The "Marriage Squeeze" and the New Gender System in China

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ABSTRACT

The strongly imbalanced sex ratio in China is causing a “marriage squeeze” in the marriage market, with a pronounced surplus of marriageable males and shortage of females. Historically and cross-culturally, the social impact of a marriage squeeze has been felt in the dowry practice in India, the bride-price in China, and the women’s liberation movement in the United States. While Western societies such as the United States have witnessed the social empowerment of women as a result of a marriage squeeze, traditional patriarchal societies such as early twentieth century India and China experienced reduced power and status of women in marriage squeezes both in favor of and against females. This paper examines the ramifications of China’s new marriage squeeze for the gender system and the new social reality of China as the nation experiences its great transformation from a traditional, agrarian society to a modern, industrial and post-industrial one. Using a historical and comparative approach, this paper argues that the effect of a marriage squeeze is dependent on societal type, especially the specific gender system of a society as shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts. Outlining a peculiar gender system in which women’s social status increases with forces of modernization, urbanization and globalization, but at the same time regresses as a result of traditional residues and incomplete or artificial liberations, this paper delineates mixed ramifications of the new marriage squeeze for China, calling for serious state and societal efforts to address gender bias and inequality.