

# THE DOWRY DEBATE

Dowries may be scorned as old-fashioned and even harmful to women. But economist Dr William Chan argues that in some circumstances they may actually be beneficial.

For centuries, marriage in Asia has been accompanied by a substantial exchange of wealth, typically paid to the family of the future spouse before the marriage can go ahead. But



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Dr William Chan

there are nuances in these exchanges, as Dr William Chan of the School of Economics and Finance has discovered.

Dr Chan has studied dowries in Taiwan and India and the different forms they take. Bride prices are paid to the groom’s family (typically the case in India) or groom prices to the bride’s family (more common in Chinese societies), and what anthropologists formally call dowries are given by parents to their daughters as a kind of nest egg for the future. He set out to see what impacts they had on women’s welfare.

First, in the late 1990s, he looked at Taiwan. “My theory was that a higher dowry put women in a better bargaining position in terms of their future life with their husbands, which was measured by the share of household chores men were involved in. It turned out that men were indeed more likely to be involved if the wives had a higher dowry,” he said.

The finding attracted much criticism in India, where dowries (in reality, groom prices) have led to violence and other injustices against women and to campaigns and weak laws to stop the practice. However, the critics offered mixed empirical support for their arguments so Dr Chan decided to test the case himself using data gathered by World Bank economist Vijayendra Rao.

## Having more say

That data included information on how much of the marital transfer – in formal terms, the dowry – remained in the daughter’s control and how much was given to the groom’s parents, and how much say the brides had in household decisions ranging from educating children to household purchases to even what to cook for dinner. The data included responses from both the wife and husband.

“I found that women with more dowry do have more say in many household decisions. In a narrow way, the dowry benefits them,” he said. “The main lesson I derived from the Indian exercise is that given there are economic forces driving all these observations, it would be much easier to work with them than try to go against them.”

In the case of India, an unenforced ban against dowries means there are no legal channels for settling disputes, which leaves women vulnerable when they marry into families unhappy with the dowry arrangements.

“It’s very difficult to stop these transactions when there is both supply and demand,” Dr Chan said, so it may be better to keep these entrenched practices out in the open since they show no sign of going away. ■



# ‘LEFTOVER’ WOMEN SPEAK OUT

Successful single women in China can have difficulty finding a partner, but the media calls them ‘leftover’ and blames them for being picky about partners or lacking genuine interest in marriage. Sociologist Dr Sandy To has been listening to the women’s side of the story.



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Imagine being a lawyer and being told by your boyfriend that he likes you but he wants to marry someone who is more docile and easier to control. Or being asked by your boyfriend to quit your well-paying job. Or being advised by your parents to step down from running the family firm to improve your marriage prospects.

These were all stories Dr Sandy To encountered in her PhD research and subsequent publications on China’s ‘leftover’ women – women who are successful and want to marry, but keep getting turned away.

“These women are discriminated against because of their high educational levels and career achievements and because they don’t fit into the stereotype of being feminine and accommodating,” she said. “There’s a Chinese saying that the man achieves outside and the woman belongs inside, doing housework and bringing up children. That tradition has never changed, but the educational chances of women have and the culture has lagged behind.”

Dr To conducted in-depth interviews with 50 single professional and business women from different parts of China to analyse their situation and also see how she could help.

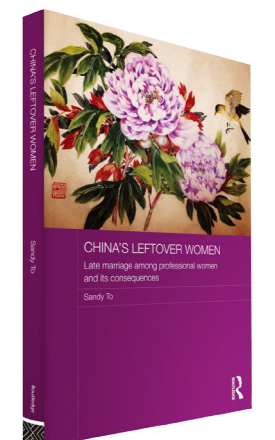
## Four categories

She studied their views on marriage, economic values and gender role perceptions, and came up with four categories that provide a theoretical basis for understanding the responses of high-achieving women in China to the patriarchal demands of marriage. The categories could also help the women themselves in better understanding where they stand and what their options might be.

She identified ‘traditionalists’ who are desperate to get married and hold conservative economic values, meaning they do not mind playing the homemaker role and taking a back seat to their husband. ‘Maximisers’ are proactive about finding a husband and may conceal their achievements (such as having a PhD), but they are also flexible in their partner choice and willing to go for older men or even Western men.

‘Satisficers’ have even more relaxed economic values – they are willing to marry men of lower economic status. And ‘innovators’ do not see marriage as the ultimate goal, although they do not reject it. They are prepared to be alone and some have started scouting nursing homes to see which are best able to look after them in old age.

Dr To said the women she interviewed did not oppose marriage. On the contrary, they wanted companionship and to keep their parents happy. “But they are finding difficulties because of their status. With these core partnership strategies, they can see what type or types fit them and maybe have a better understanding of their options,” she said. ■



China’s Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences was published by Routledge in 2015.