family pattern, as mentioned in the first section, emphasizes a vertical consanguinity instead of a horizontal conjugal model, the position of daughter in a family might be awkward in some way. A adult daughter is not acknowledged by her natal family as one who can continue the paternal lineage bloodline, as is reflected in a proverb that “A married daughter is like spilt water (嫁出去的女儿泼出去的水)”. Also, during fenjia(分家), which is a traditional ritual marking children in family changing from singlehood into adulthood, parental estate is usually equally divided among sons. This is actually a default that daughter no longer belong to her natal family, to be more specific, family’s linear bloodline, as long

as she has married. However, it does not necessarily mean that the daughter is totally split with the natal family. Instead, family's perception of the role of daughter is pragmatic. In the case of a rural family with migrants parents in the city, the eldest underage daughter usually should take the responsibility to take care of younger siblings as parents do [8]. After the daughter marries out, the natal family also expected to gain support from her marital family, either economically or relationally, to better native family's prosperity. This reflects that daughter's marriage is considered as a approach to compensating some deficiency of natal family within a particular village community. Consequently, since daughter's marriage pertains to family's interest, parental and even kinship's influence are imposed on mate choice, usually seeking for mendang hudui (门当户对) or higher social status. So though the role of daughters is marginalized in family, they are constantly subjective to this family collectivism with their ow marriage as a way to achieve family collective goal. Growing up under this collective value but with little economic reliance on natal family in their adulthood, it is more helpful to investigate young migrant generation's value changing reflected in how they behave in mate choice from female migrants' perspective, because daughter's behavior is less restricted by economic factors in natal family compared to son.

The rise of romantic love is a prominent consequence of deeper openness in China since 1990s along with economic success, because individual economic independence has promoted individual freedom and conjugal privacy [9]. As a result, it directly influences the practice of marriage, which tends to more value sexual love than material value. Though Chinese peasants embrace this individualization trend in some degree, urban residents are a better practitioner of this ideological changing because they are more frequently exposed to the modernizing environment in cities compared with people living in rural areas. Thus, rural-urban migrants is the linking point of traditional ethic and such new ethic about marriage and how new migrant generation perceive their social identity is key to decode the relation between individualistic romantic love marriage pattern and marriage migration. Unlike new migrant generation, their parent generation of migrant workers were directly emancipated from rural people's commune to cities in early 1980s. They still believed that they were totally rural people because they grew up in traditional peasant society and considered city as a temporary residence where they could gain money to feed back their rural native family. However, the new migrant generation is more like household registration institutional barrier. They grow up without knowing how to farm but they still hold rural hukou just because of their birthplace and that their migrant parents fail to join an urban hukou [10]. Thus, new migrant generation are hesitated to acknowledge their social identity of a rural person, but they are also resisted to be an urban citizen because of rural household registration. Meanwhile, they have witnessed the "modernized" lifestyle that their parents have experienced in urban areas where people could independently arrange their life in their adulthood other than relying on the rural way of fenjia. As a result, with such a hybrid perception of social identity, new migrant generation would view living in cities as a mark of being an adult. Starting a romantic love story and having love marriage in cities, thus, is an approach to echoing the individualistic lifestyle of modernized marriage paradigm and also the image of urban middle class. Thus, it can be argued that the incentive behind marriage migration of new migrant generation is, to some extent, individualization, which reflects a hope to be independent from family's influence.

Though the love marriage pattern shown in marriage migration manifests new migrant generation's emphasis on physically "small self", namely the individual will, this individualization trend is achieved subliminally by them in a broader setting of collectivist and relational society. As the party-state has propagandized since reform era, modernization equals a progress in the context of contemporary Chinese society, which somehow means a repudiation of traditional patterns. Thus, so-called modernized urban lifestyle with individualistic features is endowed with superiority over the rural ones. As a result, a new marriage style that highlight intimacy in conjugal relationship serves to

be a symbol to distinguish formal sector workers from urban middle class and informal sector workers from rural class [11]. Such a hierarchy would make rural migrants more likely describe themselves as open-minded than conservative so that they might not be criticized by urban people. As a result, seeking for a love mate and arrange marriage independently can better help rural migrants retain their face, accepted by urban residents and thus better integrated into urban social groups. One example of an ethnography conducted on factory female migrant workers can support this view [8]. Through in-depth observation and interview, researcher finds a common situation that migrant factory girls usually live outside with their boyfriend and when a girl get pregnant under a stable romantic relationship with her mate, she would quit her job to marry and tell her colleagues that she is “promoted”, whose subtext is that she not only gets promoted to be mother but also get promoted to be urban class. Also, those migrant colleagues do not consider pre-marital pregnancy as a shame but congratulate the pregnant girl for a better life. This indicates that achieving individualistic economic independence is not the paramount prompt from these female migrants to live in the modernized city and arrange their own marriage. Instead, they want to show that their “great self” can fairly suit in the modernized city by behaving individualistically in their marriage, which is a common-perceived love marriage pattern by urban people.

Overall, from the case of marriage migration, it can be argued that love marriage pattern developed from so-called individualism is a new lifestyle defined, which is paradoxically defined in advance to achieve the goal of modernization. Thus, marriage migration of new generation migrants is a behavior driven by value shifting in a true sense. Instead, it is treated as a strategic way to be integrated into a certain social group.

4. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, this paper tries to solve the research question and finds that under Chinese “modernized” environment, there is an emerging departure between physical small self and socially great self in marriage where the former tends to more emphasis individual desire while the later still values interpersonal relationship and the degree of integration in mainstream social groups. As reflected in the two cases discussed above, for nominal marriage, though it accepts and values the reasonability of homosexuality derived from self-desire, such a marriage pattern is a compromise to cater to family collective goals and social sexual orthodoxy and thus retain Mianzi in interpersonal network; for marriage migration, new-generation migrants pursue a practice of an individualistic romantic love in cities but such a behavior is more out of the consideration to suit in modernized urban areas for perpetuate residence. Thus, this indicates that it might be too general to portray a national culture as either individualism or collectivism, as in Hofstede’s original theory. What matters is on which scale people’s practice shows more individualism since they are not absolutely a pair of antonyms at least in Chinese context. Chances are that the modernization has changed the cognitive value of a single individual from conservativeness to openness, but when it comes to the whole social groups, individualization is also a collective goal to form a modernized social ethos. Thus, further research may be done to explore who sets the goal in society and its significance in the division between individualism and collectivism.

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