Effects of Bride Price On the Chinese Marriage Market

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ABSTRACT

This paper will mainly focus on the marriage market of China and how bride price affects it through diverse methods like analyzing the amount of bride price in different parts of China, using the economics models including demand and supply curve and the indifference curves to figure out whether bride price will affect the marriage rate, and finally developing a theory to depict a females' psychological and economics evaluation on whether a male is worth marrying. The author finds that if the bride price is too high, then it will negatively affect the marriage rate. The bride price will also affect some of the females' decisions in choosing their lifestyles. However, for more educated women, the theory suggests that the bride price is no longer the most important factor in their marriage decision.

Introduction

The bride price is the money or property paid by the groom to compensate the bride's family or the bride for showing gratitude for the bride's family and the marriage. Bride price is closely related to economics. However, because of the high bride price many young men in China were not capable of getting married. Chinese marriage over the last 50 years has witnessed shifts in bride price from the meaningful pledge of love including watches or clothes to pure material compensation like cash, real estate, or vehicles. Nowadays, the more expensive the bride price is, the more decent the wedding and the marriage. So, this paper raises the question "is bride price a hurdle in the marriage market?"

Literature Review

Some research shows that a high bride price leads to a high marriage rate. Because if a family is experiencing income shocks or income volatility, the family is more likely to get their daughters married to get the bride price to smooth consumption. The phenomena are more common in the village with high bride price payment for the temptations of a one-time payment for their high marginal utility of consumption (Corno&Voena 2016). However, it is believed by other researchers that a high bride price leads to a low marriage rate, which creates a lot of "bare branches" (Jiang Sánchez-Barricarte 2012, 5). The bare branches stand for Chinese single men. The bride price has been becoming a threshold for males to get into a marriage (Liu et al. 2014, 355)

However, the poorer the family is, the harder it for the males to get married for two vicious circles: the limited resources of a single man and higher bride price for being older: If a male is not married, there are no resource contributions from the other half socially and financially. The limited resources will further constrain the single man's social and financial enhancements (Pimentel&Efron 2000, 34). As the single male gets older and older, he must pay more and more bride price, consequently, getting married is harder and harder (Jiang et. al. 2011, 178). The author personally agrees with the second hypothesis which is illustrated in this essay through

different economic models and theories, whereas the first hypothesis is not reliable due to the lack of consideration on the groom side—the supply side of the bride price. The truth is even if the bride's family wanted to marry their daughters to improve their financial status by asking the groom for the bride price, the groom may not afford the high bride price, correspondingly lowering the marriage rate, which disproves the original hypothesis. This paper adopts a two-way perspective from both the demand side and the supply side and analyzes with a more comprehensive horizon to reveal the bride price effects on the marriage market.

In this paper, the author will discuss four different topics as a top-down method:

1. The duality of bride price and dowery
2. The marriage market demand and supply analysis
3. The bride price geographical patterns
4. The decision model of whether a female will choose marriage based on the indifference curve model

Methods

This paper adopts a method of supply and demand analysis, indifference curve analysis, and secondary data research.

Supply and demand curves reveal the commodity quantity and prices' relationship from the view of producers and consumers. The demand curve is downward sloping because the higher the price is, the fewer consumers would like to purchase. The supply curve is upward sloping because the higher price gives the producers more incentives to produce. An agreement between the producers and consumers of the commodity is reflected in the equilibrium price and quantity. The demand and supply curves are used in this essay to analyze how the bride price will affect the marriage market. If the bride price is higher, then the males who can afford the bride price will become fewer, as a result, they are the marriage market consumer. On the other side, if the bride price is higher, more brides are willing to get married in the future. In equilibrium, the quantity of a good supplied by producers equals the quantity demanded by consumers. The equilibrium price in this analysis represents a suitable amount of money that meets the standard of both brides and grooms. As a result, the demand and supply curve can be also applied to the marriage market analysis.

The indifference curve shows the indifferent bundles of commodities that give the consumer the same level of utility with the assumption that all other variables are held constant. The slope of the indifference curve is the Marginal Rate of Substitution (MRS), which shows how many quantities the consumer is willing to give up for another good. In the analysis, the authors leverage the economic status and time ownership as two commodities to analyze what is the trade-off mechanism between bride price, other economic benefits, and time freedom by bringing single.

Secondary data analysis is the analysis using existing data collected by others. The benefit of secondary data analysis is to use large-scale data sets, which are relatively solid, convenient, and time-efficient. This paper uses several sources of secondary data to test the hypothesis and theories generated by the author.

Different Types of Bride Prices

Bride price can be mainly classified into two types: positive bride price and negative bride price. According to Tertilt, M (2002)'s research: in a positive bride price the dowry that the wife provides is less than the bride price that the groom offers, on the other hand, a negative bride price means the dowry overweight the bride price. This concept closely relates to our topic dowry is positively correlated with a wife's welfare after marriage. If a wife brings dowry, then she will have more impact on household purchases, time allocation, and her utility (Brown, 2009), and thus have more status in the future family. In this paper, we assume all the bride prices that we discuss to be positive

The Duality of Demand and Supply in the Marriage Market

A demand and supply curve can explain the marriage market in China very well. Through constructing a demand-supply analysis we can identify how bride price intervenes in the marriage market.
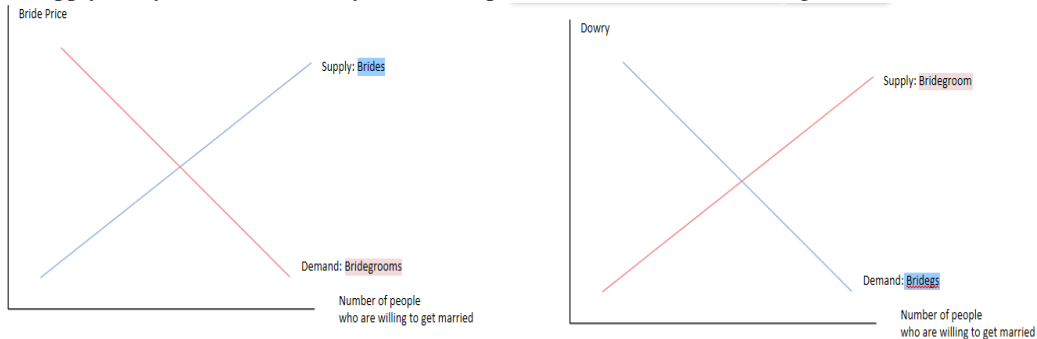

Figure 1. Demand and supply analysis of the marriage market

I used two graphs to illustrate two conditions in the marriage market. On the left-hand graph, the y-axis is the bride price, while on the right-hand graph y-axis is the dowry. Unlike the typical demand-supply analysis, where the x-axis represents the quantity of the product, both x-axes in this study represent the people who prefer to get married. The bride can both be on the demand side and supply side, depending on what the y-axis represents. If the y-axis represents the bride price, the groom, who offers the bride price, is on the demand side. If the y-axis represents the dowry, the bride, who provides the groom with dowry is on the demand side.

On the first graph, the bride is on the supply side because the higher the bride price men are willing to offer the more brides want to get married. In contrast, grooms are on the demand side because fewer grooms want to marry if the bride price increases. On the second graph, I replaced the bride price with the dowry. The marriage willingness of brides and grooms turned opposite. As a result, society can only achieve the highest marriage ratio when men who want to marry are equal to women who want to marry. So whether it is the bride price or the dowry that is too high, they may both become a hurdle for the marriage market.
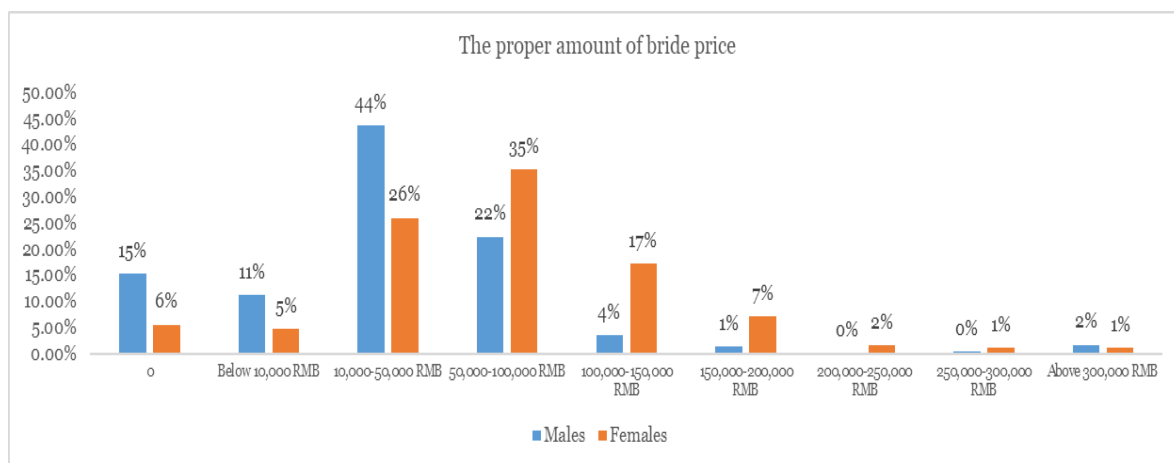

Figure 2. The proper amount of bride price (Guyu Data, 2020)

Surprisingly most Chinese brides want the bride price to be around 50 thousand RMB to 100 thousand RMB which is quite similar to the ideal bride price of the grooms. Still, there are about 30% of the brides want

a bride price above 100 thousand RMB. Overall, the Chinese marriage market is rationally based on the aligned understanding of both sides

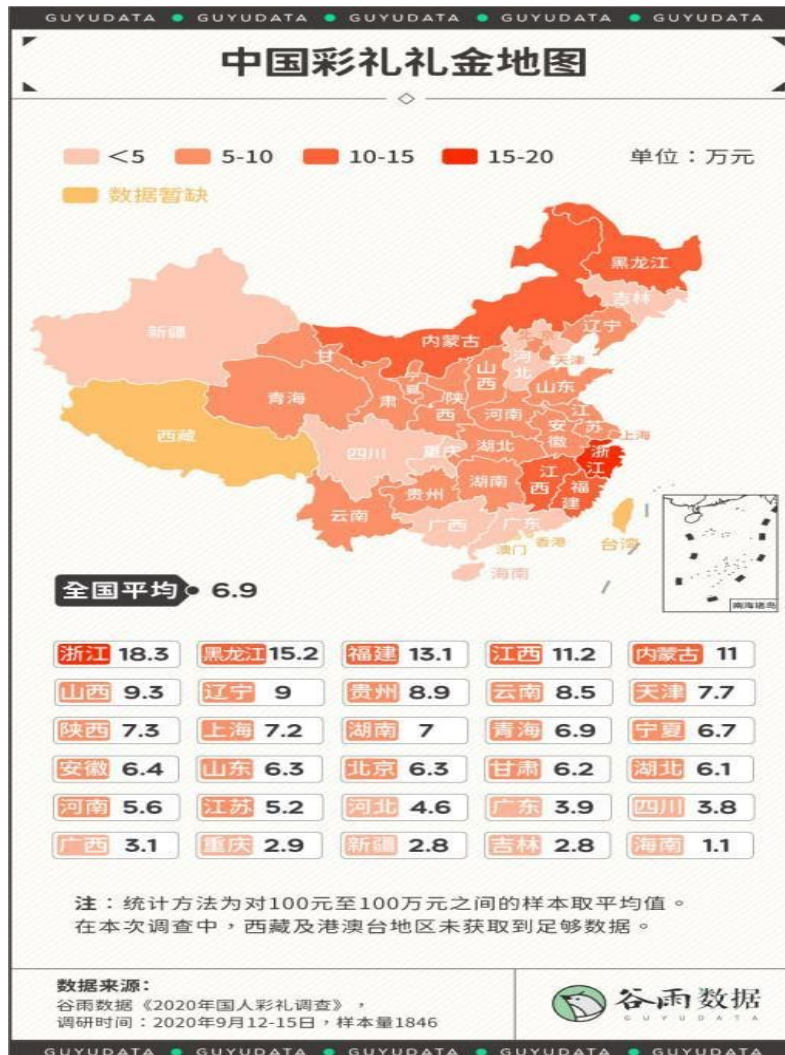## Bride Prices in Different Parts of China

Figure 3. Bride price distribution map (Guyu Data, 2020)

According to a survey conducted by Guyu Data, the average bride price in China is 69,000 RMB. Based on the heat map which labeled each province with average bride price, the northern provinces and southeastern provinces including Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Neimenggu, and Heilongjiang have the highest bride price ranging from 183,000 to 111,000 RMB. The central provinces' bride price is around 50,000-90,000 RMB. The provinces around the border have the lowest bride price which is below 50,000 RMB. The bride price is ranging around 10,000-to 180,000, the largest cities in China—Beijing and Shanghai's bride price is 6.3 and 7.2, which are around or below the average.

The more developed area has lower bride price than the undeveloped areas and the developing areas. The reasons are: gender inequality is more common in developing areas, and they monetarize the bride's value as a commodity. They would like to pay for the marriage and pay higher to marry the most popular girl. Because of the rooted mind that males are better than females, most families prefer baby boys to girls, as a result, there are usually more boys than girls in developing areas. So, the male families have to offer a bride price to make sure their sons can get married.

With these facts, females usually are faced with two choices: to live in urban and receive less bride price or live in rural and receive a higher bride price. This analysis adopts an economics theory of indifference curve, where we regard the urban welfare and bride price compensation as two commodities. The females can choose and balance the amount they would like to take on each side.
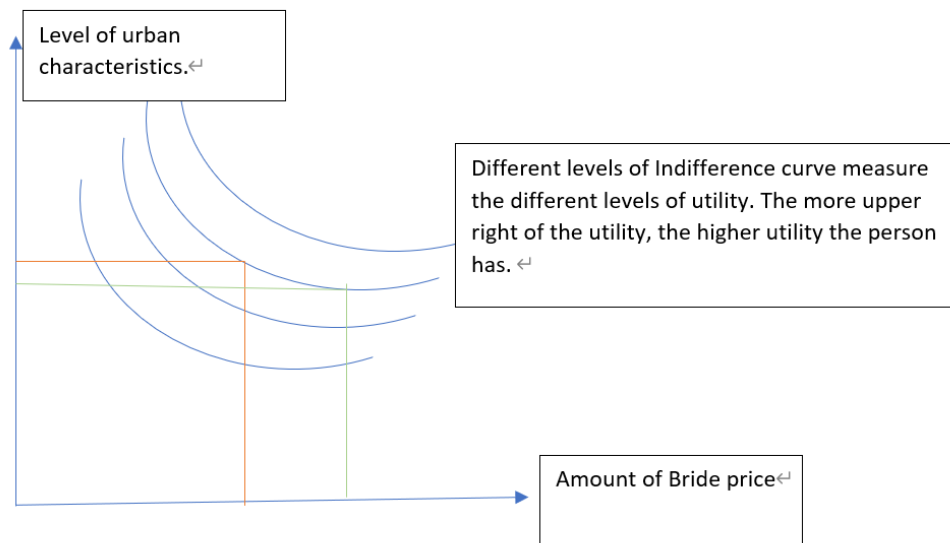

Figure 4. Indifference curve illustration

As is shown in the graph the x-axis represents commodity one: bride price; while the y-axis represents commodity two: better living standards in urban. The bride can either choose a higher bride price and live in a smaller city, or they can choose a lower bride price and live in a bigger city. Nevertheless, the bride cannot achieve both at the same time because the two commodities are in inverse ratio. Overall, bride price can affect women's decisions on staying in a big city with less bride price or living in a smaller city with a high bride price. However, the temptation of bride price is becoming larger and larger. Many Chinese living in small cities have rooted thoughts: that boys are superior to girls. Many parents use the bride price by marrying a daughter to help their sons find a wife. Some parents will even use selective abortion to keep a male child. This led to men kept on increasing and women kept on being a scarcity in the marriage market. Bride prices will rise correspondingly because of single males' competition. As a result, more women may consider choosing a higher bride price and living in a smaller city, because the bride price and temptation are higher and higher. This creates a vicious cycle with more females choice on higher bride prices, which will increase the population density in remote areas. The rooted conservative mindsets in rural areas will affect the next generations' gender distribution, and lead to more gender inequality.
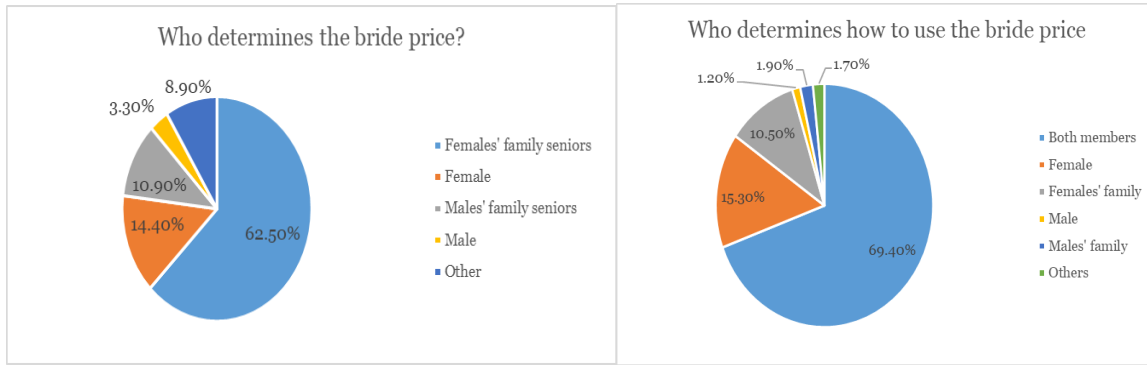
Figure 5. Decisions on bride price（Guyu Data, 2020）

Most female families decide on the number of the bride price, on the other hand almost 70% of the couples determine the use of the bride price. The result shows bride price is still an old tradition, but it includes some modern factors by including both parties rather than pure compensation for the bride's family.

Calculating Whether a Man is Worth Marrying

Women can evaluate the value of marriage and decide whether or not to get married by taking the bride price, and their leisure time into account.
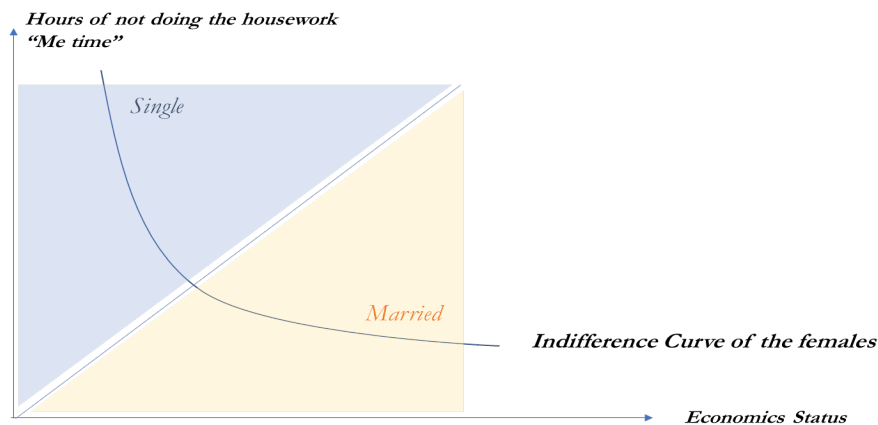

Figure 6(1). Indifference curve of marrying females

This indifference curve shows what women can gain before marriage and after marriage. The left part of the graph is focusing on unmarried women, with the y-axis representing their leisure time. If a woman is completely undesirable for marriage she will have more freedom to control her own time, but if a woman is leaning toward marriage then she needs to spend time with the other half such as taking care of others and doing extra housework, which will take some of her freedom. The right part of the graph is about married women. The x-axis, the economic status of the woman, will increase when she becomes a wife. This is due to the bride price she gets, the income of her husband, and the positive synergies (the economic value of the emotional endowment, reduced solitary feelings, and so on) due to the marriage. On the other hand, her free time will be less because she might have to do housework, take care of the baby, and look after her husband's parents. We can conclude that one reason for women to get married is the improved economic status, which makes bride price a pull factor in the marriage market.
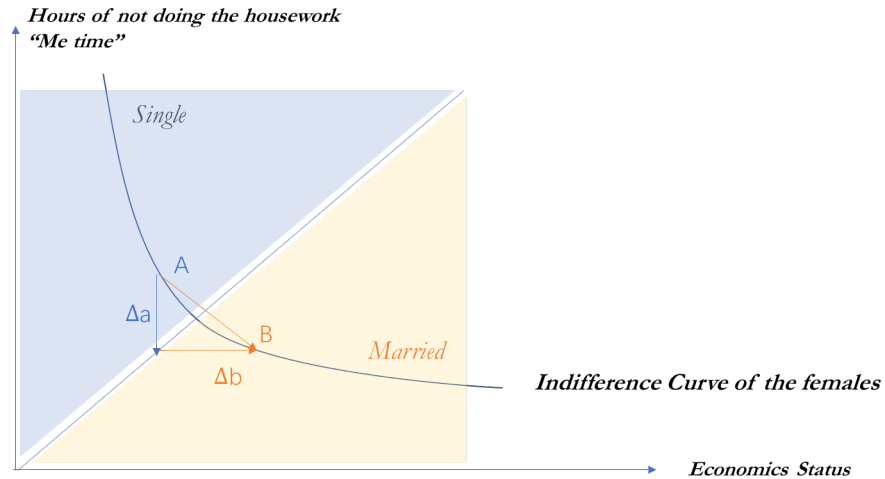
Figure 6(2). Indifference curve of marrying female $\frac{\Delta b}{\Delta a} = \frac{bride\ price + husband's\ income \pm synergy}{me\ time \pm the\ other\ half's\ housework\ contribution}$

A formula can be introduced by looking at a further indifference curve. A woman's economic status doesn't always increase as much as she wished after she got married. It depends on the bride price her husband is willing to offer and the income of her husband. If the couple has a high synergy both of their economic status will increase, but if they can't corporate then both of their economic statuses will stay the same or even drop. A married woman's leisure time also depends on her husband. If her husband has a high contribution to the housework, she will even have more own time than before marrying, while when her husband's housework contribution is low she will have to reduce her free time and spend it on taking care of the family. With this formula, women can calculate the value of marriage. $\Delta b/\Delta a$ means the economic value of one hour of the woman's leisure time. A rational woman's $\Delta b/\Delta a$ should at least be positive. $\Delta b/\Delta a$ is positive means this is a good quality marriage, however when $\Delta b/\Delta a$ is negative meaning a poor quality marriage maybe women should be reconsidered to get married.
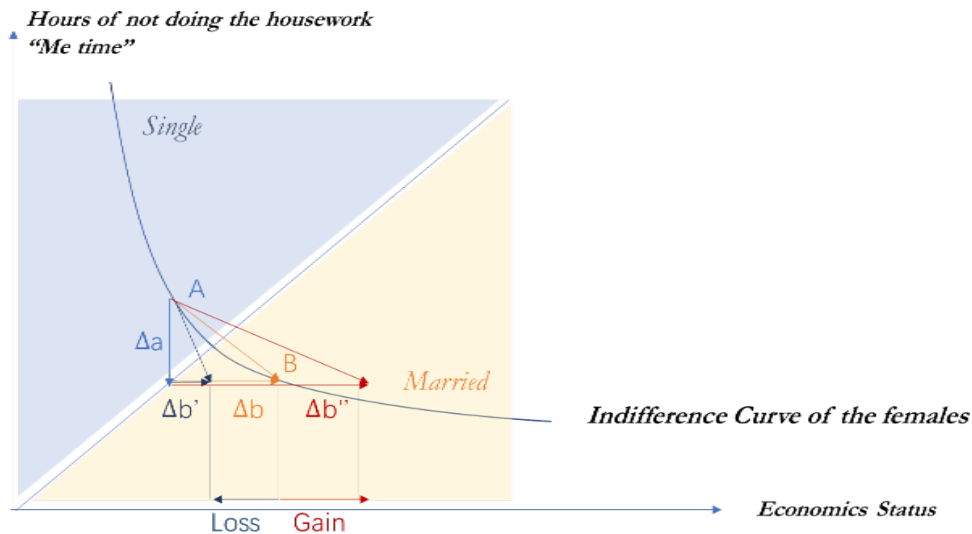

Figure 7. Marriage side-effects and economic status improvements balance illustrated by the Indifference curve

As we have concluded that the leisure time and the economic status of married women are not in a direct ratio. We can look at another indifference curve of the same female with different scenarios for further discussion. In this indifference curve, Δa and Δb are the two initial points and Δa is a controlled variable. $\Delta b'$

is the loss by the woman when her husband is unable to provide the economic status—bride price that matches the women's leisure time loss, while $\Delta b''$ is the gain by women when she had an extra increase in wealth by having the same amount of leisure time scarification. Overall, a woman will only choose to get married when Δa matches with Δb or $\Delta b''$ because her scarification of time and gain of wealth can be matched up. Before going into a marriage, a rational woman will make the decision based on whether she gets Δb. However, with six hundred million farmers in China, most young men cannot reach Δb or $\Delta b''$,
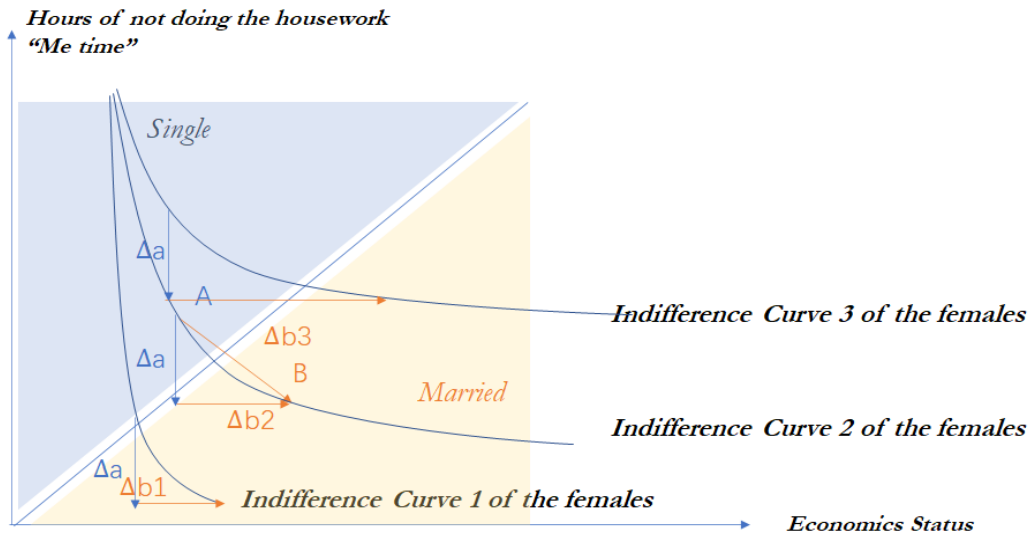

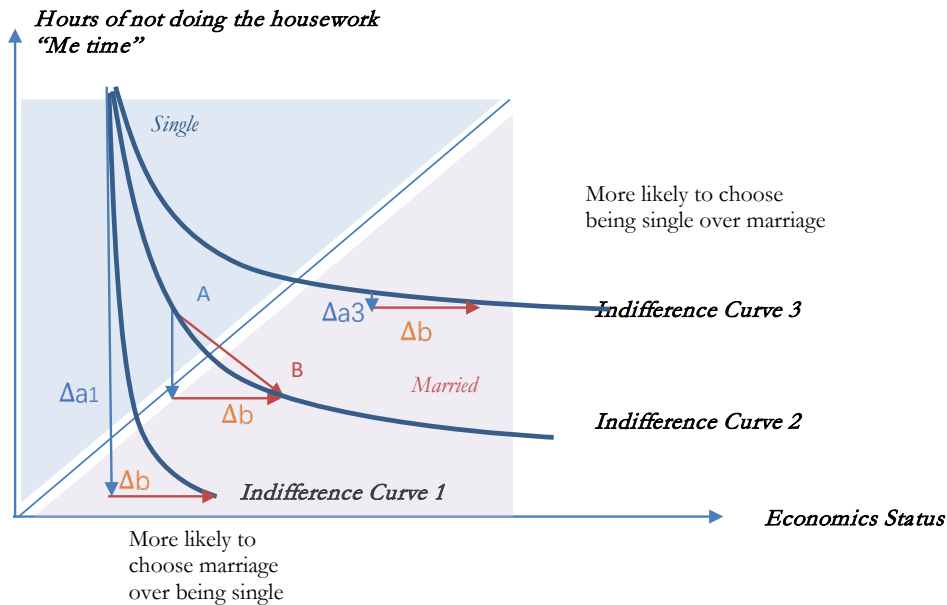**Figure 8.** Indifference curves of different females

Figure 9. Different compensations requirements are illustrated by different females' indifference curves

The above two graphs are different expressions of the same idea. Suppose Δb remains the same. We assume that three men can offer the same amount for the bride price. In this case, a woman will marry the man that allows her to have the most leisure time and less leisure time reduction. We assume indifference curve 2 to be the benchmark. Females who hold indifference curve 1 are more likely to get married because she is willing

to sacrifice more of their time for the same amount of economic status improvement, while the couple on indifference curve 3 might choose to remain single because she is less willing to spend time on family. Equally shown on the first graph, females with the first indifference curve will care more about the bride price and are asking for a lower bride price to get married, whereas females with the third indifference curve will not care about the bride price because of their time values more. As the education received by women is constantly increasing nowadays, allowing them to have similar incomes as men which makes bride prices no longer attractive to most intellectual females.
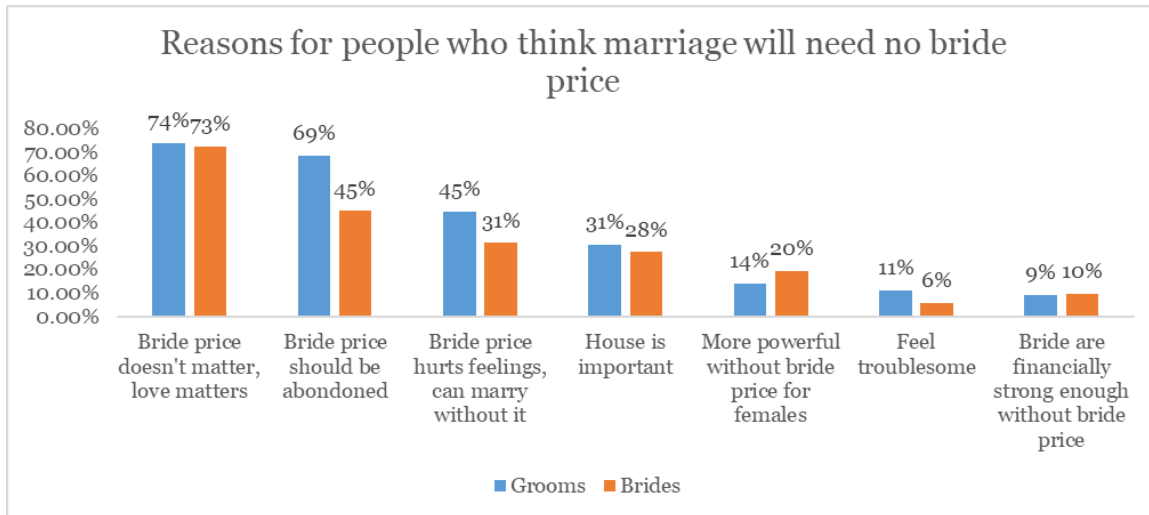

Figure 10. Reasons for people who think marriage will need no bride price　(Guyu Data, 2020)

More reasons against bride price occurred nowadays. The most popular reasons are that it cannot represent love and it is an old tradition which needs to be abandoned. Some also suggest that compared to bride price housing is more important. But in the author's opinion, despite all the troubles it had cost us bride price is still the most effective way to enhance the family status of the bride. And another observation is that there is no huge awareness gap between males and females, which suggest the progress of gender equality through females' and males' attitude towards the bride price.

Discussion

The demand and supply analysis first reveals that the bride and groom can both be on the supply and demand side of the marriage market. Society can only achieve the highest marriage ratio when men who want to marry are equal to women who want to marry. As for the amount of the bride price, the more developed area has lower bride prices than the undeveloped areas and the developing areas. As a result, bride price can be a factor that affects women's decisions on staying in a big city with less bride price or living in a smaller city with a high bride price. For a female to decide on a marriage based on different factors, though bride price can be a push factor to improve the economic status, her own time controlling, and extra housework can be a pull factor than discourage a female from marriage.

Conclusion

This paper aims to associate bride price and the marriage market with different economic models, for instance, the demand and supply model as well as the indifference curve model. The paper first defines the positive bride price as the net value of the bride price is larger than the net value of the dowry. Positive bride price is more

commonly seen in Chinese society, as a result, positive bride price is a key analysis target in this paper. The demand and supply analysis suggests that too high and too low of the bride price as a social standard will become a hurdle in the marriage market. The author also finds that smaller cities have rooted traditions and usually offer more bride prices than larger cities. This is because many Chinese living in small cities have had the rooted thoughts of "boys are superior to girls" for decades. The selective abortion led to the imbalanced gender ratio and finally the higher and higher bride price to compete these single males for a wife. Then the smaller cities might be attractive for some females for higher bride price. The author develops a general model that reveals women's decisions on marriage based on the indifference curve. The model shows that women with similar incomes as men will make the bride price no longer attractive to those females. As the education received by women is constantly increasing nowadays, bride prices will become less and less attractive for more well-educated females.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was that the author didn't contain any primary data which can be a critical supplement for this work. By collecting and analyzing data, the hypothesis generated by the model can be tested and verified more thoroughly.

Furthermore, the paper does not offer in-depth solutions to changing the negative effects brought by the bride price on the marriage rate. For future studies, the author would try to include policy implementation suggestions to improve social welfare and positive impact generation.

Acknowledgments

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