Educational Status in the Marriage Exchange in Contemporary China

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Abstract. In the late 1970s, Our country restored the college entrance examination system, emphasizing the important role of educational background, and also made it an important resource advantage affecting marriage exchange. However, the enrollment expansion reform of colleges and universities implemented in 2000 has led diploma to a sharp decline in the “glory” and the exchange value in the marriage market. This paper aims to make a brief analysis of the changes in the value of educational status (academic qualifications and diplomas) in marriage exchange during China’s past 40 years, and I will also briefly introduces the exchange characteristics of different genders in the marriage market.

Due to the specific social and historical background, many Chinese’s specific social status and identity have played different roles in the marriage exchange relation since the establishment of new China. This has undergone more tortuous changes, reflecting the complex changes of contemporary Chinese society and its impacts on people’s marriage and family life. The paper aims to analyze the corresponding changes of educational status (academic qualification and diploma) in the marriage exchange, which has changed typically before and after the reform and opening up. Through comparative analysis, we can see that the social status and identity changes of the parties and their families in the marriage exchange have a close relationship with a series of formal and informal systems of the state and society in a particular historical period.

The “Exchange Value” of Diplomas and Academic Qualifications in the Marriage Market Is Gradually Decreasing

In modern society, a person’s educational status is mainly manifested in the diploma and academic qualifications he has obtained. Objectively speaking, his diploma and education is only the evidence of his educational years or degree and his learning experience. In China, the relationship between diploma and marriage can be traced back to the traditional society more than two thousand years ago. Since the Sui Dynasty began to select talents through the imperial examination system, there has been a great relationship between diploma and marriage in more than two thousand years of Chinese history, whether in real life or in literary and artistic works such as novels and dramas. Especially in novels, dramas and other literary works, due to the exaggeration and imagination of art, the relationship between diploma and marriage has almost always been the eternal theme of these literary works, and it is also a topic which is widely discussed among the ordinary people. The classical scenes in the movies and dramas and other artistic works are often: the former is because those unmarried young people who win the Juren or the Champion in the exam will be immediately recruited as the bridegroom by the emperor or as son-in-law by a prominent minister in the Court, and then be entrusted with an important task and promoted to a higher rank. The latter refers to those married men who have passed the examinations, they then abandoned their wives and children and their original marriage in order to seek a better future.

In many countries around the world, diplomas have always been of high exchange value in the marriage market. For example, in his book “The History of Human Marriage”, Westermarck pointed out: “The groom’s education has had a great impact on his status/worth. In Bangladesh, college graduates from the Kayastha caste usually can be sold for 500 to 1000 rupees, and some even can reach a record of 10000 rupees”. In the past 40 years, the diploma and degree has undergone a tremendous change in China’s marriage market. In the late 1970s, among the first college graduates in China after the resumption of the college entrance examination, their diplomas

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were of the highest value in marriage exchange. However, since 2000, with the abolition of “unified distribution of jobs” for university graduates and the implementation of policies requiring college graduates to choose their own careers. The diplomas and qualifications of college graduates, especially undergraduate and below diplomas, are significantly reduced in the “exchange value” of the marriage market.

As we all know, since our country resumed the college entrance examination system in the late 1970s, until the end of the 1990s, many college graduates from rural areas can overcome many existing barriers to marriage just with a single diploma and make a marriage that themselves and their parents/families could not dare to imagine. At that time, the most common phenomenon was that male college graduates from rural areas with agricultural household registration would easily marry a girl with non-agricultural household in the city. In fact, it is better to say that in the specific social context, the other series of social values and economic values carried by the diplomas are huge, rather than to say the high value of diploma diplomas in marriage exchanges at the time. For example, according to the national policy of the time, when the children with peasant household registration were admitted to the university, their agricultural household registration would immediately be transferred to non-agricultural household registration. After graduating from university, their work is also distributed by the state. After working in the unit, the house is also allocated by the unit. Therefore, the diploma and Diploma of university graduates at that time actually symbolized work income, social status and a series of other rich material conditions, and these factors hidden behind the diploma are the real value of it.

According to the detailed statistics in my survey, after the resumption of the college entrance examination system in China, there have been 14 people in F village of A Province have left the countryside through college entrance examination since 1979. On the basis of the author’s memory and investigation, before the year of 2000, especially in the 1980s and 1979, several college students who were admitted to the college caused the greatest sensation effect in F village at that time. Especially in 1979 and 1980, F Village had two undergraduates in two years. At that time, the two students who were admitted to the university and their families became a “big news” and the envy of many families, not only in F village, but also in the whole S town affiliated to the F village. In the survey, some elderly people in F village also recalled some scenes when this two students were enrolled in the university. An old man still said with envious expression in his memory: “Oh, that’s a great event! Just like the Champion, the whole village came to congratulate him. When Zhou Zibao’s younger son was admitted to the college in 1980, he also paid the projection team of the commune to put three movies in the village, once a night, the whole village was as lively as the New Year”. I asked jokingly (knowing his answer): “Didn’t it only admitted to a college entrance exam? Is it worth so much pleasure?” The old man said to me disdainfully: “Didn’t it only admitted to a college entrance exam?” It’s easy for you to say that, it was quite different (from the present) to enter a university at that time. The entrance to university means a complete departure from the countryside, not only did you do not have to do dirty and tired farm work, but also become a member of “public family”, and then you are able to “eat Royal grain”, the “public” also have allocate houses, and you also don’t have to worry about marrying a daughter-in-law. How can rural people get this treatment?” The old man’s words still reveal the infinite envy of the various national preferential policies enjoyed by university graduates at that time.

However, with the expansion of the scale of higher education in China at the end of the last century, and the implementation of a series of social policies such as non-job-assignment and self-employment of university graduates. On the one hand, the number of university graduates is increasing; due of the abolition of the unified distribution, all graduates have to find their units independently, and the nature of those units they are looking for is varied. If it doesn’t go well, some college graduates may not find a satisfactory unit after graduation for several years. On the other hand, the national preferential policies that were originally linked to the many real material interests of university graduates have disappeared, the most typical example is that since the implementation of the housing system reform in our country, the unit has canceled the welfare housing division, the college graduates have no allocated housing when they work in the unit, they
either rent or buy a house. Under these social backgrounds, the exchange value of college graduates’ academic degrees and diplomas in marriage is obviously greatly reduced.

The above changes have been partly proved by the experience of three college students in F village who have been admitted to universities since 2000. These three students are all enrolled in universities after the expansion of college enrollment. Because the expansion of the scale of higher education is accompanied by the college fees, and the family economic conditions of the three students are general, the four-year university has already made the three families overwhelmed in economy. However, the three students have been changing units frequently after graduated from university because their majors do not have much advantage in job-hunting, they constantly keeping “job-hopping”, and their economic income has never been up. Therefore, one of the college students even needs his parents to give him financial support sometimes. As for this matter, his father grinned helplessly and said:” There is no use for studying in the university, and spend so much money in vain. Such a man in his thirties is still floating on the water like a duckweed, he doesn’t even have a girlfriend. If I had known that it was such a result, I would have preferred not to let him go to college. If I had let him go out to work after he graduated from junior high school or senior high school, I’m afraid he’s making a lot of money now and already married and I may also have a grandson. Many children in the village did not go to college, but they also made money. However, as you can see, I and his mother get nothing until now, and we still need to give him some money from time to time”.

When it comes to the purpose, nature, or the function of higher education may have some more pure explanations and more rational analyses, or some more scientific explanations. However, no matter how we understand higher education, utilitarianism is still an important attribute of higher education for many ordinary people. Even without discussing these simple peasants, I believe that most people will hold the view that if the higher education (spent four years’ time and tens of thousands of yuan) does not bring any benefits to improve their lives, then it is a “uneconomical” investment to receive such higher education. Only by comparison can we distinguish, people all from the same village and were also admitted to university, but those who went to university 20 years ago enjoy such advantages while those who go to university 20 years later will not enjoy them at all. It is precisely because of this that when the value of university qualifications and diplomas (including its exchange value in marriage) is reduced, or when it is very difficult for college students with corresponding diploma and diploma to get rid of the restrictions of a certain social class, is it necessary for many young people to go to college? As Paul Willis said:“ When the effectiveness and goals of the diploma are questioned, is it wise to invest oneself and one’s abilities in the diploma?”[2]

The Characteristics of Marriage Exchange among Female College Graduates

As the proof and voucher of one’s higher education, the college diploma and academic qualification played a specific role in marriage exchange. As a high-quality resource in the society at that time, it can actually be used to exchange another equally superior resource. This situation expressed more obvious in the marriage exchange of female university graduates at that time, which can be seen as a heterogeneous exchange of diplomas and degrees in the marriage of female college students. In the survey of 2018, the author made a statistical analysis on the marriage situation of female graduates who graduated from colleges and universities in 23 years from 1977 (The state began to restore the college entrance examination system) to 1999 (The universities began to expand enrollment), these female graduates all worked and lived in S Town (F Village belongs to it).

According to the detailed statistics, there are 27 female graduates from rural areas who have worked and married in S Town after graduated from various colleges and universities (including secondary technical school) in the past 23 years. They work in some primary and secondary schools, the town government and its immediate subordinate units (including some local offices set up by county-level units in villages and towns, such as the Town Health Center, Family Planning Office, Police Station and the Court) respectively. In these 27 women, a total of 13 people were married to the staff of the relevant government organs or institutions in the county town; according to the
survey, there are 6 women with higher education than their husbands among these 13 women. The remaining 14 people were married in the town, there a total of 9 husband had less education than wives, while the families of these nine men had relatively higher social and economic status in the region. The fathers or mothers of six people of them were the party and government leaders of the S town government or the principal heads of the township units; and the other three families were well-known wealthy families in the local area. The other five women who married in the town are mainly teach in two middle schools in the town, and their spouses are public teachers in their own schools or nearby primary and secondary schools; these five women married their husbands mainly through the way of free love or others’ introduction. In contrast, the spouses of the vast majority of male college graduates working in S Town are either unemployed or temporary workers in some units; or do small business in the market towns. All in all, these male college graduates rarely can find a wife with the same or similar educational background or better jobs.

Gradient Theory in Marriage Exchange

The academic qualification and diploma of the men and women also follow a gradient theory in marriage exchange, that is to say, a man’s diploma is generally higher than a woman’s, and such a marriage is more likely to be achieved. During a period of time, there was a joke spread far and wide, which referred to the matching of educational qualifications in marriage between men and women. The joke said as follows: “A male doctor looks for a female master; a male master looks for a female undergraduate; a male undergraduate looks for a female junior college student; then a female doctor looks for ...”. Because the female doctoral degree is the highest, according to the aforementioned gradient theory in marriage exchange, a female doctor can no longer find a man with higher degree than herself, and finally can only fall into some awkward situation. It is precisely because of this, there are some female doctors who are really very passive on the issue of marriage in real life. In fact, this gradient model of “male is higher and female is lower” in academic qualifications also reflect the male chauvinism in marriage exchange to a certain extent.

Conclusion

As we all know, the easiest and most eloquent way to know a person’s educational level is to rely on his diploma and academic qualification. And this factor has always played a special role in the marriage market, both in China and in other countries around the world. Based on the historical experience of China in the past 40 years and the field investigation of F village, this paper points out that the exchange value of one’s education status in the marriage market has undergone a tremendous change process. In the late 1970s, the resumption of the college entrance examination system has promoted the pursuit of diplomas by Chinese people. At that time, there were a series of national welfare policies and social and economic values behind the education, which also promoted it to play a great advantage in marriage exchange. With the reform of college enrollment system in 2000, college students are not as rare as before, and they no longer enjoy the special treatment of the unified distribution of work by the state, then the exchange value of diplomas in the marriage market has decreased significantly. In addition to the change in the value of the academic qualifications, which is a tendency to change from the prosperity to the decline. In the marriage exchange between different genders, the role of the diploma is also different. Especially when the woman’s educational background is higher, it can be transformed into a kind of high-quality resource, which can be used to exchange other equally superior resources, such as the economic advantage and social status of the male family. Furthermore, considering the reality, the education status in the marriage market also partially follows the gradient theory. That is to say, when a man with higher level academic qualification than the woman, it is more likely to conclude a marriage.
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