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# Marriage Squeeze and Mate Selection

## The Ecology of Choice and Implications for Social Policy in China

LISA EKLUND

The marriage squeeze in China, whereby the sex ratio imbalance leaves many males without a marriage partner, is not only about numbers, but also about how the institution of marriage is socially, economically, and politically underpinned. This paper uses the concept of ecology of choice in mate selection to demonstrate how different social processes and practices have ramifications on who can marry, who they can marry, and under what circumstances. It points to the historical and cultural practices of patrilineage, hypergamy, and concubinage, which contributed to a marriage squeeze long before the sex ratio at birth became an issue. It also examines how the policies of the Chinese Communist Party have affected social institutions related to marriage, reinforcing the marriage squeeze, and discusses the implications of this.

On a recent visit to China, I had an informal conversation with Li Erhua, a woman in her early twenties working as a masseuse in the hotel I stayed at. When asked about her future plans, she sighed loudly and explained that she felt trapped between parental expectations and her own lifestyle preferences. She felt disillusioned at the prospect of finding a partner, and said that several of her friends had got divorced at a young age. One friend who recently got divorced had found her husband cheating on her with another woman just a few months into their marriage. It is impossible to trust men, Li concluded. At the same time, she said, that in her view, a man would have to have a car and a flat to be considered a good match.

Li belongs to the generation of Chinese youth that, due mostly to the increase in sex-selective abortions since the mid-1980s, has a shortage of women compared to men. An obvious adverse outcome of the sex ratio imbalance is the marriage squeeze, where men, especially poorer and less educated men, find it increasingly hard to find a wife (Das Gupta and Li 1999; Attané 2006; Li, S et al 2006; Jiang et al 2011; Jiang et al 2011a). It is estimated that among the cohorts born between 1980 and 2000, there were 22 million more men than women (Ebenstein and Sharygin 2009). From 2015 to 2045, China will face an additional annual surplus of one million males (Jiang et al 2011a). Other studies have estimated that by 2020, 12% to 15% of Chinese men will be unable to marry. Guilimoto (2012) has estimated that even if the sex ratio at birth (SRB) returns to normal by 2020, the proportion of men unmarried at the age of 50 will be 15% in China by 2055, indicating that the marriage squeeze is a long-term phenomenon. Bride shortages are being addressed in various ways, including through cross-region marriage, kidnap marriage, and kidnapping including deception and enticement (Chao 2005; Schein 2005). The relation between an increase in trafficking of women and an increase in the sex industry has also been linked to the marriage squeeze (Chen 2008). Still, due to the bride shortage, young women like Li have a growing sense that they can “pick and choose”, as also reflected in popular literature (see, for example, Lv 2006). Li is also entering adulthood in an era when divorce rates are increasing (Zhang 2008), and some women and men are choosing to defy marriage customs and marry late (Zhao 2008), or not at all (Zhang and Gu 2007; To 2013). Still, there is social and family pressure to get married (Li, S et al 2010), and the marriage rate in China is near universal (Zhang and Gu 2007). Yet other women and men – albeit few – choose to live with someone of the same sex, although same-sex marriage is still illegal in China.

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The point of departure of this paper is that the phenomenon of a marriage squeeze, whereby the sex ratio imbalance effectively leaves those in greater “supply” without a marriage partner, is not only a matter of numeric imbalance, but also a matter of how marriage as an institution is socially, economically, and politically constructed. To start with, the term marriage squeeze rests on the assumption that all people identify themselves as either women or men. That is, it rests on a binary understanding of gender/sex. It further assumes that effectively all women and men want to get married. Moreover, it presupposes that all women and men want to marry someone from the opposite sex, and the term as such is heteronormative (Eklund 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to take the analysis of the adverse effects of the sex ratio imbalance and the resulting marriage squeeze one step further by looking closely at the institution of marriage in China, its historical and cultural roots, and how it has been shaped in modern times, particularly in relation to state policies. It attempts to offer some answers as to why there is a marriage squeeze in China today, as well as some solutions in terms of the role of the state when it comes to addressing the issue. It is believed that the analysis can be useful to other countries that experience a sex ratio imbalance, both from the perspective of academics and policymakers.

The paper analyses data from secondary sources and from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural Anhui province in 2007<sup>1</sup> and analytical inspiration is drawn from the sociologist Eva Illouz, who has given much thought to theorising about mate selection, which effectively is at the core of the marriage squeeze. Illouz (2012) uses two concepts to analyse how strategies and practices for mate selection are shaped and reshaped – the ecology of choice and the architecture of choice. The former refers to the social environment in which choices are made, such as policies and various social dynamics and processes. Conceptually, these are structural factors enabling or impeding certain behaviour. The latter refers to “mechanisms that are internal to the subject and shaped by culture” (ibid: 20), that is, an interaction between agency and structure. In the analysis below, language is an important aspect of the ecology of choice and architecture of choice when it comes to mate selection. It not only reflects the social world, but also creates meaning and categories through which “human beings constitute and articulate their world” (Harris 1988: ix). As such it has a paradigmatic aspect to it.

The paper starts by discussing some historical and cultural traits that have implications for the ecology of choice in mate selection today. It then moves on to discuss how different social institutions related to marriage have evolved, how these interplay with the marriage squeeze, and how the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have affected their development. Before concluding, it discusses some implications that current demographics and social policy could have for the future of the marriage squeeze.

### Historical Perspectives

Sex ratio imbalance is not a new phenomenon in China, and historically, getting married was by no means a universal

practice for men.<sup>2</sup> However, in addition to sex ratio imbalance, there were other factors that contributed to involuntary bachelorhood, namely, factors related to how the ecology of choice in terms of mate selection was constructed. More specifically, there were three social institutions shaping the ecology of choice that intensified the marriage squeeze – patrilineality, hypergamy, and concubinage. The ways in which these social institutions played out had clear implications for mate selection along gender and class lines.

### Patrilineality

Patrilineality refers to a complex set of practices and customs that vary according to time and place. The most distinctive features of patrilineality are the use of patrilineal surnames, the belief in the need of a male heir, and the worship of patrilineal ancestors (Ebrey 1990). The concept of patrilineality is especially dominant in areas where there are religious convictions related to ancestor worship (Miller 1987). In China the idea of patrilineality is also reflected in language, where names to denote kin on the women’s side often begin with the word “outside”, signifying that women are outside the lineage (Eklund 2011).

Central to the practices related to worship of patrilineal ancestors is the first-born son, who is expected to assume the spiritual and political leadership of the descent group. Exhibiting respect and devotion to elders was a key component of the Confucian concept of filial piety, typifying the relationship between father and son, and older and younger generations. According to Ebrey, filial piety “came to provide an explicit ideology of the proper basis for family life” (1990: 202) and failing to reproduce descendants (that is, sons) was the most “unfilial” act.

There was thus a close association between marriage and reproduction, and marriage was the most important social institution in imperial China (Zhang and Gu 2007). This close association was manifested in practices surrounding weddings, which have persisted till today. When asking young women and men in rural Anhui about customs surrounding weddings, I was frequently told of rites that involved acts that would enhance fertility and the chance of conceiving a son. A typical practice was that before the wedding night, a baby boy, preferably a close relative, would sleep in the bed of the bride and bridegroom. If the baby urinated on the bed, it was a sign that the bride would conceive shortly after marriage and that the couple would have a son. It was therefore considered a good omen.

Marriage was, however, not only meant to secure continuation of patrilineage. It was also the medium through which social and economic life, production and reproduction were organised. To meet the expectations patrilineality placed on younger generations, patrilocal marriage was the norm. In patrilocal marriages, women marry into the household of their husband and reside with their in-laws or near them. Since sons and their wives would live with the sons’ parents, they became the main persons to provide care and support in old age, and this in turn contributed to reproducing the patrilocal marriage institution (Croll 2000). Central to this practice was that men were considered breadwinners and women caregivers, who

belonged to their natal family until marriage and to their husband's family after marriage. The social, economic, and moral exchanges between generations within patrilineage can thus be said to have been regulated by an "intergenerational contract" (ibid). Consequently, one cornerstone of the ecology of choice for mate selection was patrilineality, manifested through filial piety, patrilocality, and the intergenerational contract.

It is important to note that the institution of patrilocal marriage as it has evolved through history is neither static nor isolated from other practices. In the absence of social and economic support by non-kinship-based institutions, such as religious groups, voluntary organisations, and the state, families were the basic unit of social and economic security, and the extended kinship system was like a buffer to be mobilised when the family failed to do so. The absence of non-family-based social and economic support has contributed to a strong sense of familism, which means that the social and economic relations within a family are strong and mutually dependent, sometimes leading to "family interests" outweighing individual interests (Chan et al 2008).

### **Hypergamy**

Historically, marriage was the primary way for women – and by extension an important way for their natal families – to advance social mobility. Therefore, women generally practised hypergamy which meant that a woman would marry a man of higher social and economic status, often involving migration to a richer area or "spatial hypergamy" (Lavelly 1991). The practice of hypergamy was reinforced by the fact that women did not own resources and were not inheritors of their natal families' assets (Ocko 1991). Widows were not allowed to remarry (Watson and Ebrey 1991) thus making it imperative for women to marry someone of higher social and economic standing.

From the point of view of men, particularly in the countryside, where the vast majority of the Chinese population resided, wealth was therefore an important factor to be able to attract a bride. Especially important in this regard was access to land, as that was the basic unit for production in rural China. However, until the land reform of 1953, land was not equitably distributed between different social classes (Lavelly 1991). Whereas landlords were in control of land, many landless farmers were either day labourers or trapped in serfdom, with little prospect of attracting a wife, and many unmarried men were recruited into the army (Lary 1985).

Language not only functions as a set of signs that mirror practices and the everyday life of people. It also brings meaning and creates social categories and contributes to upholding norms. This holds true for how the language of marriage is constructed and what symbolism it carries. In the past – like today – the different terms used in Chinese to denote that a woman and a man were married revealed the hypergamous nature of marriage for women. The character to denote that a woman gets married consists of the character "home" and the character "woman." Moreover, when a woman gets married to a man, the word "marry" is followed by the verb complement "to give",

that is, the woman gives herself away in marriage. The character to denote that a man gets married consists of the character "get", "collect", or "gain" and the character "woman", connoting that a man "takes" a bride in marriage (Eklund 2011).

To make sure that marriages complied with the principle of hypergamy and in consideration of the social and economic status of the spouses, they were historically mostly arranged (Xu and Whyte 1990). It was not uncommon for betrothal to take place during childhood and for child marriage to occur. The shortage of wives and the practice of hypergamy has throughout history been a driving force in the practice of paying a bride price (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte 2012).

### **Concubinage**

At the same time, the elite practised concubinage, and it was not uncommon for the male elite to have several concubines, and the higher in the administration an official rose, the more concubines he was likely to take (Watson and Ebrey 1991). Whereas concubinage is different from polygamy in the sense that concubines were not formally wives of their patrons, the relationship did resemble matrimony, and the concubines lived with their patrons and gave birth to children who were considered legal children of the patron, albeit with lower social status (Ebrey 1993). This custom of concubinage naturally created a shortage of women and a surplus of poorer men who were unable to find a bride. It follows that even in the absence of a sex ratio imbalance poorer men were bound not to marry due to their low social standing, the practice of women marrying hypergamously and concubinage.

Patrilineality, hypergamy, and concubinage were legacies that had clear implications for the ecology of choice for mate selection, and which the CCP was left with when they took power in 1949. Even though the sex ratio imbalance and the marriage squeeze were not causes for concern per se, the underlying factors causing them became subject to policy interventions when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established, with varying effects on them.

### **The 1950 Marriage Law**

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, there was an ambitious project to modernise many parts of society. One of the first laws to be promulgated in 1950 was the new marriage law, which criminalised prostitution, the practice of concubinage, and child marriage (Jaschok and Miers 1994). The purpose of the law was to reform the family and the institution of marriage, which initially were seen as impediments to modernisation of the nation. The law further granted the right to divorce and the freedom to choose a marriage partner (Evans 1992; Rai 1992; Edwards 2000), which had ramifications for mate selection and mate separation.

### **New Meanings of Love**

In the early days of the PRC, it was believed that in socialist societies marriage departed from that in capitalist societies because it was supposedly not based on economic considerations. Therefore, concerns that marriage contributed to

upholding men's power and sense of ownership over women were dismissed as "characteristics of a bourgeois marriage system" (Evans 1992: 151). This had implications for the ecology of choice in terms of mate selection, as hypergamy became less of a necessity to secure social and economic welfare for women. This was particularly so in urban areas, where new labour policies encouraged women to join the paid labour market, which gave them some social and economic rights secured by the state, regardless of whom they married.

These transformations were also reflected in language and a new term for husband and wife was introduced, namely "*airen*" (love person). It consists of two characters – *ai* (love) and *ren* (person) – and is gender-neutral in the sense that neither of the two connotes the sex of the spouse. The same term is used for both the female and male spouse. Another important aspect is the inclusion of *ai* (love), suggesting that the institution of marriage was, or ought to be, primarily based on spousal love, and not on hypergamous considerations, family alliances, and strategies to strengthen family interest and power, which were seen as a threat to CCP rule and the effective organisation of economic and social life free of class differences (ibid).

### Second Thoughts

However, apart from a short period just after the promulgation of the marriage law in 1950, the CCP did little to challenge patriarchal and kinship-based structures that largely influenced women's status in the family (Yang 1959). It was believed that the marriage law contributed to family and marital instability, to the extent that it was nicknamed the "divorce law" (Edwards 2000).

Therefore, the CCP began to promote the "virtuous woman" as a caring wife and efficient domestic manager (Evans 1992). To implement reforms in rural areas, the CCP was largely reliant on the support and loyalty of existing kin-based organisations, which were rooted in the institution of patrilocal marriage. As such, empowering women was considered less of a priority to keeping the male peasantry committed to the cause of the communist revolution. Johnson (1983: 151) argues that "the state began to develop a real, if indirect and barely acknowledged, stake in the maintenance of the rooted, traditional patrilineal bonds that reinforced and strengthened the stability of the rural family and community".

### Popularisation of Patrilocality

The CCP's policies and reforms had several unintended consequences (ibid; Wolf 1985; Croll 1987; Davis and Harrell 1993). More equitable distribution of food, and investment in public health, including training of midwives, contributed to falling mortality rates (Banister 1984), meaning that more children survived and older persons lived longer. This contributed to multigenerational households expanding both in terms of size and complexity, and joint patrilocal families becoming more and more common.

Another unintended effect of the CCP reform was the impact of the household registration (*hukou*) system.<sup>3</sup> The hukou

system drew a strict line between rural and urban residents and restricted the movement of people from one place of registration to another. This meant that families became increasingly rooted in their place of birth, further strengthening the notion of patrilocality (Croll 1985; Davis and Harrell 1993).

Perhaps more importantly, through land reforms, land and other resources were distributed more equally. This meant that more men could afford to get married and have a multigenerational stem or joint family (Lavelly 1991). Indeed, before 1949, only affluent families with large landholdings were rich enough to be able to afford to live in patrilineal multigenerational joint families (Yang 1959; Croll 1985). Poorer families seldom consisted of more than two generations because mortality rates were high and older persons often died before they became grandparents (Croll 1985). Stacey refers to the popularisation of patrilocality as "new democratic patriarchy," which is a "patriarchal system whose gender and generational relationships were reformed substantially at the same time that patriarchy was made more democratically available to masses of peasant men" (1983: 116).

### CCP Reform and the Ecology of Choice

Several analyses of China during the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976) suggest that though patrilocal families became more common, patriarchal power – understood in a Confucian way as senior men's power over younger family members, and men's domination over women – did not become stronger. On the contrary, patriarchal power was challenged in both ideological and practical terms by the CCP (Davin 1976; Yan 2003). The stance of the CCP was that fathers should not "dominate and oppress" sons or wives (Parish and Whyte 1980: 133).

One reform that challenged patriarchal power was the breaking up of lineage organisations, which had managed much of the political, economic, and religious life in rural China (Yang 1959; Li and Lavelly 2003). Yang describes how youth at the beginning of the Mao era were indoctrinated to defy kinship relations and age hierarchies (1959: 100-104). As the lineages were stripped of formal power, the patriarchal power hierarchy that was sustained by the lineage organisations was substantially undermined.

Moreover, since the collective (and the *danwei* [work unit], which organised most of urban life in the spheres of employment, housing, health, and education until the late 1990s) replaced many of the functions of the family, many social and economic aspects of everyday life were under the authority of peasant and party organisations rather than under patriarchal authority (Li and Lavelly 2003). This in turn reduced "familism", but not necessarily the need to marry as such, since some benefits, such as housing allocated through the *danwei*, improved on marriage (Summerfield 1999).

The demise of intergenerational transfer of property from the older to the younger generation further weakened patriarchal and parental power. Since large dowries and wedding feasts were labelled "feudal extravagance" and bride price was regarded as "buying and selling in marriage" (Siu 1993: 176), most couples married without any major support from their

parents. This clearly had implications for the ecology of choice, as it became acceptable to select marriage partners without respect for the wishes and needs of the elderly.

Reviewing the implications of CCP policies on the ecology of choice, it is clear that some of the features of the traditional institution of marriage were altered, not least the banning of concubinage and raising the age for marriage, as well as reducing the reliance on the family for social and economic security, which eased the need for hypergamy. However, the policies and laws did little to alter the universality of the marriage norm. On the contrary, since more and more men were able to afford getting married, more people expected to get married and marriage became a more common practice.

### **Marriage as a Way of Citizenship**

As established above, the marriage squeeze results not only from a sex ratio imbalance, but also from how the institution of marriage is underpinned by social, economic, and political factors. Such factors have an impact on structural level norms about marriage and individual level expectations about getting married. It is well documented that customary laws, referring to practices not enacted in official laws and policies, affect citizenship through various practices. The most common ones are access to land and resources, which according to customary laws are allocated to women through male relatives – through fathers before marriage and through husbands after it (Watson 1994; Jacka and Sargeson 2011). However, there are several instances where formal state policies make certain rights conditional on marriage, and thereby contribute to reinforcing marriage as a norm.

### **Population and Family Planning Law**

Although the so-called one-child policy originates from 1979, the policy was not enacted into a law until 2002 through the population and family planning law (hereafter referred to as the FP law). A rarely discussed aspect of the FP law is that the way in which it is formulated and implemented contributes to upholding the notion that being married is a condition for childbearing. For example, the FP law grants better maternity benefits to couples who marry late and delay childbearing (PRC 2002: Article 25). It further states that “family planning technical service institutions and medical and healthcare institutions...shall...provide pregnancy check-ups and follow-up for married women of reproductive age” (PRC 2002: Article 23). These articles grant married women certain privileges and thereby condition those privileges on marriage.

Moreover, local authorities repeatedly restrict the right to have a child to married couples, and thereby condition the right to childbearing to marriage. In the villages of rural Anhui, where I conducted my fieldwork, couples were charged a so-called “social compensation fee” if they gave birth without being married. Therefore, most couples would get married as soon as they decided to not opt for an abortion and keep the baby, even if they were below the minimum age of marriage. In such circumstances, the dates of birth of the parents-to-be

would be altered so that they would meet the minimum age requirement, as was the case with Li’s brother.

The FP law also says, “The state maintains its current policy for reproduction, encouraging late marriage and childbearing and advocating one child per couple” (PRC 2002: Article 18) and “Citizens who marry late and delay childbearing may be entitled to longer nuptial and maternity leaves or other welfare benefits” (PRC 2002: Article 25). The concept “late marriage and late childbearing” not only creates a strong association between marriage and childbearing, but also creates a category of “late marriage”, which narrows the window during which women and men can select a mate without falling into the category of being “late.” The Chinese term *shengnü*, which literally means “leftover woman”, is a new one for unmarried women in their late twenties or older. It appears in the Chinese media and official discourse, suggesting that there is a best-before-date after which the likelihood of getting married falls drastically (To 2013). Similarly stigmatising is the term “*guanggun*”, which means bare branches, and connotes an unmarried man who cannot continue his lineage.

It is of course reasonable to argue that the definition of late marriage and late childbearing are based on people’s ideas and preferences, and that it, to a large extent, coincides with what “common people” hold to be late marriage and late childbearing. However, it is also reasonable to assume that spelling out such definitions in national law contributes to cementing such notions, and conditioning citizenship on marriage further intensifies the social pressure to get married. That childbearing is conditioned on marriage may explain that in China women have a much higher marriage rate than women in other Asian countries, such as Japan, Thailand, and South Korea (Zhang and Gu 2007).

### **Reflecting, Reinforcing and Resisting Hypergamy**

As suggested by Illouz, even in cases where marriages are formed in more “modern” contexts, characterised by individual choice and freedom in mate selection, it would be misleading to think that social and economic considerations in mate selection belong to “traditional” marriage customs (2012). In other words, aspects of hypergamy are central to how love and relationships are constructed and formed in modern relationships.

One common feature of hypergamy is age difference or age hypergamy. With age comes experience, and people who marry upwards socially and economically often marry someone older (Coltrane 1998). The marriage squeeze is likely to reinforce age hypergamy, as larger age spans increase the pool of women available and men tend to postpone marriage so that they can accumulate enough wealth to be able to “take” a bride (Kochin and Knox 2012). The notion that women practise age hypergamy is also reflected in the legal framework of the marriage law, where Article 6 states, “No marriage may be contracted before the man has reached 22 years of age and the woman 20 years of age” (PRC 1980). The difference in age between the sexes is also reflected in provincial regulations of the FP law. For example, the Anhui regulations for population and

family planning set the age for “late marriage and late child-bearing” at 25 for men and 23 for women (APC 2002). Stipulating different ages for women and men sanctions the notion that an older male spouse is considered the norm.

During my interviews with women and men in Anhui province, I found that among the households where a man had moved into the woman’s household, becoming a son-in-law in an uxorilocal household, the husband’s economic and social status had been lower than the woman’s. The man had as such practised hypergamy, and the woman hypogamy, that is, married someone of lower social standing. Among my informants, there were couples who had married in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and where the man had practised hypergamy. The hypergamous nature of these relationships had to do with access to land, poverty, remoteness, age, and the professional status of the man. Another important factor common to all couples who had married uxorilocally was that the woman did not have a brother. If this is a general trend in China, the fact that more and more families have only daughters may open an opportunity for men to marry hypergamously, and thereby ease the adverse outcome of the marriage squeeze on poorer men. Another effect of uxorilocal marriages may be the weakening of patriarchal ideologies, which have been identified as one of the root causes to son preference and sex-selection. Indeed, studies have confirmed that where uxorilocal marriages are more common, the SRB is closer to normal (Jin et al 2007).

### Free Love versus Arranged Marriages

Marriage as a condition for some aspects of citizenship, and marriage as an institution offering social and economic security, have shaped and continue to shape the ecology of choice. This also has implications for the archaeology of choice in terms of parents’ role in seeing to it that their children get married. Recent research has shown that parents are closely involved in mate selection by their children (To 2013). This practice challenges spousal relationships based on love and individual choice, which in Chinese is termed “*ziyou tan lian’ai*” (freely talk of love). The term was coined in juxtaposition to arranged marriages, which often involved a middleperson who negotiated a deal with the families of the spouses.

During my interviews with women and men of different ages in Anhui province I observed that there was a reluctance to depict relationships and dating as acts based on love and individual choice. Here, it was a marked difference between those who had got married in the 1970s and those who had selected their spouse more recently. Those who were dating in the 1970s and had found their partner in the spirit of “freely talk of love” almost excused themselves for having found their partners in an “unruly” way and some mothers-in-law felt uncomfortable talking about how they had met their husbands in front of their daughters-in-law. Younger persons, on the other hand, almost exclusively told stories of an intermediary who introduced them to their partner. This was true even in circumstances where a couple had fallen for each other without the help of an intermediary. Under such circumstances, it was

deemed important to find an intermediary who could be the official person to introduce the couple to each other, so that it would be a “proper” and “orderly” matchmaking, and not one too much based on desire and emotion.

At the same time, the notion of romantic love has become very strong and cherished as an ideal for a happy marriage. The symbolism of romantic love is manifested materially through certain tokens. In the villages I visited, an important symbol of romantic love was the wedding photo and album, on which couples spent large amounts of money. Those photos were taken by professional photographers who had costumes, hair-dressers, and make-up stylists at their disposal. Typically, these wedding photos show the woman in a white and expensive dress and the man in a black tuxedo.

The act of marriage and the wedding ceremony also become a display of status. Wedding banquets have become much more extravagant in recent years, with large banquets, expensive food, and venues (Yan 2003). This is in sharp contrast to the way marriages were conducted in the Mao years, where a couple would simply register their marriage at the local registrar, without dressing up and holding a wedding ceremony (Siu 1993). Today, older couples, who were married in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, have wedding photos taken where they dress up as described above, often to mark an anniversary.

It seems that notions of romantic love have become an important cornerstone of the archaeology of choice, not least when it comes to decisions about staying married, thereby also strengthening the institution of marriage and marriage as a norm.

Coming back to the intergenerational contract, none of those interviewed said that their parents had had any say when it came to their final decision in selecting a partner. It was common for parents to engage relatives and colleagues to identify potential marriage partners for their children, but there was a clear understanding across generations that the adult child always had the option to decline. Even though parents may not have a final say in who their children marry, they do have a say when it comes to marrying or not, as illustrated in the case of Li. The need to find a marriage partner has resulted in new strategies and practices, such as online dating, matchmaking programmes on tv, speed-dating, and parents taking on the role of matchmakers, “marketing” their adult children by sharing cvs and photo albums with parents of potential marriage partners, as frequently reported in the media (for example, *The Guardian* 2011). It is not uncommon for parents to take an active role in pursuing these strategies (To 2013).

### Looking Ahead

While there are trends pointing at the weakening importance of the family, as reflected in lower marriage rates and increased divorce rates, in the absence of state-run welfare programmes and affordable private insurance, the family is also becoming increasingly important as a social and economic institution, providing welfare and support to family members. This is particularly true among the low-income and medium-low income groups and may fuel familism. In this context, it is

also interesting to note that bride price in China is on the rise, both in terms of prevalence and in terms of the amount of money and gifts that are involved and exchanged between the bridegroom's family and the bride's family, something that has been found to be correlated to bride shortage (Zhang 2000; Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte 2012). The practice of bride price is likely to affect the pressure from parents on whether their children should marry, and could further fuel hypergamy.

Another factor that may strengthen familism is the ageing of the population. As a result of low fertility and an increase in life expectancy at birth, the age structure of the Chinese population is such that the proportion of young people in relation to old people is relatively small. Consequently, one-child families have a 4-2-1 structure, where two sets of grandparents with one child each have only one grandchild. This structure means that there is a high burden placed on the grandchild, who – in the absence of state, community, or affordable private facilities for old-age care and support – at an adult age is expected to provide support for his or her parents and grandparents in accordance with the custom of filial piety, and as enacted in the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (NPC 1996, Chapter 2, Article 11). In situations of son preference, the only grandchild is also expected to fulfil the filial duty of producing a male heir, a duty siblings in a multiple-sibling family can share. In the absence of same-sex marriages and the right for homosexual couples to adopt a child, the 4-2-1 family structure further intensifies norms related to heteronormativity and marriage for young adults.

Moreover, since a large proportion of coming Chinese generations will be single children and male dominated (in demographic terms), uxorilocal marriages may become increasingly difficult, as parents with only one son will be reluctant to “give away” their sons. At the same time, daughters-only families may also become increasingly reluctant to “give away” their daughters in patrilocal marriage, and perhaps an intensification of neo locality is to be expected. Vanessa Fong (2004) has found that there has been a “daughter empowerment” process unfolding as a result of falling fertility rates and many families having only daughters. She is referring to resources and opportunities being available to daughters who do not have brothers to compete with. This may pose a challenge to patrilineality, but the extent to which daughters' empowerment spills over into love, sexuality, marriage, and family life beyond the natal family remains to be investigated. At the same time, there is a risk that there will be an increasing downward pressure for women to marry young (Goodkind 2006), thus intensifying hypergamy.

**Conclusions**

This paper has taken a constructivist approach to understanding the marriage squeeze, and has shown how the marriage squeeze is not only about sex ratio imbalance, but also about the social, economic and political underpinnings of the institution of marriage. It has used the concept of ecology of

choice in mate selection to demonstrate how different social processes and practices have ramifications for who can marry, who they can marry, and under what circumstances. The paper has illustrated that the historical and cultural practices of patrilineage, hypergamy, and concubinage contributed to a marriage squeeze long before the sex ratio imbalance became an issue in the mid-1980s.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the findings presented above is that social policy and laws have consequences for the ecology of choice in mate selection. Through social policy, labour policies, and population policies and laws, the ccp has an important role in fostering or easing familism, which in the absence of social welfare is a core driver for marriage. Likewise, social policy has the potential of reducing the practical need for hypergamy, which is the main reason for the marriage squeeze of less-privileged men. At the same time, social policy and laws may contribute to strengthening the institution of marriage by conditioning citizenship on marriage, as illustrated by the marriage law and the population and family planning law. As such, state policies can challenge and contest cultural practices, but they can also reinforce them, and the dogmatic view of the ccp on marriage may actually contribute to intensifying the marriage squeeze.

The paper further concludes that language is an important structure that affects both the ecology of choice and the architecture of choice. Terms like “leftover women” and “bare branches” have pejorative connotations and intensify the notion that remaining unmarried is deviant. Such language effectively strengthens the expectations that everyone should marry, and thereby contributes to the marriage squeeze. The continuous emphasis on the marriage squeeze may ultimately affect decisions on getting married, staying married, or staying unmarried, since it signals that there is a clear risk of falling outside the marriage market. This has implications for the architecture of choice as “aversion of risk and anticipation of regret may become culturally salient features of some decisions, thereby transforming the process of choice” (Illouz 2012: 20).

Consequently, to come to terms with some of the perceived and real adverse outcomes of the marriage squeeze, a first step is to regard it as a construction, which is not to be taken as a given fact or as something static. Rather the marriage squeeze is changeable, not perhaps so much in terms of sex ratios but in terms of how marriage norms and expectations are created, reproduced, and contested. By being open to new ideas, practices, and ideals for family and personal life, love and relationships – other than lifelong heterosexual marriages formed before the age of 25 – the marriage squeeze may become an obsolete concept in the long run.

**NOTES**

- 1 The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in four villages in rural Anhui in 2007. Forty-eight households, including women and men of different generations, were included in the study.
- 2 The first national census in 1953 revealed that there were about 107 men for every 100 women (UNFPA 2004).
- 3 In a Chinese context, the division between rural and urban has special historical, political, and administrative ramifications through the *hukou*



system, which is the household registration system, introduced in the late 1950s. The *hukou* system divides citizens into agricultural and non-agricultural, which largely coincide with "rural" and "urban".

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