

# The Strength and Resilience of Shim-pua Marriage

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## ABSTRACT

Shim-pua marriage, also known as *tongyangxi*, is a traditional Chinese practice where a poorer family's infant daughter is sold into a wealthier family in exchange for a dowry. The daughter would grow up in the new family, often subjected to difficult chores and maidwork. As the girl matured, she would then be forcefully married to one of the family's sons. Shim-pua marriage persisted through multiple phases of cultural, social, and political change. But this persistence is indicative of a larger social phenomena. The recurrence of the practice results from the failure of top-down intervention to change underlying social norms. Additionally, Shim-pua marriage is closely connected to modern issues such as human trafficking. This paper provides an in-depth view and analysis of historical revolutions, government action, and people's response with respect to Shim-pua marriage. It explores the underlying causes of the practice's persistence, and the socio-economic conditions that fueled it.

## Introduction

Shim-pua marriage, also known as *tongyangxi*, is a traditional Chinese practice where a poor family's infant daughter is sold into a wealthy family in exchange for a dowry. The daughter would grow up in the new family, often subjected to difficult chores and maidwork. As the girl matured, she would then be forcibly married to one of the family's sons.

Despite two powerful, anti-conservative revolutions that changed concepts of marriage, westernized the country, and kickstarted a feminist movement, Shim-pua marriage remained common practice in some regions of the country. The extensive power of ruling dynasties and the People's Republic of China might suggest that massive cultural shifts – such as the eradication of traditions like that of shim-pua marriage – were relatively easy to implement. However, regardless of government power, top-down intervention often failed to change underlying social norms, as evidenced by the remarkable persistence of Shim-pua marriage into the 21st Century. Shim-pua marriage is deeply intertwined with China's patriarchal roots of Confucianism and feudalism. And even as the country's urban areas and industrial complexes saw noticeable cultural evolution, tightly knit rural societies remained stagnant, and so did Shim-pua marriage.

## A practice with strong, deep roots

Shim-pua marriage was a traditional practice involving the adoption of a pre-adolescent girl into a wealthier family. In exchange for dowry– a sum of money presented as a marriage gift– the girl would be forced into a pre-planned marriage with the son of the recipient family.<sup>1</sup> The daughter was separated from her biological family and taken into a home of complete strangers. From a young age, she would endure abuse, forced labor, and eventually, sexual exploitation.<sup>2</sup> As the girl matured, she was then pushed into a forced marriage as a child bride to a son of the recipient family.<sup>3</sup>

Because the girl had been raised with her future husband for most of her childhood, the prospect of marriage and intercourse with a sibling-like family member often proved uncomfortable, or even terrifying to her. This terror resulted from a phenomenon called the Westermarck effect, which suggests that if an individual is exposed to another in the same family for a long period of time before age 6, they lack sexual feelings toward each other.<sup>4</sup> In fact,

not only is there an absence of sexual attraction, but there is frequently a strong aversion to and even a sense of horror surrounding sexual intercourse.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, a daughter taken into a new family within the practice of Shim-pua marriage often has a strained and toxic relationship with the son whom she is to marry. Furthermore, due to her position as the lowest-ranking family member, the future bride faces mistreatment from both the family members and the son who is to be her future husband. It is no surprise then that this bride and groom have no personal feelings of attraction towards each other either before or after being married and typically only engage in sexual activity under the pressure to produce sons and continue the male bloodline.

The origins of this practice date all the way back to the ancient roots of the Zhou Dynasty. A process called *yin qi zhi* (imperial Chinese harem system), practiced among the Zhou Dynasty's nobility involved soon-to-be married noblewomen who would bring along their younger female family members. These female siblings would eventually become concubines to their sister's husband as they matured.<sup>6</sup> The practice spread to the imperial courts in the Qin and Han dynasties. Emperors often selected noble families' daughters from a young age to be brought into the palace. When they reached adulthood, they would be either formally married as imperial brides or given as wives to members of the ruling family. Though still nameless, this practice became widespread around the time of the Northern Song Dynasty.<sup>7</sup> The practice became a folk tradition following the Yuan Dynasty, also the time when it gained a name as *tong yang xi*, or Shim-pua marriage.<sup>8</sup> During the Ming and Qing dynasties, certain policies were established, like the elimination of the requirement for dowry or other marriage gifts. Despite these measures, however, Shim-pua marriage remained largely widespread.

The widespread prevalence and surprising resilience of Shim-pua marriage centers around long-lasting social norms that reach back thousands of years, heavily based on the teachings of Confucianism. As detailed in the three obediences in *Yi Li*, one of the thirteen Confucian classics, girls at a young age were taught to obey their fathers and follow their every word, eliminating their opportunities to roam freely and learn independently. As daughters matured, they were expected to obey their husbands, retaining the man's control and authority over the wife. And when her husband passed away, her freedom was once again taken as she was to obey her mature son as long as she lived.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, the early adoption of the four virtues to a successful woman amplified the expectations of her role as an obedient wife to remain in the home and produce sons for the family. These virtues dictated feminine conduct (*fude*), speech (*fuyan*), behavior (*furong*), and work (*fugong*).<sup>10</sup>

In order to perpetuate a strict social and familial hierarchy, Confucianism neglected to acknowledge women. Women were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy, deemed caregivers and domestic servants. This can easily be seen through the concept of *xiao*, or filial piety, another Confucian teaching. In comparison to the three obediences and four virtues, filial piety played an equally influential role in the subjugation of women. The teaching emphasized female obedience towards men and the family and their role in supporting other members. Filial piety characterized a true woman as one that had obedience toward those around her. In order to be good wives or daughters, women were expected to remain frugal in their own lives and generous towards their families. Rather than focusing on their own well-being, wives had to dedicate their lives to supporting and caring for their parents and men in the family, particularly their husbands.<sup>11</sup> Women were called to be faithful towards care for parents or elders, to bring a good name to their parents and ancestors, respect male family members, and retain a male lineage through the production of sons. A good woman was yielding, chaste, obedient, and agreeable.<sup>12</sup> Female obedience in Confucianism stemmed from a social emphasis on male roles in the family, which left little opportunity for women. These social sanctions were rare and difficult to acquire, as they were principally offered to men.<sup>13</sup> Thus, not producing offspring, especially sons, was said to be the absolute worst violation of filial piety since it was deemed the most important contribution a woman would make to the family.<sup>14</sup> It would take away one of the most important aspects of the traditional family: kinship.

In Chinese culture, kinship calls for a life governed by a strict familial hierarchy centered around respect.<sup>15</sup> The ideology of the kinship system was significantly influenced by a facet of Confucius' teaching of filial piety. As detailed in *Wulun*, the five cardinal relationships of filial piety, the son in a family was expected to obey his father, the younger brother, his elders, and the wife her husband.<sup>16</sup> In return, the father would take on work outside of the home to support the family's livelihood. The earliest record of this concept was kept in the oldest surviving Chinese

dictionary from the Zhou dynasty, *Erya*.<sup>17</sup> During the late Han period, a comprehensive list of titles and means of address for various family members was detailed in the document *Shiming* [An Explanation of Names].<sup>18</sup> These ideas would prove most prevalent in rural and coastal regions of China, where farming, fishing, and other forms of agriculture sustained the livelihoods of families. In rural areas, a family's survival depended on the might and muscle of male family members. With rural work centered around difficult labor and physical tasks, more sons became vital to village life. As a result, the more men in a family, the more prestigious and successful that family was.<sup>19</sup> A typical marriage involved extravagant delivery of gifts and dowry, in addition to a formal ceremony, making it expensive. However, buying a daughter and raising her together with the rest of the family proved the most cost-effective and efficient way to produce sons. With Shim-pua marriage, dowry was extremely cheap and no ceremony was required. Additionally, the child bride could be used as a servant in the recipient family's household, earning much more than the family had paid in the purchase.<sup>20</sup> Thus Shim-pua marriage became most pervasive in the rural areas of China.

## Persistence after years of revolutions

Because the governments failed to break the lasting influence of traditional social norms, Shim-pua marriage persisted despite multiple revolutions by anti-conservative regimes and extensive changes in Chinese society.

### Late Qing and the Republic

In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution led to the establishment of a new republic, overturning thousands of years of autocratic monarchy and ushering in a new republican era. The revolution imposed a separation of power into three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial. As the new government took the country's reins, its influence spread in urban regions of China. These areas began to see the beginnings of a slow, cultural evolution. Individualism spread among young, urban individuals, especially students. Challenges to age-old Confucian norms prompted the emergence of Western philosophies like communism and socialism in Chinese education. New ideologies promoted women's rights and planted the seeds for the feminist movement.<sup>21</sup> Ideas of true love, free marriage, and individualism grew among high-level intellectuals. They denounced the strict hierarchy of the traditional family structure. These ideas grew especially pronounced during the 1919 May 4th movement.<sup>22</sup> Young family members in urban regions began to turn on their former roles under the traditional family system and sought independence. However, this phenomenon was restricted to a minority of the population close to industrial centers where the influence of modernity and the West was strongest.<sup>23</sup>

However, after the establishment of the revolutionary new republic, China experienced a period of social, political, and economic upheaval. The nascent government faced difficulties assuming authority over the people. Competing warlords maintained control over pieces of the country. When Yuan Shih Kai emerged as president in 1911, his attempts to westernize the political and social order fell on deaf ears, as various warlords maintained their own interests.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the republican government was unable to address the situations of individuals already deeply involved in Shim-pua marriage; even under the new republic, families still held extensive control over the practice in rural areas. Limited funds available to the government further limited the extent of its influence, and families involved in the practice were often the only parties that could provide welfare to the women. The burgeoning republic's inability to provide such welfare to women deeply tangled in the web of Shim-pua marriage made change difficult.

A tipping point, defined as the “threshold” where the proportion of people deviating from an existing norm reaches a critical level, plays a pivotal role in shaping social norms.<sup>25</sup> When around 25 percent of a group accepts a deviant practice, the beliefs of those still following existing social norms could potentially be influenced. Once the tipping point is reached, even those tightly adherent to existing traditions are influenced to follow suit.<sup>26</sup> However, as urban areas began to move towards their tipping points, rural areas remained stagnant. Government influence failed

to reach rural regions, suggesting its failure to push people far enough to a point where the majority believed Shim-pua marriage was unacceptable. Even policy such as the prohibition of underage marriage outlined in the Kuomintang civil code was largely ignored in these areas.<sup>27</sup> Regions like the Shansi village Changchuang maintained traditional family structures through 1948 and Mao's era, resisting to encroaching influences of modernity and the West.<sup>28</sup> It was only regions highly receptive to Western influences that began to change.<sup>29</sup> Public policy alone could not change the minds of the people, and traditional values broadly remained throughout society.

In rural China, the majority of work was centered around agriculture. Thus, male strength was utilized the most. Coupled with the government's failure to expand its control, rural kinship fueled the continuation of Shim-pua marriage. In order to maintain agricultural productivity and ensure a sufficient male labor force, married women played a crucial role in producing and raising sons for the family. Fighting poverty and the need for more working hands, families turned to selling their own daughters for dowry.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, land ownership was central to rural life, and families exhibited a strong sense of mutual care and unity.<sup>31</sup> These tightly knit family units foiled any incentive for women to object to or reveal any details of the outlawed practice to authorities who were already difficult to contact.

Attempts at top-down westernization and industrialization of the economy failed to grasp the deep cultural roots of Shim-pua marriage. Despite the new government and urban impact of the 1911 revolution, central government policy was insufficient to affect shim-pua marriage in rural areas. Modernity was heavily concentrated in urban areas near new industrial establishments – the heart of new radical, anti-conservative thinking. Westernization and newly introduced familial structures induced noticeable change only in industrial areas where permeability to Western ideas was high, education was available, and the intellectual elite resided.<sup>32</sup>

## Maoist China

After half a century of cultural evolution, urban society began to approach its tipping point as new generations deviated from old marriage customs. In 1949, Mao rose to power, along with an anti-conservative, anti-Confucian government, seeking total control over the people.<sup>33</sup> In order to establish a Chinese rendition of Marxism-Leninism, Mao encouraged modernization in order to advance a society that, in the eyes of the People's Republic, was centered around feudalism.

Mao pushed for modernization to advance the course of China's social state in accordance with historical materialism, a significant part of Marxist philosophy. Historical materialism splits history into economic stages, called modes of production. Karl Marx claimed that materialist forces would drive social change through ideological contradiction.<sup>34</sup> The first mode of production is "primitive communism", such as hunting and gathering. From the perspective of historical materialists, every member of the tribe was largely self-sufficient, and thus exploitation of resources was nonexistent. Therefore, Marxists characterized such a society as inherently communist, though social structures were very rudimentary. Additionally, a lack of organized government meant the politics and economics in primitive societies were essentially the same.<sup>35</sup> As such a society's agrarian economy grew, a surplus of goods emerged, creating a higher demand for production. Thus slavery appeared as production demand increased as individuals were exploited for their labor. The society would enter the second stage of the Marxist perspective on history, a slave society.<sup>36</sup> As economic efficiency grew, the slave society would transition to a feudalist mode of production. Marx characterized such a society as one having a strict hierarchy, centered around divided roles for individuals and strictly geared towards production; such as serfdom in medieval Europe. By this theory, a society during this stage experienced the growth of a merchant class. As the merchant class grew, so would the opening of new markets, and eventually industrialization.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, industrialization proves a defining segway from a feudalist society to a capitalist society. Marx suggested that society would then be divided into the proletariat and bourgeoisie classes. As the proletariat was exploited, dissatisfaction would grow, and the bourgeoisie would seal their own downfall as tensions heightened. A proletariat revolution would then ensue, a proletarian dictatorship would be created, and the society would enter its final stage, the communist mode of production. First, labor would be strategically divided. Then, as

the people toiled in their labor, it would become their motivation. Finally, society would become driven by the wants of productivity.<sup>38</sup>

Marxism accused capitalist societies of exploiting men as wage slaves to wealthy business elites. Due to this supposed exploitation, the capitalist system, in Marx's eyes, created a large division between the workplace and the home which proved detrimental to the well-being of families.<sup>39</sup> According to the modes of production in historical materialism, however, a revolution of the working man would break the lasting oppression of the bourgeois. A previously "exploitative" society would become a communist one, devoid of inequality and class division. Marxism entailed that the concept of family was a tool to advance the interests of the bourgeoisie. Instead, Marx proposed alternatives like collectivization, education by the communist state, and an egalitarian family system, which resulted in each individual exhibiting collective ownership over production.<sup>40</sup>

Mao sought to eliminate the exploitation of generations of Chinese people. His vision of an eventual communist society fueled a desire to revolutionize China's labor system and heavily industrialize the country.<sup>41</sup> The driving force of this industrialization was the communist party's goal to advance China's "mode of production" from a "feudalist" to first a fully capitalist, then socialist, and finally communist. By 1958, men in the family were sent to work in large industrial plants in steel manufacturing and construction projects across China. Thus women began to hold a greater responsibility back at farms to care for crops and work in the fields, and the demand for female labor increased. Party leaders stressed the importance of women's work outside of the home to become free of their "feudal confinement."<sup>42</sup> Thus the initial motivations of Mao's liberation of women were an effect of a strategic move designed to further political and economic interests. By liberating women from the home, a large female workforce could satisfy the demands of the new economic system, while simultaneously begin eliminating the roots of a feudal society.<sup>43</sup>

Traditional "feudalist" society in China enabled men to continuously pass their property and legacies to their sons, while women were expected to maintain the home and attend to their husband's needs. Thus, Mao believed the strict hierarchy of the traditional family was also characteristic of a fundamentally feudal society. Therefore, to further their goal to leave "feudalism" behind, the PRC passed the 1950 Marriage Law. The law included a set of policies that sought to establish a new marriage system, while simultaneously prohibiting practicing the traditional patriarchal system. First, the policy established equality between men and women, overturning patriarchal social norms that proclaimed male superiority.<sup>44</sup> It also prohibited practices like child betrothal and polygamy.<sup>45</sup> The law further outlawed any parental interference in the marriage process, and much like the Kuomintang civil code, – which included statutes attempting to prohibit underage marriage–sought to place marriage decisions in the hands of the bride and groom. In simple terms, the marriage law represented a formal attempt to remove "feudalist" patriarchal roots and establish freedom of marriage. Because the policy prohibited parental involvement in who their children should wed, Shim-pua marriage was largely wiped out of major urban regions receptive to social change.<sup>46</sup> However, what the PRC characterized as feudalism and lasting social norms, along with the kinship structure, were woven deeply into the country's fabric. With family being the center of growth and mutual care, widespread enforcement of government policy proved extremely difficult. Additionally, the law turned out much less effective than the government hoped for. Like the Kuomintang policy, the PRC's marriage law simply introduced a new method of marriage that had the potential to be more equitable and inclusive to the sexes. But both policies failed to instigate lasting social impact that would bring society to drop old social norms, but the 1950 marriage law, apart from causing gradual cultural evolution in urban areas and among the educational elite, did little to expand its influence to the country at large.<sup>47</sup>

A decade later, Mao initiated the Great Leap Forward, planning heavy industrialization. The program was aimed at strengthening the Chinese economy by rapidly increasing grain and steel production.<sup>48</sup> The program also targeted rural farmers and presented them with an obligation to contribute to the collective efforts at agricultural and metal production. To quell possible rural opposition to collective agriculture, farming cooperatives were established to increase rural families' production efficiency while preserving their land ownership and traditional practices.<sup>49</sup> However, widespread corruption, forced labor, and appalling working conditions led to a rapid spread in poverty rates.

Three long years of famine plagued the country's people. The government's failure to address poverty and food shortages nationwide furthered families' desperation to survive and sustain their livelihoods.<sup>50</sup> The emphasis on the significance of men within families intensified, leading to increased pressure for the birth of male heirs. This occurrence, in turn, led families to revert to Shim-pua marriage for the purpose of bearing sons and securing dowries.

In the 1970s, due to the lasting effects of poverty from the Great Leap Forward, Shim-pua marriage resurfaced in rural areas. Families sought financial stability and support and did so through higher rates of production. Higher rates of production came from sons rapidly born into the working family that would bolster the workforce. However, families in poverty could not afford dowry and a formal marriage ceremony. As a result, Shim-pua marriage was used as a tool to more cheaply produce male offspring, and at the same time, receive a female servant that could work for the family.<sup>51</sup> Mao's policy may have attempted to suppress occurrences of the issue itself but failed to expand its influence thoroughly enough and address underlying social norms that fueled the circumstances of the practice.

In Maoist China, authoritarian and anti-Confucian efforts at modernization quickly brought prominent areas of the country to their tipping points. The feminist movement began blooming in urban areas and cities. In addition, law enforcement was concentrated in these regions, making policies like the 1950 marriage law easy to enforce. In metropolitan and urban areas in the country, the practice waned. Law enforcement overlooked the outskirts of China and rural areas like Fujian. In addition, a strong social norm of kinship remained prevalent in tightly knit rural societies, and the influence of modern movements and cultural transformations throughout the rest of the country was limited. With families living in closely consolidated units and limited contact with outside cultures, the tipping points in these regions were nearly impossible to reach.

## Post-Mao Era

After 1978, Deng Xiaoping reintroduced Confucian ideas in his vision of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," merging fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism with traditional Confucianism.<sup>52</sup>

Due to China's fundamental patriarchal roots, families exhibited strong preferences for male children, which significantly contributed to the widespread practice of Shim-pua marriage. In 1979, the One Child policy was introduced, aiming to curtail rapid, skyrocketing population growth in the country.<sup>53</sup> However, the attempt to restrict family size in a patriarchal country created a gender imbalance that resulted in a rural marriage crisis. As the ratio of male to female children increased further, many families committed sex-selective infanticide. Sex-selective abortion, abandonment, and the selling of young female children were widespread.<sup>54</sup>

Tightly knit rural societies in China were unreceptive to change, and thus reluctant to abide by the One Child policy. When met with the new policy, rural regions resorted to evasion, and often confrontation and violence.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the emphasis on a compartmentalized life created a barrier of secrecy and confidentiality that made it difficult even for local officials to exhibit control. Additionally, the presence of elderly family members required the attendance and care of younger family members, the burden often falling to women. Prevailing social norms, such as filial piety, placed domestic obligations on female members of the family. The stress and mental toll this form of care took made life even more difficult for Shim-pua women. Large rural families quickly fill with elderly individuals. Generations of endogamy and increasing lifespans effectively confined Shim-pua women to the home. Limited connections and a lack of effective communication with modernized regions of China proved rural development barely possible.

Economic advancements during this time had mixed effects on Shim-pua marriage. While it helped slow the practice by expanding education opportunities and increasing connections with remote areas of China, economic activity and dropping poverty rates, coupled with the importance of kinship and reproduction, increased the incentive for shim-pua marriage. Families that were gaining financial footing became less concerned with fines and violations of the one-child policy, which leads to more children in addition to living in less accessible areas.<sup>56</sup> Although economic activity somewhat mitigated the practice, it still persisted in rural areas like Putian in Fujian. In fact, Shim-pua marriage and trafficking of women remained widespread issues in the early 21st century. The vast majority of trafficking

cases that took place in China from 2005-2010 involved forced marriage, child brides, and women from neighboring countries. Eastern regions like Fujuan, Kwangtung, and Shandong, experienced gender imbalance, with 119 males for every 100 females.<sup>57</sup> High rates of forced marriage characterized these areas. In the modern era, Putian families continued to practice Shim-pua marriage. The practice offered advantages including the reservation of funds for elderly members through the early marriage of families' children and improving the son's chance at marriage.<sup>58</sup> With its underlying social norms intact, Shim-pua marriage—once an ancient, then premodern practice—became modern.

## Conclusion

Why was Shim-pua marriage so resilient to many revolutions, cultural changes, and the advent of modernity in China? successive Chinese governments failed to change underlying social norms and institutions from the top down, which led to the persistence of Shim-pua marriage.

Due to strong Confucian family values, China has always tended towards a “tight society,” characterized by traditions that are strictly adhered to, and very limited influence of deviant influences.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, “loose societies” tend to be more receptive to modernization and social change, and thus can more readily enter a phase of cultural evolution.

Large urban areas, cities, and densely populated regions in China were gradually “loosened” with the advent of multiple revolutions that transformed, modernized, and westernized China. The “large-scale and rapid development” of lasting social norms made it extremely difficult for “formal institutions like laws, treaties,” and government intervention” to effectively expand their influence.<sup>60</sup>

Change to long-lasting practices like Shim-pua marriage can only come through widespread cultural evolution. Instead of addressing the underlying cultural factors, the government launched futile attempts to directly suppress the occurrence of the phenomenon. In the case of Shim-pua marriage, lasting social norms, coupled with geographical, political, and cultural isolation contributed to ineffective government intervention. However, increased interregional communication between urban and rural regions, and encroachment of modernity in China may eventually diminish the practice. This suggests organic cultural change, rather than direct government interference, can bring forth social evolution.

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