

**Stress and Coping in Families with Forced Male Bachelor: A Qualitative Analysis
from Henan, China***

(Draft)

Yan WEI

School of Management
Xi'an University of Finance and Economics
Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 710061, China
Email: violet3650@yahoo.com.cn

Xiaoyi Jin

Institute for Population and Development Studies
Xi'an Jiaotong University
Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 710049, China
Email: xiaoyijin@mail.xjtu.edu.cn

*Sponsored by National Social Science Foundation (07CRK003), Changjiang Scholar Awarding Program by Ministry of Education, Program for Changjiang Scholars and Innovative Research Team in University (IRT0855), "985 Project" National Social Science Research Base of The State Education Committee (07200701), and The Presidential Fund for Innovation in International Studies, Stanford University.

*Acknowledgment: We would like to show our deepest gratitude to Professor Marcus W. Feldman and Assistant Professor Melissa Brown in Stanford University because they gave us some valuable comments of revise the paper.

Stress and Coping in Families with Forced Male Bachelor: A Qualitative Analysis from Henan, China

Abstract: Forced male bachelors are those men who are compelled to remain single when they reach their late 20's or older because of personal poverty, limited intellectual capability, physical disability or a shortage of available potential females. Using qualitative data from interviews in central China, and the three-stage coding method of grounded theory, as well as family stress theory, this paper explores family stress and coping strategies in families of forced male bachelors. We find that forced male bachelors have exerted a negative impact on their family's economies, family relationships and family members' psychology; family poverty, low social status as well as individual comparative disadvantages have together resulted in the single status of forced male bachelors. The inability of forced male bachelors' families to integrate their internal and external resources and their lack of communication about stress, together with the bachelors' limited economic ability, low education and rare social intercourse have aggravated their families stress. The present research is intended to provide a theoretical basis for improving forced male bachelors' and their families' well-being and promoting social stability.

Key Words: marriage squeeze; family stress theory; forced male bachelors; coping strategy

BACKGROUND

Chinese society follows a strict patrilineal family system, as a result of which there is a widespread preference for sons (Skinner, 1997). The strong preference for sons produces all forms of discrimination against girls such as desertion of baby girls, female infanticide, and reduced rates of medical treatment for girls, which have led to a much higher female child mortality rate (Das Gupta and Li, 1999). With more than 20 years of continuous decline in China's fertility rate, sex-selective abortion has caused a significant rise in the sex ratio at birth (Zeng, 1993; Das Gupta and Li, 1999). The increasing sex ratio at birth and female child mortality have resulted in the phenomenon of missing women; about 35.59 million women were missing in 20th century China, accounting for 4.65% of the cohort we examined (Li et al., 2006). Missing girls due to gender discrimination has led to a sex imbalance in China's population. The scarcity of women at marriageable ages will eventually lead to a "marriage squeeze" among males (Skinner, 2002). China is confronted with a great shortage of women both currently and in the future, as a result of which millions of young men are unable to find spouses each year (Tuljapurkar et al., 1995). After the year 2013, the surplus male population will be more than 10%, and the proportion will rise to 15% and higher in 2015–2045, which means that an average of about 1.2 million men will not find spouses in the first marriage market each year (Li et al., 2006). When the marriage squeeze reaches a certain threshold, it is likely to have a serious impact on gender relations, marriage and family, and social stability (Skinner, 2002; Song, et al., 2005).

There is a great difference between urban and rural areas of China in terms of socio-economic and cultural development, and females' migration for marriage has made the marriage squeeze especially serious in the rural areas. Under both the push and pull effects of this marriage migration, the adverse impact of scarcity of females on males' marriage tends to be concentrated in poverty-stricken areas, where males at marriageable age have become a "vulnerable group" in the marriage market, the direct victims of sex imbalance in China's population (Skinner, 2002; Shi, 2006). In the family-centered Chinese society, marriage of the young is never a personal matter

but a family event. As a result, forced male bachelors place pressure on almost every family member (Zhang et al., 2005; Mo, 2005) and cause the family both economic and psychological stresses. Previous studies of forced male bachelors in China have mainly used historical data or macro judgment (Hudson et al., 2004). A few qualitative surveys have examined the overall consequences of the sex ratio at birth at the family, individual and community levels in Shaanxi, Jilin, and Henan provinces (Liu, 2005; Mo, 2005). However, a systematic analysis of the effects of the marriage squeeze on forced male bachelors' physical and psychological well-being and its impact on family stress and family coping strategies remains to be came out.

Studies of family stress try to understand its effects on the family and to identify the process through which the family copes with it. In studying the stress on families broken and reunited due to wars, Hill (1949) proposed an ABCX model, which became the theoretical basis for family stress research in subsequent decades. Later studies have searched for empirical data in support of Hill's model and to adjust and improve it (Burr, 1973; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983; Patterson, 1988). Nevertheless, Hill's variables and analysis have remained relevant. In the classical ABCX model (Hill, 1949, 1958), A is the event or situation that triggers family stress, B represents the resources and advantages possessed by the family when stress occurs, C is the family's cognition of the stressful event at both collective and individual levels (whether the family takes the event negatively or positively), and A, B, and C together lead to X, which is the degree of family stress or crisis. The model holds that families which have advantages in resources and positive cognition of stresses tend to be more capable of accommodating and relieving stress.

The ABCX model is applied mainly to study family stress and adjustment at different stages of the life cycle (Bowen, 1989; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983). Sometimes it is used to examine how families with disabled or retarded children cope with stresses (Prout, 1996; Fallon and Russon, 2003), and it has recently been adopted in studies of family coping strategies related to military life (Black, 1993; Bowen et al., 1993; Schumm et al., 1996). Family resources (B) and family cognition (C), as intermediate variables, can influence the effects of stress sources (A). Previous studies of family stress emphasize the effects of "A" on family stress, but seldom consider the effects of intermediate variables (B and C), and even if the intermediate variables are considered,

these studies still fail to draw fully on Hill's model and concentrate on the effects of family resources (social class and support) on family stress rather than the effects of family cognition and appraisal of stress (Wilder, 1986). It has been pointed out that when the intermediate variables are excluded, the sources of stress seem to be unrelated to family stress (Wilder, 1986). While studies of family stress are rather active in the West, in China little research has been done on this topic. Through in-depth interviews with 92 females from 78 Shanghai households, Xu et al. (2007) analyzed the features of females' cognition of family stress, available resources and social support (Xu and Bao, 2007; Bao and Xu, 2007). However, research on rural areas, especially on forced male bachelors' family stress and coping strategies, is largely missing. How do the families of forced male bachelors adjust their strategies and find the internal and external resources to effectively cushion family stress in reacting to setbacks? Providing the "vulnerable" families that include forced male bachelors with humane care and social support, and improving their survival environment, should be a responsibility of public authorities.

In the present paper, we report on a preliminary study of forced male bachelors' family stress and coping strategies using family stress theory and qualitative interviews made in rural areas of central China. Our findings might help to inform public policies, enhance the well-being of this vulnerable group and their families, and provide a theoretical basis for relieving the marriage squeeze and promoting social stability.

STUDY DESIGN

Data and Methods

Data

Jia is a county located in middle-south Henan province. The county has a total area of 407 km², a population of 480 thousand, and has under its jurisdiction 8 townships and 1 street office. National census and sample survey data show that Henan's sex ratio at birth was 130.3 and 125.8 in 2000 and 2005 respectively, both higher than the national levels (the national levels were 119.9 and 120.5 respectively). The corresponding sex ratio at birth in Jia's rural areas was 141.1 and 123.3 respectively, also higher than the average levels in rural China (namely, 121.7 and 122.9,

respectively). Jia's economic development is at the medium level for rural China and its culture is representative of China's middle-west traditional society. Our aims are to develop an in-depth understanding of forced male bachelors' community and family conditions in Jia County, to analyze their survival conditions, well-being and family stress, their impact on community stability, and to contrast this special group and their families with other groups. In this way, we can deepen our understanding of the effects of the marriage squeeze at the family level and perhaps promote societal interventions that may help this vulnerable group.

The Institute for Population and Development Studies of Xi'an Jiaotong University organized a qualitative interview survey called "Forward-looking Policy Exploration under Gender Equality Promotion" in October 2007. The survey collected data by individual and group interviews. The subjects of the survey were mainly "rural males older than 30" and their family members; individual interviews were carried out with these subjects. Other subjects of the survey included regulators, married males and both married and unmarried females in the community of the forced male bachelors; both individual and group interviews were made with these subjects. The entire interview survey was carried out following semi-structured interview outlines. The outline for individual interviews consists of five parts: basic information about the individual, his economic status, marriage and family information, social support information and old-age support information. The outline for group interviews has an extra part, namely group appraisal of forced male bachelors.

Three townships—one developed, one under-developed, and one in between—were selected from JIA County. From each of these townships, a village with relatively more forced male bachelors was chosen for further sampling. Forced male bachelors belonging to three different age groups (30-39 years old, 40-49 years old and the group above 50 years old) were selected in the three villages. In total, 26 forced male bachelors together with 12 of their family members were interviewed. In addition, individual interviews were also made with three married males and six married females, and nine group interviews were made with different groups. The present paper reports mainly on the interview data with 26 forced male bachelors and their 12 family members.

Methods

We use qualitative research that highlights the “grounded theory”, which combines induction with deduction while using inference and comparison. If relevant theories are already available, “grounded theory” can also apply them to develop a better understanding of the results (Strauss, 1987). The objective of the present paper is not to set up new theories but to assess the family stress theory. We will first describe and analyze stress in families of forced male bachelors so as to identify the sources and coping strategies of these families’ stress. We will attempt to discover the reasons behind the bachelors’ single status. Then we will stand in their shoes to learn about their experiences and the consequences of female deficit in order to assess the suitability of applying the theory to forced male bachelors’ family stress.

In order to systematically summarize and analyze the family stress and coping strategies of forced male bachelors, we applied the three-stage coding of grounded theory to the survey data, namely open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss, 1990). Open coding is the conceptualization and categorization of data, which entails condensing large quantities of data and using concepts and categories to define them in an accurate and concise manner. It is also a process of breaking down and reshuffling the collected data and abstract concepts (Strauss, 1987). Axial coding is applied to discover connections between concepts and categories so as to reflect the organic relationship among different parts of the data (Rose, 1982). Selective coding involves selecting the “core category” from all the identified concept categories and focusing the analysis on those “codes” related to the core category (Chen, 1996).

Table1 here

Analytical Framework

The three-stage coding of interview data in our analysis of family stress and coping strategies of forced male bachelors is depicted in Figure 1. Our research consists of two parts: we first analyze the status and sources of forced male bachelors’ family stress. Then we analyze both individual

and family coping strategies. As shown in Fig.1, stress sources (marriage squeeze, migration, family poverty and individual disadvantages) not only affect the status of forced male bachelors' family stress directly but also affect it indirectly through intermediate factors (family resources and stress appraisal). Families often adopt various approaches such as mustering both internal and external resources, switching stress appraisal, improving economic ability and lowering the standard for choosing spouses to relieve the family stress induced by forced male bachelors.

Unlike what happens in Western countries, single status in China is mostly involuntary as it is usually caused by objective rather than subjective factors. In rural areas, marriage is often looked upon as the most important event in one's life and family. Rural people marry much earlier than urban residents, and if they remain single beyond a certain age they often remain unmarried involuntarily. Based on existing studies, we define forced male bachelors as those men who are above 30 years old and are single.

Figure 1 here

STATUS OF FAMILY STRESS

Individual and Family Conditions of Forced Male Bachelors

Table 2 provides basic information about 26 forced male bachelors and their families. At the individual level, it can be seen that: the interviewees are **evenly distributed in terms of age** (except for the 51-60 year olds who account for only 11.5%), **most of the interviewees are poorly educated** as 53.8% of them attended only primary school and 11.5% are illiterate; **about 40% of the interviewees are comparatively disadvantaged** – although 61.5% of them are healthy, 19.3% are either physically or mentally disabled and the remaining 19.2% are afflicted with chronic diseases; **half of the interviewees make a living as migrant workers**, the rest do farm work at home, while only 11.5% of them depend on family or government support because of disability or disease.

In Table 2 we see that: most forced male bachelors have **multiple brothers in the family** – 46.2% of them have three or four brothers and 15.4% have five or even more brothers; according to the

order of the brothers, **the youngest and the oldest are most likely to be unmarried** – although those in between account for 26.9% of the forced male bachelors, the youngest sons account for as many as 34.6%; as some of the interviewees are advanced in age, 38.5% of them have lost both parents; **34.6% and 23.1% have their mother or both parents alive respectively; the interviewees' residence patterns are closely related to whether their parents are alive or not** – if their parents are alive, as many as 50% of them would live with their parents; if both parents have passed away, about 19.2% would live on their own and 15.4% would live with relatives; 15.4% of the interviewees are living in rest homes.

Table 2 here

Status of Forced Male Bachelors' Family Stress (X)

We analyze the status of forced male bachelors' family stress at both individual and family levels. At the family level, the analysis focuses mainly on family economy, family relationships and family members' psychology; at the individual level, the analysis mainly focuses on forced male bachelors' economic situation, everyday life and psychological well-being.

Family level

Increased family economic burden

Family economic stress includes the effects on the family economy of the presence of a forced male bachelor, such as an increase in economic burden and his lack of financial contribution. Previous research suggests that in families with forced male bachelors, the parents' quality of life tends to deteriorate. In addition, as the forced male bachelors are often incapable of making a living on their own, are lazy or gluttonous, and sometimes depend on the care of their parents, they add to the economic burden of the family (Mo, 2005). In our interviews, however, we found that although most of the unmarried males live with their parents and some of the sick and disabled ones need to be taken care of by their parents or other relatives, most can live on their own by doing petty jobs, and are causing no apparent stress on family economy.

However, the forced male bachelors and their families usually try every means available to find them wives. As a result, they are often swindled by others and are left with nothing, which has, no

doubt, added to the families' economic burden. *One interviewee had two marriage experiences, both of which ended in nothing after paying one to three thousand Yuan as engagement fees (No. 1303). Another interviewee lived with a widow in the village for about six years, during which time he spent all his money on her. When he was too old to make money, however, he was driven out of the widow's house with nothing in his pocket (No. 2303).*

Not on good terms with brothers but show more intergenerational support with parents

Children's needs are a family's highest priority, as a result of which parents often provide their children in crisis with all kinds of support (Bian and Rogen., 2001). Similarly, a marriage crisis will also cause the parents to offer the affected children more help (Spitze et al., 1990). Chinese culture demands that parents do their best to find spouses for their unmarried sons, which might intrude on other children's interest. In the present study, we find no evidence that parents' help for the unmarried sons affected other children's interests. *However, when we asked to interview a subject's elder brother, the subject appeared reluctant to allow it saying that they were not on good terms – they did not even talk to each other. According to the village leader who was accompanying us, these “bare bachelors” were often rather peculiar and sometimes not on good terms with their brothers for no apparent reason (No. 1603).* Apparently, being unmarried and in financial difficulties has injured these people's psychological health, leaving them depressed, introverted, with low self-esteem, and unable to handle relationships with those surrounding them, even with their own brothers.

Children's marital status can greatly affect the intergenerational support between them and their parents (Eggebeen, 1992). Socioeconomic resources, such as high income or better education, will promote intergenerational support while poverty and disadvantages in social resources might decrease intergenerational support (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990). Due to the disadvantaged position of the rural elderly with respect to economic and social resources, they rely heavily on support by their children. As male bachelors in rural China come mainly from poverty-stricken regions, their intergenerational support with their parents is quite different from that in average families. Our interviews revealed that forced male bachelors are more filial toward their parents, perhaps because these are the only people with whom they have emotional ties.

Increased stress on family members, especially the parents

The unbearable weight of “face” and “gossip” in the eyes of the farmers actually results from cultural norms, which are determined by the small communities they live in (the spatial factor) and customs that date back thousands of years (the temporal factor) (Li and Chen, 2000). Because there are old single sons at home, their parents and other family members feel overwhelmed psychologically. Afraid of being despised in the community, they cannot hold their heads up and gradually avoid exchanges with others. Family members are vulnerable to the negative psychological effects related to unmarried sons or brothers; they worry about them, feel anxious and helpless and have low self-esteem. Some parents blame it on themselves saying that they have failed to fulfill their responsibility. *In one word, the parents of forced male bachelors suffer from increased pressure in the community. As one of them said, “You cannot hold your head up if you have unmarried sons at home. People in the village will say behind your back, ‘His son is still single at such an age!’ Though they may not mean to discriminate against you, you get that strange feeling more or less.” (No. 2102).*

Individual level

Economic stress due to future marriage

Many of the interviewees said that they remain unmarried mainly due to poverty. Of all the expenses incurred by marriage, the sum needed for building a house is regarded as the premise for discussing marriage. Accordingly, individual forced male bachelors often think that the marriage issue will solve itself as long as they earn enough money to build a house. Having a house is crucial for getting married, and more than one interviewee felt that his stress is mainly related to the building of a house. *An interviewee said that “In the countryside, it costs at least 70,000 or 80,000 Yuan to build a house. I need another 4 or 5 years to amass that sum. I have got to save more before I am too old to work.” (No. 1401)*

Forced male bachelors are not only subject to the stress of making money to build a house and get married, but are also vulnerable to fraudulent marriages and emotional setbacks which may cost them everything they have. As already mentioned, one of our interviewees was swindled out of several thousand Yuan by matchmakers and another was driven out after spending everything he had on a widow’s family. For them, these were heavy blows both economically and emotionally

Low well-being

The absence of marriage has caused a loss in forced male bachelors' well-being: they lack care in daily life, especially when they are sick; they have no plan on their expenses; the cold atmosphere in their home without a wife has deprived them of many pleasures that abound in normal families. Many forced male bachelors acknowledge that the lack of a wife has affected their well-being to a great extent. *According to one interviewee, "There is a huge difference if you have no wife: dressing, washing and cooking – nobody would take care of them; you have to attend to them by yourself after a day's work; nobody does your housework; those who are married are always neatly dressed; I will just eat at my neighbors if there is no time to cook or I will just go hungry if I don't want to cook; you have to go hungry if you don't want to cook; the worst thing is falling sick with no one caring about you all the time."* (No. 1502)

Strong self-contempt due to psychological stress from both family and community

Chinese farmers live under the close scrutiny of the group to which they belong, as a result of which their individual identity gives way to family identity (Li and Chen., 2000). Marriage is not just an issue of a single person but a major event for the family. As most forced male bachelors live with their parents, their stress often comes from their own parents as well as the community. The incessant urging of family members only adds to their psychological burden; in the meantime, they dare not hold their heads up in the village due to their single status. As a result, forced male bachelors are burdened with dual psychological stresses. Some interviewees mentioned that "You can feel the pressure from family: mother and sisters always urge you to get married, which only makes you unhappy. *Being single, you cannot hold your head up and it is inconvenient for you to go to those who are married – people will watch over you wherever a bachelor goes – you can feel the discrimination.*" (No. 1203; 1501)

China's patrilineal family system demands that males are responsible for carrying on the family line. Consequently, being single carries with it the danger of terminating the family line, which adds to forced male bachelors' self-contempt (Sun, 2005). During our survey, many forced male bachelors intentionally avoided the topic, saying that they don't want to get married or that it is not bad to be single. However, we received sharply different information from their family

members (including their parents), who told us that forced male bachelors often cry to themselves, feel depressed, injure themselves, and occasionally even commit suicide. *An interviewee told us, "When parents were alive, they kept talking about the marriage thing – you could feel the pressure from family. You cannot really hold you head up in the village. When you feel annoyed, you just want to kill yourself."* (No. J4)

FAMILY ABILITY TO INTEGRATE RESOURCES IN THE FACE OF STRESS, AND STRESS APPRAISAL (B and C)

Forced male bachelors' families have low ability to integrate resources

A family's resources consist of the sum total of family members' assets and advantages, the family's ability to cope with stress, and other resources they can draw on (McCubbin, 1979). Previous research has evaluated family resources from the three aspects of individual resources (knowledge and skills), family system resources (cohesion and exchange) and external social supports (Prout, 1996; Fallon and Russon, 2003).

Unmarried males are comparatively disadvantaged, poorly educated, incompetent, and of limited earning power. Some research links the unmarried state with income level, holding that personal economic condition has forced some to postpone their marriage (Chen, 2004). As many as 40% of the interviewees work on farms, which brings in only a meagre income. Although nearly 50% make a living as migrant workers, these are mainly involved in transportation or construction industries and are doing dirty, exhausting, and underpaid jobs.

As the families of most forced male bachelors are poverty-stricken, they have no advantages in terms of assets or income. During the interviews, many family members of the forced male bachelors admitted that due to poverty no women were willing to marry them. However, family members need more discussion about marriage because most forced male bachelors are depressed, self-contemptuous, and reluctant to talk to others due to the incessant urging of family members and pressure from community. Some are even reluctant to tell their families about their emotional setbacks or their experience of fraudulent marriages for fear of taxing family members with more anxiety. This lack of communication has aggravated family stress.

Social support outside the family is rather limited. Forced male bachelors in rural China mostly live with their parents, who have a very simple life style. They are almost isolated and have limited social intercourse, so forced male bachelors tend to socialize with other single men. *“You feel close to the unmarried and can talk to them freely. When they get married, however, it is inconvenient to go to them. On festival occasions, I mainly get together with other single folks to have a drink. It won’t do for us to talk to women in the village either.”* (No. 1501) Similarly, the families of forced male bachelors also lack a larger social support network; as family members are despised by others for having an unmarried member, they often avoid mingling with others and refrain from topics related to marriage. *“Our family is poor and our life is hard. The marriage thing has made it ever worse. We seldom tell others what is on our mind – it’s no use any way.”* (No. 2601)

The response to family stress is dominated by negative cognition

Previous research on family stress has demonstrated that stress appraisals will affect the status of stress itself: a positive cognition of stress and positive attitudes toward it are helpful for relieving it, while pessimistic attitudes and negative appraisals tend to aggravate family stress (Prout, 1996). From the interviews, we learned that family-level appraisals of stress center mainly on the sons (or brothers) and were mainly negative. In a family-centered society like rural China, parents’ devotion and sacrifice for their children cannot be explained simply by love; they have become a behavioral norms and part of the life style (Li and Chen, 1993). As mentioned earlier, the singleness of the sons causes the parents tremendous psychological stress and deep remorse. Parents tend to identify their sons’ marriage as their family’s problem, give top priority to their sons’ need for marriage, and are willing to pay for it through their own sacrifice and devotion. *“I still want my son to find a wife; otherwise, nobody would care about him when I am gone. As long as he gets married, I shall die content.”* (No. 2601)

Forced male bachelors themselves also make negative and pessimistic appraisals of their single status, although the younger ones tend to have more positive attitudes. Most forced male bachelors, however, think that they remain single because they are poor, incompetent or disabled. Having neither passion for nor expectation from life, they can only accept and tolerate whatever comes to

them. *"I still want it but few matchmakers would come to me: it is hard for an old man to get married in the countryside. The chance of marriage is slim and I am too old to be a migrant worker."*(No. 1501) But some relatively younger ones seem to have positive attitudes toward the stress of needing to get married, believing that things will improve in the future. *Their mentality goes this way: it is high time that they got married but there is no need to worry about it for they cannot help it any way. People tend to introduce to them old widows or divorced women but never girls with no prior marriage. "If there are such girls, they must be either deaf or disabled. Others are not reliable – you have got to rely on yourself."* (No. 1302)

SOURCES OF FAMILY STRESS FOR OLD UNMARRIED MALES IN RURAL CHINA

(A)

The sources of family stress include both internal and external factors. External factors are mainly the marriage squeeze and migration; internal factors include family socioeconomic status and individual relative disadvantages.

External factors: marriage squeeze resulting from the high sex ratio at birth and females' marriage migration

China's sex ratio at birth has stayed high since the mid-1980s and is still climbing resulting in an ever-worsening deficit of females. The lack of females of marriageable age has caused a severe marriage squeeze among males, which is even more serious in the countryside. At the same time, large numbers of young girls who have left their poverty-stricken hometowns as migrant workers are reluctant to return home to get married, while other girls choose to leave their hometown by directly marrying to distant places. Population migration in this manner has made it more difficult for local youths to find spouses and has led to concentration of the marriage squeeze in poverty-stricken and backward regions. Accordingly, problems faced by these regions are much more serious (Deng, 2003; Wang, 2003).

Jia, the target county of the survey, had a sex ratio at birth of 141.4 and a sex ratio of 121.5 for 1-19 year olds in 2000, both of which are much higher than the normal level. Presently, the county

has 4,488 unmarried males who are above 30 years old, accounting for about 1% of the total population. In some outlying villages, they account for about 6% of the total population. Although the interviews obtained little information about female migration, the fraudulent marriages mentioned by some interviewees reflected the scarcity of females in the region. *“In the past, there were people who bought Sichuan women as wives. Later the police took them away and seized the traffickers. By and by, the women all left and women traffickers were thrown into prison – I have a relative who once took several women back home but he was sentenced to years of imprisonment almost right away. Some people are lucky enough to find wives but they would leave in no more than a month taking almost everything with them.”* (No. 1603)

Internal factors: family poverty, low social status and forced male bachelors’ comparative disadvantages

Family-level influences include family economic conditions and social status, etc. Family economic conditions may be caused by or reflect a heavy burden on the family due to the multiplicity of brothers, poor residential conditions and poverty caused by the parents’ health. Generally speaking, family economic conditions are associated with the marriage of forced male bachelors. Those in better economic conditions stand a good chance of getting married (Zhang and Zhong, 2005; Lu, 2006). The consequences of spouse scarcity are shouldered mainly by the poor or younger sons as is proven by data collected from northwest India (Das Gupta, 1995), northeast China (Lee et al., 1997) and China’s Jiangsu province (Li et al., 1995). The two major expenses in farmers’ lives are incurred by their children’s marriages and the construction of houses (Li et al., 1993). From our survey, we also see that a “new house” is the premise for marriage and the expense of building that house is the largest of all expenses related to marriage. *“The most difficult thing is ‘economic conditions’. When you earn enough to build a house, there is no way not to find a wife.”* (No. 1401) Due to a multiplicity of sons, some families cannot afford to build all of them a house, which has delayed the marriage of some of the brothers. *“I have too many brothers and my family is not well to do. It is hard to find a wife due to the heavy burden.” “He has so many brothers that it is impossible to build all those houses. Every one has to wait for his turn. When he finally has his own house, he is too old to get married.”* (No. 2501)

Family social status can also affect the marriage of forced male bachelors. Social status here mainly refers to the family's political status, which is a historical vestige, and the family's reputation, due to which it is sometimes difficult for rural males to win women's favor. Forced male bachelors whose families have low social status or who have a bad reputation or a weak household have difficulties finding wives. Since political status was assigned to Chinese households in the 1950s, the standard for choosing spouses has undergone radical changes and political status has become crucial (Xu, 2004). This was especially apparent during the 10-year long Cultural Revolution. *"People like me who used to have a low political status were difficult to get married back then. With the political stigma on you, you dare not think of anything – after liberation, my family was labeled as landowners. When political status was finally scraped after the reform, I am already too old to get married."* (No. J3) Some interviewees think that although financial condition has a major effect on their marriage, their parents' reputation is also very important – even the parents' character can affect their marriage. *"No one wants to be your matchmaker if you have ruthless parents."* (No. 1603) Some interviewees thought that the strength of the household is critical to marriage, and economic condition is more important than the multiplicity of brothers. *"I don't think having too many brothers is the point. Some women just won't marry you if you have few brothers – they won't marry you because your household is too weak and might be bullied by others."* (No. 1603)

Internal factors at the individual level include health status, capability, personality and appearance etc. Although some of the interviewees are unmarried due to their own comparative disadvantages, disability and disease also play a major role for the rest. Disability mainly consists of wounds in the legs, deafness, muteness and low IQ; diseases include chronic bronchitis, hepatitis-B, and other chronic diseases such as stomach ailments. More forced male bachelors, however, stay single because of their personality. Some researchers hold that rural youths fail to get married mainly because they are too obedient and without initiative; they impress people as being stiff, incompetent at interpersonal communication and ignorant of worldly affairs; their personality has become a major obstacle to marriage (Peng, 2004; Mo, 2005). This argument is supported by our survey; most of our interviewees were found to be introverted, incompetent at communication, too obedient and less capable at social intercourse and in making money. Such personal factors have

also contributed to the single status of forced male bachelors.

COPING STRATEGIES OF FAMILY STRESS

In response to the stress caused by forced male bachelors, family members often muster both internal and external resources and seek all available support to alleviate the stress. At the individual level, younger unmarried males are working hard to enhance their economic condition, while elderly unmarried males, as a response to the stress, are lowering their standards both for spouses and social intercourse. At the same time, their family members are also actively searching for social support.

Family level: actively integrate internal and external resources

The families of forced male bachelors often give them the greatest possible financial and emotional support while seeking external social support on their behalf. Parents and other family members all want their sons (or brothers) to get married as soon as possible, and they spare no pains to realize it. *“I really want to find my brother a wife, even if a disabled one. But there is just no suitable woman. My mother is also anxious about it. But nothing can be done. Engagement itself will cost the family no less than 4 or 5 thousand Yuan; the wedding will cost tens of thousands more. I am willing to pay for it though.”* (No. 2201)

In the family-centered Chinese society, the strong ties between kin is the most important social capital for family support. When formal institutional support from the public sector is scarce or inaccessible, informal support from the private sector plays a crucial role in coping with family stress (Xu and Bao, 2007). In the families of forced male bachelors, family members, especially the parents, actively seek support from various sources. The social ties of the Chinese are established following a “differential order”, in which kinship is the basic social tie of the rural population (Fei, 1998). Our survey also indicates that family members of forced male bachelors are still relying on kinship – the primary social network – to relieve their stress. *“It’s hard to find a suitable match around you. Some children have got married through the introduction of relatives. I also asked my neighbors for help but there is just no suitable match. Only your own relatives would take it seriously – it won’t do*

for others.” (No. 2302)

Individual level

Forced male bachelors tend to lower their standard in choosing spouses as time passes

The marriage squeeze makes it necessary for the squeezed party either consciously or unconsciously to lower their standard in choosing spouses so as to enlarge the range of potential spouses. Most unmarried males tend to lower the standard of choosing spouses to a great extent as time elapses but the younger ones still hold high hopes for an advantageous marriage. The standard of acceptable spouses evolves, especially for forced male bachelors who are in a disadvantaged position. These changes are also affected by social and historical changes. Unlike young men who still hope for the ideal, older males tend to be more practical, lowering their expectations and standards for fearing of missing the opportunity of a potential match (Xu, 2000). In our survey, we also find that the forced male bachelors’ standard of choosing spouses in the marriage market exhibits similar features. *“When I was young, I used to hold high hopes. I wanted to start a career first and then get married. My ideal wife back then was a woman who had her own thoughts, could lend a hand to me and might contribute her ideas and strategies. Now, however, I only hope her to be filial to my parents and I will not be particular about her appearance either.” (No. 603)* .Some interviewees say that they may marry a divorced woman with a daughter. *“If I want to marry one, I will consider those with daughters. Sons won’t do – it will be too costly. I still want a son of my own any way.” (No. 1302)* Other interviewees are now willing to try uxori-local marriage although they would not have thought about it earlier. *“I had a love affair when I was young. However, the girl’s family wanted me to live with them, which was unacceptable to my parents. Uxorilocal marriage was rather rare back then, so it didn’t work out. Now, I would try it if the woman’s condition is not too bad. I hope to have a change – it’s boring to live in the present environment.” (No. 1303)*

The survey suggests, however, that the younger interviewees haven’t changed their standards for spouses. They still hold high hopes for marriage and believe that marriage should be based on love rather than need. *“When I was young, some one introduced a girl to me and we two loved each other. We finally broke up because her family thought mine too poor. Later, when others introduced new girls to me, I just would not meet them. It’s enough to love once in your life and I only love that one.” (No. 1203)* *“I tried to start a love affair*

with a couple of girls – all introduced to me by others – but ended in nothing because none had the personality that would go with mine. I just hoped to find one with similar temperaments. How can we start a life if we want different things? That's what I wanted back then and it is still what I want now.” (No. 1402)

Forced male bachelors are actively improving financial status and expanding social intercourse

Most interviewees agree that financial difficulties are the major obstacle to marriage and the cost of building new houses is the most important of these. Most individuals we surveyed have been migrant workers, whose main objective is to improve their financial position and to build new houses. *“If he has enough money to build a house, wife will not be an issue. With us brothers all married and our parents gone, he feels no burden at all. He can go to make money as a migrant worker and build a house. It's still hopeful for him to get married.” (No. 1401)* *“Other villagers are getting married at the age of 22 or 23. In contrast, I am much older. I am thinking about building a house first. They (father and elder sister) are not talking about the marriage thing either. House first! With a new house there, I will stand a better chance.” (No. 1102)*

Some forced male bachelors, aware of their narrow circle of social intercourse, are making efforts to establish contact with more females. *“Others have introduced some women to him, who are either too old, or widows or divorced. By far, no one has introduced any women without prior marriage to him. If there are any, they are either deaf or disabled. He is now too old to rely on others. He is planning on working away from home, where he can contact more women.” (No. 1302)*

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVE

We have qualitatively analyzed the family stress and coping strategies of forced male bachelors in light of our interview data. We have deepened our understanding of this special type of family stress and reached some meaningful conclusions. First, the single status of forced male bachelors in rural China has exerted negative effects on their families' economies, family relationships, and family members' psychological well-being. Worrying about their future marriage, these “disadvantaged” bachelors are overwhelmed with financial worries, low well-being, and dual psychological stresses coming from both the family and the community. Second, with respect to the sources of family stress, the external factors of marriage squeeze and migration have definitely

affected the forced male bachelors' single status. Internal factors, including family poverty, low social status and their own comparative disadvantages, have together caused their singleness. Third, by analyzing the family's ability to integrate resources and the family's appraisal of stress, we find that the families of forced male bachelors are incompetent at integrating internal and external resources, family members are poor at communicating about the stress related to singleness, and the forced male bachelors are of limited earning power, low education, and narrow social intercourse, which has added to their families' stress. Fourth, in the face of stress, families muster both internal and external resources while seeking social support at the same time. Individual unmarried males are also making efforts to relieve family stress by improving their earning power and lowering their standard for choosing spouses.

Understanding the family stress and coping strategies of forced male bachelors as we have attempted here can contribute to social stability and the construction of a harmonious society. We have tried to understand the consequences of the marriage squeeze at both family and individual levels by analyzing the status, the sources, the intermediate influences and the coping strategies of forced male bachelors' family stress. Studying forced male bachelors' family stress is helpful in identifying and solving their psychological and physical problems, which in turn can help forced male bachelors and their families find an approach to social integration. Due to the marriage squeeze among males, marriage and family stability issues faced by forced male bachelors will eventually affect China's drive to build a harmonious society. The present research has elucidated underlying causes of forced male bachelorhood and their families' social behavior and coping strategies and may lead to actions that relieve social conflicts related to marriage squeeze.

Our research and its findings also have some limitations. First, as the present paper is based on interview data collected from a limited sample and the family factors of the interviewees may differ greatly, the conclusions we have reached may vary. In terms of the marriage squeeze and economic development level, the sampled population we have chosen belongs to the medium level. As former research has suggested that the marriage squeeze is even worse in poverty-stricken regions, whether our conclusions are applicable for those regions is yet to be determined.

Reference

- 【1】 Bao, L., A. Xu. (2007), A study of family stress among contemporary urban women. (In Chinese). *Collection of Women's Studies* 3:11-21.
- 【2】 Bian, F., L. John. (2001), A comparative analysis of intergenerational relations in China and United States. (In Chinese). *Sociological Studies* 2: 85-95.
- 【3】 Black, W. G. (1993), Military-induced family separation: A stress reduction intervention. *Social Work* 38: 273–280.
- 【4】 Bowen, G. L. (1989), *Family adaptation to relocation: An empirical analysis of family stressors, adaptive resources, and sense of coherence* (Technical Report 856). Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences
- 【5】 Bowen, G. L., Orthner, D. K., & Zimmerman, L. I. (1993), Family adaptation of single parents in the United States Army: An empirical analysis of work stressors and adaptive resources. *Family Relations* 42: 293–304.
- 【6】 Burr, W. R. (1973), *Theory Construction and the Sociology of the Family*. New York, John Wiley and Sons.
- 【7】 Chen, X. Method of qualitative research in Sociology. (In Chinese). *Sociological Studies* 6: 23-32.
- 【8】 Chen, Y. (2004), *Analysis of marriage market of China and Europe Union*. (In Chinese). Nanjing: Nanjing University Publishing House.
- 【9】 Das Gupta, M., and S. Li. (1999), Gender bias in China, South Korea and India 1920–1990: The effects of war, famine, and fertility decline. *Development and Change* 30(3): 619–652.
- 【10】 Das Gupta, M. (1995), Fertility decline in Punjab, India: Parallels with historical Europe, *Population Studies* 49(3): 481-500.
- 【11】 Deng, G. (2003), Impact of high sex ratio at birth on mating selection. (In Chinese). *Population Research* 5:41-43.
- 【12】 Eggebeen, D. J. (1992), Family Structure and Intergenerational Exchanges. *Research on Agin.* 14(4): 427-447.
- 【13】 Eggebeen, D. J. and Dennis P. Hogan. (1990), Giving Between Generations in American Families. *Human Nature* 1: 211-232.
- 【14】 Fallon, M. A. and T. J. Russo. (2003). *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 30(3), 193-198.
- 【15】 Fei, X. (1998), *Childbearing system in rural China*. (In Chinese). Beijing: Peking University Publishing House.
- 【16】 Hill, R. (1958), Social stresses on the family: Generic features of families under stress. *Social Casework*, 39, 139–158.
- 【17】 Hill, R. (1949), *Families under Stress*. New York: Harper & Row.
- 【18】 Hudson V., Den Boer, A. M. (2004), *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- 【19】 Lee, J., C. Campbell. (1997), *Fate and Fortune in Rural China: Social organization and population behavior in Liaoning, 1774-1873*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 【20】 Li, J., W. Lavelly. (1995), Rural economy and male marriage in China: Jurong, Jiangsu 1933. *Journal of Family History* 20: 289-306.
- 【21】 Li, S., Q. Jiang, I. Attané, and M.W. Feldman. (2006), Son Preference and the Marriage Squeeze in China: An Integrated Analysis of the First Marriage and Remarriage Market.

- (In Chinese). *Population and Economics*. 4:1-8.
- 【22】 Li, Y. J. Chen. (1993), Family orientation, individual orientation and childbearing attitude of farmers. (In Chinese). *Sociological Studies* 2:
- 【23】 Liu, Z. (2005), Issues on unmarried men and the stability in rural areas. (In Chinese). *Issues On Juvenile Crimes and Delinquency* 5: 17-22.
- 【24】 Lu, J. Research on sex poverty in rural west China (In Chinese). *Chinese Writers* 19: 117-146.
- 【25】 McCubbin, H. L. & Patterson, J. M. (1983), The family process: The Double ABCX Model of adjustment and adaptation. In H. McCubbin, M. Sussman, & J. Patterson (Eds.), *Advances and Developments in Family Stress Theory and Research* (pp. 7-37), New York: Haworth Press.
- 【26】 Mo, L. (2006), *Study on the effect of rise in sex ratio at birth*. (In Chinese). Beijing: Chinese Population Publishing House.
- 【27】 Patterson, J. M. (1988), Families experiencing stress. *Family Systems Medicine* 6: 202-237.
- 【28】 Peng, Y. (2004), Analysis of older single youth's having difficulty in getting married in poor mountainous Areas (In Chinese). *Youth Studies* 6: 18-20.
- 【29】 Prout, T. F. (1996), Stress and Coping in Families with Deaf Children. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 3:155-166.
- 【30】 Rose G. (1982), *Deciphering social research*, London: Macmillan,.
- 【31】 Schumm, W. R., Bell, D. B., Knott, B., & Rice, R. E. (1996), The perceived effect of stressors on marital satisfaction among civilian wives of enlisted soldiers deployed to Somalia for operation restore hope. *Military Medicine*, 161: 601-606.
- 【32】 Shi, R. (2006), Influence of Out-floating Young People on the Marriage in Rural Area. (In Chinese). *Population Journal* 1: 32-36.
- 【33】 Skinner, G. W. (1997), Family systems and demographic processes. In D. I. Kertzer and T. Fricke (eds.), *Anthropological Demography: Toward A New Synthesis*. pp. 53-95. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.
- 【34】 Skinner, G. W. (2002), Family and reproduction in East Asia: China, Korea, and Japan compared.
[www.info.gov.hk/sfaa/Form/sgl/Manuscripts/ Prof.%20Skinner's%20report.doc](http://www.info.gov.hk/sfaa/Form/sgl/Manuscripts/Prof.%20Skinner's%20report.doc)
- 【35】 Song, J., Y. Yao, B. Gu, J. Lu, M. Zhang, W, Yang. (2005), Population Security in China. (In Chinese). *Population Research* 2: 34-48.
- 【36】 Spitze, G. and J. Logan. (1990), Sons, daughters, and intergenerational social support. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52: 420-430.
- 【37】 Strauss, A. (1987), *Qualitative analysis for social scientists* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press.
- 【38】 Strauss A, J. Corbin (1990), *Basis of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- 【39】 Sun, S. (2005), *The mating-selection form of farmers: The research at Zhaocun in the Northwest*. (In Chinese). Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.
- 【40】 Tuljapurkar, S., N. Li, and M.W. Feldman (1995), High sex ratios in China's future. *Science* 267: 874-876.
- 【41】 Wang, Z. (2003), Worried about the highly centered marriage squeeze. (In Chinese).

Population Research 5: 43-44.

- 【42】 Wilder, L. (1986), Family stress theory and research on families of children with mental retardation. In J. Gallagher & F.Vietze (Eds.), *Families of handicapped persons: Research, programs, and policy issues* (pp. 167-195), Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks.
- 【43】 Xu, A.(2000). Mating Preference: Transition and causes during 50 years. (In Chinese). *Sociological Studies* 6:20-32.
- 【44】 Xu, A., L, Bao. (2007), Family stress and coping: female cognition, resources and social support. (In Chinese). *Jiangsu Social Sciences* 5: 96-102.
- 【45】 Xu, X. (2004), On the epoch Characters of mate-selecting standard viewed from its changes : Choice made by chinese female in the past 50 years since the foundation of new China. (In Chinese). *Journal of Wuhan University of Technology(Social Science Edition)* 5:
- 【46】 Zeng, Y., P. Tu, B. Gu, Y. Xu, B. Li , Y. Li. (1993), An analysis of the cause and implications of recent increase in the sex ratio at birth in China. *Population and Development Review* 19 (2): 283–302.
- 【47】 Zhang, C., Z. Zhong. (2005), Analysis of causes of old unmarried males in rural areas. (In Chinese). *Yourth Studies* 1:17-19.

Table1 Three-stage coding of the sources of forced male bachelors' family stress

Open coding			Axial coding	Selective coding
Original data	conceptualization	categorization		
<i>The family cannot afford to build new houses for all the brothers at the same time. After the older brothers have married and he finally has his own house, he has missed the prime age for getting married.</i>	The family's economy is overloaded.	Family economic condition	Family level	Stress source – internal factors
<i>The family is poor and cannot help it. Family poverty is to blame.</i>	Poverty			
<i>When I was young no body wanted to marry me due to my political status.</i>	Political status	Family social status		
<i>No one wants to be your matchmaker if you have ruthless parents.</i>	Family reputation			
<i>My fiancée said we might continue if I recovered from the wound in my leg. We finally broke up as I never recovered from that wound. I contracted B-type hepatitis.</i>	Wound or disease	Health status	Individual level	
<i>He is retarded so it hard for him to get married.</i>	Low IQ	Capability		
<i>He has no ability: he is good for nothing.</i>	No ability			
<i>He is afraid of being laughed at for misspelling; it takes him a long time to say a word.</i>	Low education			

Source: 2007 survey: "Forward-looking policy exploration under gender equality promotion" .

Fig.1 Analytic framework for forced male bachelors' family stress and coping strategies

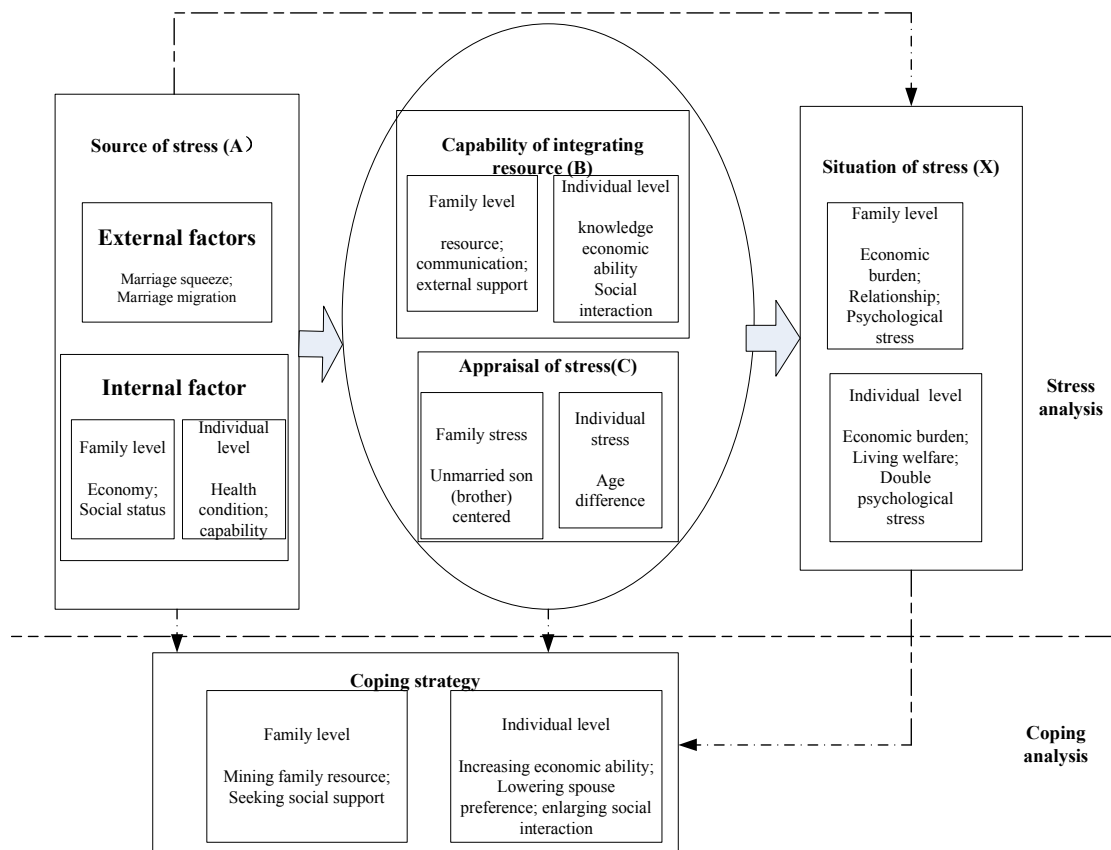


Table 2 Individual and family information about forced male bachelors (%)

Individual level							
Age scope		Education		Health status		Economic resources	
30–39	34.6	Illiterate	11.5	Healthy	61.5	Farming	38.5
40–49	26.9	Primary school	53.8	Sick	19.2	Migrant worker	50.0
50–59	11.5	Junior high	30.8	Disabled	19.3	Family or government support	11.5
Above 60	26.9	Senior high and above	3.8				
Family level							
Number of brothers		Order among brothers*		Parent information		Residence pattern	
Only son	7.7	Oldest	30.8	Both alive	23.1	On one's own	19.2
2–	30.8	In between	26.9	Father alive	3.8	With parents	11.5
3–4	46.2	Youngest	34.6	Mother alive	34.6	With mother/father	38.5
5+	15.4	Only son	7.7	Both passed away	38.5	With other relatives	15.4
						Rest home	15.4

Source: 2007 survey: “Forward-looking policy exploration under gender equality promotion”.

*As the female siblings of the interviewees are all married, it is mainly the multiplicity of brothers that affects their marriage, we consider the order only among brothers.