

THE GIFT OF THE BRIDE: A CRITICAL NOTE ON MAURICE FREEDMAN'S
INTERPRETATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MARRIAGE

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Freedman (1970:185) has asserted that the patrilocal grand form of marriage in traditional Chinese society would leave the family of the bride ritually and socially inferior to the family of the groom. He says,

The rites of marriage demonstrate that the bride's body, fertility, domestic service and loyalty are handed over by one family to another. To her natal family the loss is severe, both emotionally and economically: a member of the family is turned into a drain on its resources and a potential foe (Freedman, 1970:185).

In making these assertions Freedman reiterated a position he had taken before.

There is a Chinese proverb which says, "A boy is born facing in; a girl is born facing out." In other words from the moment she comes into life a girl is a potential loss to her family. Among Singapore Chinese from southern Fukien daughters are spoken of as "goods on which one loses." These statements reflect the rule that a woman left her family on marriage and contributed children to the group into which she married. Her domestic services, her fertility, and her chief ritual attachments were transferred from one family to another. The conveyance of rights in a woman from one family to another was validated by the passage of bride-price (Freedman, 1958:31).

It is fair, I think, to say that for Freedman the rites of the patrilocal grand form of marriage were first and foremost a rite de passage for the bride.

The main body of rites constituting a wedding segregate the girl from her ordinary life in her natal house, prepare her for the pains and duties of her married life, transfer her in a state of marginality to her new house, and begin the process by which she will be incorporated there (Freedman, 1970:183).

By dramatizing the bride's separation from one family and her incorporation in another the rites would also seem to have dramatized the loss to one family and the gain to another. This is the basic presupposition of Freedman's analysis.

I would maintain that Freedman has erred in taking into account only the wedding itself instead of the whole cycle of rites of which it is only a single part. He has noted that betrothal was the first step in the marriage, for it established the bond of affinity between the two families (Freedman, 1970:181). Nonetheless he has chosen to completely neglect the series of gift exchanges which began with betrothal, included the wedding, and continued on after the wedding itself.

When the wedding itself is seen as one of these gift exchanges, involving the gift of the bride herself and her dowry, then it can also be seen that the loss of the bride herself did not necessarily leave her family ritually and socially inferior to the family of the groom.

When a gift is given, the loss of the gift itself is compensated by a rise in status. This is the basic premise of public charity as well as private giving all over the world. If the bride were a gift, then the greater her family's loss, the greater would be their gain in social and ritual status.

Reciprocal gift giving creates social relations of solidarity between social equals. When one of the givers gives more than the other, however, their relations become asymmetrical with the giver of the greater gifts left in the better position. I would argue that the patrilocal grand form of marriage in traditional Chinese society dramatized an ideal situation in which the family of the bride would have given the greater gifts. If in fact the family of the bride did give the greater gifts,

they would then be left in a state of ritual and social superiority in relation to the family of the groom.

It will first be necessary to state precisely what is the subject being considered, the patrilocal grand form of marriage. In order to make my critique as effective as possible I accept at face value Freedman's own statement.

The rites enshrine a single form of marriage, even though marriage is of different kinds, and it is to the one form that I shall confine the discussion: a man marries a virgin bride who is at that point brought into his paternal house as a primary wife. To the Chinese this is "marriage" in the abstract, and it is the norm from which all other forms of marital union are deviations, however significant they may be in real life (Freedman, 1970:180).

Freedman's last qualification is most important. The subject being considered here is not the normal or average Chinese marriage in any statistical sense, but instead an ideal form of marriage with reference to which the meaning of other forms is determined.

Thus, although I would argue that the ideal patrilocal grand form of marriage would leave the family of the bride ritually and socially superior to the family of the groom, I will not argue that actual Chinese marriages commonly left them socially superior. In fact marriages instituted in accord with the patrilocal grand form of marriage were commonly hypergamous. In these cases the social and ritual gain accrued by their daughter's marriage might only put the family of the bride on the same social level as the family of the groom.

This would explain Arthur Wolf's observation:

Although younger brothers are expected to defer to their older brothers in many situations, the relationship is essentially one of equality. The same is true of affines. One family may be wealthier or more powerful than the other, but in the realm of kinship they stand on the same plane (Wolf, 1970:199).

It is wrong to say, as Freedman has, that, "The conveyance of rights in a woman from one group to another was validated by the passage of bride-price" (Freedman, 1958:31). In no sense in the ideal patrilocal grand form of marriage were rights in a bride sold for a certain price. This in fact was the definition of a lesser deviant form of marriage.

The ideal was that the family of the bride should contribute a sum equal to the so-called "bride-price" and return the whole to the family of the groom as the bride's dowry. At the very least they were bound to return the bride-price itself. If they did not, they would be accused of "selling" their daughter and lose face.

What happened in most cases, I suspect, was that the gift of the bride herself and her dowry would bring the bride's family up to a level of approximate social equality with the family of the groom. Their relations with the family of the groom would then resemble those of the older and younger brothers mentioned by Wolf. Ritual deference to them on certain occasions would co-exist with approximate social equality.

In analyzing traditional Chinese institutions it is crucial to distinguish two types of social relations which I will call "categorical" and "contingent." Categorical relations are directly defined by Chinese social structure in accord with a priori principles. Contingent relations are dependent on exchange of gifts and favors. What Freedman (1970:179) called "the fixed bonds of agnatic kinship" were categorical. What he called the "contractual ties of marriage" were only contingent.

Relations between affines were created and sustained by exchange of gifts and favors. The ceremonial gift exchanges involved in the rites of marriage indicate clearly that the family of the bride were supposed to give the greater gifts and guarantee themselves a socially and

ritually superior status.

In the ethnographic literature the best account of these gifts is that by Doolittle who observed Chinese custom in Foochow a little over a century ago. Doolittle's observations are in full accord with accounts of the patrilocal grand form of marriage which I myself collected in central Taiwan and are, moreover, consistent with Fei Hsiao-tung's observations in his own home village, Kaihsienkung, in the Yangtse delta.

As Freedman himself noted betrothal was the first step in instituting a marriage. The betrothal itself was instituted by exchanging cards with information regarding the bride and groom and their families.

At the time when the cards are sent to the family to which the girl belongs, it is also customary to send as a present for her a pair of silver or gold wristlets, and for her family various articles of food, as pigs' feet, a pair of fowls, two fish, etc. When they send back to the family to which the boy belongs the engagement card, they send also as a present a quantity of artificial gilt flowers, some vermicelli and bread cakes (Doolittle, 1865:68).

Two more times before the wedding itself similar gifts were exchanged by the families of the bride and groom.

To a student of Chinese folk-religion the most striking thing about these gift exchanges is their precise analogy to the offerings made to two distinct types of spiritual beings. Gifts of whole fish and fowl and whole large chunks of pork are the offerings appropriate for active gods (sin), while vegetarian foods and flowers are appropriate gifts for Buddhas (fut).

My own informants distinguished these types in the following way: active gods may actively intervene in human affairs and may act as patrons in patron-client relations. Buddhas, however, do not intervene in human affairs and do not act as patrons. Their role in religion

is only to act as moral models. Some informants would claim that Buddhas, as such, enjoy a theoretical superiority over active gods. In religious practice, however, Buddhas were never treated with the same high degree of deference as active gods. Offerings to them were generally speaking more meager and the ritual surrounding these offerings far less elaborate.

The family of the groom made gifts to the family of the bride as if they were active gods and potential patrons, but received in return only vegetarian foods and flowers suitable for Buddhas. These gifts suggest that the family of the bride were treated as persons in the same social category as active gods, superior beings who might, if approached properly, be the source of important favors.

Consideration of gift exchanges which went on after marriage confirm this classification. For example, in central Taiwan a man and wife are expected to offer gifts of mooncakes or other fancy foodstuffs to the wife's family during the Moon Festival which occurs on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month.

On this occasion, however, mooncakes are also given to special friends and patrons to acknowledge gifts and favors during the previous year. Such gifts are only given to persons whose status is at least equal and often superior to the status of those who give them.

It seems clear then that the family of the bride do not expect to be treated as socially and ritually inferior by the family of the groom. On the contrary both before and after the wedding itself they should be treated as friends or patrons whose status is at least equal and possibly superior.

Their superiority is not, however, seen as given in the nature of things. It is not a direct consequence of the a priori norms which constituted traditional Chinese social structure. To maintain their position as honored friends or patrons the family of the bride had periodically to give greater gifts in exchange for the gifts which they themselves received. The first of their greater gifts were the bride herself and her dowry. Later the brothers of the bride as mother's brother to her sons would be expected to make the greatest of the gifts of cash publicly displayed at their rites de passage.

From the point of view of symbolic analysis which aims at revealing the ideal expectations enshrined in the patrilocal grand form of marriage the decisive fact is that the bride herself was treated as a gift of quality most rare and precious.

According to traditional Chinese etiquette a gift should be wrapped in red. The person to whom it is given must not lower his eyes to see what it is. Only after the giver has left the scene, in the inner privacy of his own home, would the person to whom it was given remove its wrappings and examine its content.

What then of the bride? On the day of her wedding she was covered from head to foot in special wedding garments, coloured red, which completely concealed her features. Between the time of betrothal and the wedding itself and for most of the wedding ritual the groom and his family were not supposed to catch even a glimpse of her face. For this reason custom prescribed a strong avoidance between members of the families of the bride and groom, especially the bride and groom themselves, until after the wedding was finished. Only after the bride was

separated from her own family, in the inner recesses of the family into which she married could her bright red bridal "wrappings" be removed. The analogy is clear and too circumstantial to be accidental. The bride herself was a gift.

She was, moreover, treated as a gift most precious and rare. While being conveyed from one family to the other she was treated as nothing less than an empress of China. It is true enough that the bride's elevation in status during her transfer and the rites' stripping away of this status and emphasizing her lowly status in the family into which she married are consistent with what we know of rites de passage (Turner, 1964:4-20). It is also consistent with the fact that the bride herself was a gift.

By sending her off dressed as an empress of China her natal family would emphasize the high value of the gift they were giving. By stripping away her bridal "wrappings" and emphasizing her lowly status the family of the groom would deny the full weight of the obligation which the gift of the bride imposed upon them.

Recognizing that the bride herself was a gift and only one of a series of gifts which linked her family as friends and patrons to the family into which she married clears the way for understanding an aspect of traditional Chinese marriage and its implications for affinal relationships which seems to have troubled Freedman himself.

Having argued that the rites of marriage emphasized the bride's separation from the family into which she was born, Freedman in the end is forced to back down a bit.

The rites pose a problem and leave it unresolved. How is a woman to reconcile her duties as wife and daughter-in-law with those she has as sister and daughter? How are a group of

agnates to reconcile their independence with the need to form ties by marriage? The bride's solemn send-off from her natal house is not (emphasis added) a complete termination of her filial and sibling ties, for the rites also establish her as a married daughter with claims on her parents and brothers. Her family retains an interest in her well-being, most dramatically stated in the rites at the end of her life, when her brothers arrive to insure that her death is natural and her funeral is lavish enough to reflect their own standing. These interfering men are affines to the bereaved family, and yet they are also mother's brothers, in which role they are affectionate protectors of their sororal nephews and often sought by them to act as mediators among themselves. They also occupy a chief place in the marriage rites, appearing in the rites performed in the bride's house and the groom's; in the latter the maternal uncle is given the seat of honor at the feast. But the ritual involvement of ties through women does not end there, for the bride's younger brother (a mother's brother in the making) is usually given some special role to perform in the house to which the bride travels. Groom's mother's brother and bride's brother are ritual evidence of non-agnatic links forged by the family in two generations--kindly matrilineal kinsmen on the one side, and troublemaking affines on the other (Freedman, 1970:186).

Once the rites which institute the patrilocal grand form of marriage are seen as only one of a series of gift exchanges which link together the families of the bride and groom, the singular status of the mother's brother (the one-time brother of the bride) is readily understandable. He acts in ways exactly appropriate to a patron on whom the family of the groom depend for large and important gifts.

As a member of the bride's family he receives periodically largely symbolic gifts. In return he is expected to confirm his status as a patron by giving the largest of all the gifts of cash publicly displayed at his nephew's rites de passage, his wedding and his entering into a new house.

More important he is expected to act as mediator in quarrels not only among his sister's sons but also between his sister's sons and their father (Fei, 1939). In order to act as mediator, he must fulfill two

conditions and be at one and the same time related to both the parties involved and superior to them both. If he were not superior or at least an equal to whom ritual deference was accorded, he would have no influence and would be unable to act as mediator.

A Taiwanese proverb says, "While he's alive a man has three gods, Heaven, Earth, and his mother's brother." My own informants noted that in Taiwan at least the role of a wife's brother, who will act as mother's brother to her children and protect his sister from excessive abuse, is considered so important that when women marry or migrate far from their natal homes they will seek out other men to act as fictive brothers. This "recognizing an outside family" (jin kua-ke) is symbolized by the same kinds of ceremonial gift exchanges which would ordinarily occur between the family into which a woman married and the family into which she was born.

In short, throughout his sister's life the bride's brother acts in exactly the way that he should act as an affine in the same category with active gods and other friends and patrons of the family into which his sister married.

I have argued that Freedman's assertion that the patrilocal grand form of marriage left the family of the bride ritually and socially inferior to the family of the groom is not necessarily true. On the contrary, the family of the bride would, ideally at least, be the givers of the greater gifts in a series of gift exchanges which could, if they did give the greater gifts, leave them ritually and socially superior. I have shown, moreover, that adopting this interpretation clears the way for understanding the special role which the bride's brothers could come

to play in relation to the family into which she married.

From a theoretical point of view the chief advantage of insisting that exchange between two social groups instead of an individual's rite de passage is the more important aspect of the patrilocal grand form of marriage is that this interpretation allows us to understand the whole range of alternative forms of marriage of which the patrilocal grand form was only one, albeit the ideal type.

In traditional Chinese society besides the patrilocal grand form of marriage several other forms of marriage were publicly recognized and institutionalized. There were at one extreme marriages where the brides were simply "sold" for so much cash down. There were at the other extreme uxorilocal marriages by which men would leave their own natal homes and cut themselves off from the worship of their own ancestors in order to marry into their wives' families. In a third alternative potential daughters-in-law were adopted as infants or small children into the families into which they were later to marry. If we were to insist that the bride's rite de passage, her separation from one family and her incorporation into another, was the crucial aspect of traditional Chinese marriage we would then be hard put to understand the relationship of these alternative forms of marriage to the patrilocal grand form.

In the case of brides who were simply "sold," marriage by purchase in the most straightforward possible sense, and in the case of adopted daughters-in-law we have two other forms of patrilocal marriage in which, if anything, the bride herself was more radically separated from the family into which she was born than in the patrilocal grand form itself. For as we have seen after the patrilocal grand form of marriage the bride

and the family into which she married retained connections with her natal family periodically symbolized by further exchanges of gifts and occasionally put to use when the bride's brothers would act as mediators in quarrels among her sons or in quarrels between her sons and their father. As we have seen this relationship would continue at least until the death of the bride, at which time her brothers' permission was necessary in order to complete her funeral. At least for the case of brides who were sold this it seems was not the case.

One of my own informants, a poor woman, was contemplating selling her daughter to one of the mainland Chinese who now live in Taiwan. She explained that although this was likely to be hard on her daughter it would after all make a great deal of money for herself, the girl's mother. At that time, she said, the going price paid by mainlanders for Taiwanese brides was around thirty thousand national Taiwan dollars (\$750 U.S.). Moreover, she said, after such a marriage she herself would be free of the onerous burdens of the gifts which the girl's family would otherwise be expected to provide at the rites de passage for her sons. Getting involved in ceremonial gift exchanges was all very well for those who were well enough off to afford it. For a poor widow it would certainly be too expensive. Better by far, she said, to get your daughter married off in a way which wouldn't involve such expenses and would, moreover, bring in a substantial sum of cash in the process.

It should be apparent that the ritual separation of a bride from her family could not be crucial for a case of uxori-local marriage. On the contrary, it would be a contradiction in terms. It isn't of course impossible to construct ad hoc explanations to relate the performance of

this and the other variant forms of marriage described above to the patrilocal grand form. We might, for example, argue that these forms went largely undramatized by elaborate ritual precisely because they were less than ideal forms. Because they were less than ideal deviant patterns people, of course, wouldn't go out of their way to publicly show them off. This kind of explanation, however, begs the question. Given the patrilineal bias of traditional Chinese social structure it is easy to see why uxori-local marriages might be despised and a source of shame for the men who married into their wives' families. Why, however, were the selling of brides and adopting of infant daughters-in-law less than ideal? Both, after all, were patrilocal forms of marriage. Both involved the separation of the bride from her natal family. Why then were these forms of marriage less than ideal?

An interpretation which emphasizes exchange between two social groups as the crucial aspect of traditional Chinese marriage not only answers this question but also provides a comprehensive explanation for the interrelations of all of the various forms of patrilocal and uxori-local marriage permitted in traditional Chinese society. The crucial factors in this explanation are the interrelations of the bride-price, the dowry, and her natal family's investment in the bride herself.

In the patrilocal grand form of marriage we have seen that ideally the bride price and something more would be returned to the family of the groom with the bride herself as her dowry. The bride's family would then have given substantial gifts to the family of the groom but received nothing much in return. This asymmetrical giving would create a social relationship between the two families and raise the bride's family's

social position in relation to the family of the groom. This we have seen was the ideal form, a kind of exchange which would bring into being an alliance between two families.

In the form of marriage where the bride was simply sold we typically find a much higher than normal bride-price which was not, moreover, returned. The family of the bride would be compensated for the cost of feeding, clothing, and sheltering their daughter until her marriage. Exchange would take the form of a purchase instead of a series of gifts and the bride's links to her natal family would be as completely as possible severed.

In the case of adopted-daughters-in-law the bride-price, if any, was typically much less than in the case of a nearly adult or adult bride who was sold. After all, her family's investment in their daughter was much less and they couldn't expect much in return.

In the cases of brides who were sold and adopted daughters-in-law we have forms of marriage which closely fit the idea that rights in a woman were conveyed from one family to another in exchange for bride-price. The bride-price varied from one form to the other because of the different investment the family of the bride had made in their daughter in the two cases. In neither case would the bride retain links to her natal family. Neither would any form of alliance be created between the two families. Since any ambitious family in traditional China's highly competitive society needed allies to rise in the world this would account for why these forms of marriage were less ideal than the patrilocal grand form.

In the case of uxori-local marriages we have exactly the opposite condition from the case in which the bride was sold. Instead of a marriage where a bride-price was given but no dowry given in return, we have a case where a man gained the use of a large dowry but his family paid no bride-price at all. The groom instead of the bride was bought and paid for by the family into which he married and made to sever his links with the family into which he was born. Here, too, no alliance was created between the families of bride and groom. Since, moreover, this kind of marriage did contradict the patrilineal bias of Chinese social structure it was even more despised than the less than ideal forms of patrilocal marriage.

I am, I would argue, justified in asserting that exchange between two families rather than the bride's rite de passage was the more important aspect of the patrilocal grand form of marriage because it is this aspect of the patrilocal grand form of marriage which explains its function as the norm or ideal type in terms of which the various other forms of marriage permitted in traditional Chinese society were defined and evaluated. The bride's rite de passage, however important for the bride herself or the family into which she married, cannot explain this function. Once we see, however, that exchange was indeed the more important aspect of the patrilocal grand form of marriage we can no longer agree with Freedman's assertion that this ideal type of marriage would leave the family of the bride ritually and socially inferior to the family of the groom.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The actual publication date of Numbers 45-46 is April, 1974. Although publication of the Papers has fallen behind its biannual schedule, regular numbers for Fall and Spring, 1973, are still forthcoming. Special Publication No. 3, entitled "The Crisis in North American Archaeology," is being distributed to current members of the Society in place of a separate publication for Spring, 1972.