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Elisabeth Croll

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INTRODUCTION

On 1 May 1950 the government of the People's Republic of China announced the abolition of all laws upholding 'arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage' and introduced a marriage contract based on 'freedom of choice'. The negotiations of marriage or procedures of mate selection in any society are normally distinguished by the degree to which persons other than the parties to the marriage, the bride and groom, participate in the selection and enter into the negotiations of marriage. Article 1 of the first chapter of the new Marriage Law rejected 'arranged marriage', or marriage negotiated between the kin groups or persons other than the bride or groom, and outlined the principle on which the new marriage contract was to be based:

Article 1: The feudal marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangement and the supremacy of man over woman, and in disregard for the interests of the children, is abolished.

The new Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, is put into effect.

Freedom of marriage (*ziyou jiehun*) or free-choice marriage (*hunyin ziyou*) was defined as 'the provision of full rights for the individual to handle his or her own matrimonial affairs without any interference or obstruction from third parties and without regard for social status, occupation or property' (KMRB 27 February 1957). It constituted the 'fundamental principle on which the new Marriage Law was based, the foundation for the establishment of new family structures and relations and the weapon for releasing the people, especially the women, from the suffering caused by feudal marriage' (KMRB 27 February 1957). The politics or redistribution of power involved in the substitution of free-choice marriage for arranged marriage and its

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consequences for the authority and controls exercised by interested generations, primary groups and the State is the subject of this book.

The study, based on documentary sources and a brief period of intensive interviewing in the People's Republic of China, examines the process of change within the institution of marriage in terms of the procedures and controls of negotiation, the criteria governing choice of spouse, the age of marriage and its ritual and ceremonial forms. It is a study of the new marriage patterns as they have evolved in contemporary China from 1950 to 1975, and an analysis of the specific economic and ideological variables working for and against their social change. The study of the new marriage patterns in contemporary China raises a number of interesting questions to do with conceptualising marriage and its relation to familial and kinship structures and the role of economic and ideological variables in 'modernising' marriage, family and kinship structures. The government of the People's Republic has not only redefined the institution of marriage, but has invested it with a new significance for the individual and for domestic, kin and other social groups.

MARRIAGE REDEFINED

Underlying all the policies to do with marriage is the assumption that it is a necessary and 'natural' step for each individual (RMRB 29 May 1959; Lu Yang 1964: 7). It is often stated that once young people reach an appropriate age, 'it is necessary that they find a life's companion' (ZQ 14 September 1962) and it is 'rational and irreproachable that they should get married and have a family of two children' (ZQ 1 October 1963). The normal concept of marriage is of a stable union lasting the lifetime of the parties,* and the placing of the negotiations of marriage within the control of the individual parties and the resting of the marriage bond exclusively on the congeniality of the parties was to invest marriage with a new significance for the bride and groom. As one article emphasised 'viewed from the perspective of an individual's life, love and marriage are important matters in a person's

* Although divorce by mutual consent is also allowed by the new law, it was more common in the early 1950s when many marriages arranged in the traditional manner were dissolved. Since the mid-1950s however, it seems that divorce has become much less common. Certainly all the educational materials to do with marriage assume that if a marriage partner is carefully chosen at an appropriate age and on appropriate criteria, then there will be little need for, or likelihood of, divorce.

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life-cycle'. 'Choosing a life companion', it continued, 'can never be said to have no significance' (ZQ 14 September 1962). It constituted a serious political task for the individual.

Perhaps more than any other 'social drama' (Turner 1957) or socio-drama (Duncan 1968), the redefinition of the procedures and symbols of marriage was the vehicle by which the State intervened and attempted to articulate major changes in the social relations between the sexes and the generations within domestic and kin groups. The marriage bond constitutes the foundation of the domestic group, which continues to be the basic social unit of society (ZQ 16 December 1956). As one article pointed out:

The family, as a form of joint life of the two sexes united in marriage, we may definitely say will never be eliminated. The existence of this form of joint life is dictated not only by the physiological difference of the sexes, but also by the perpetuation of the race. Even in Communist society we cannot conceive of any objective basis and necessity for the 'elimination of the family'. (HRB 8 April 1959)

Marriage was to remain the foundation of the domestic group, but equally its redefinition was designed to effect some rearrangement of social relations within these familial and kinship structures. The strengthening of the marital bond as opposed to all other kin bonds had repercussions for familial and kin relations within and between households. The relations between the parties based on free choice and congeniality might thus be expected to affect the balance of power between the generations and the sexes and especially that between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

The redefinition of the procedures and symbols of marriage to represent interpersonal relations between equal partners of the opposite sex, rather than intergroup relations based on the interests of and the exchange of women between these groups, amounts to a rejection of both the alliance and descent models of marriage which underlie anthropological attempts to conceptualise marriage. In these two models, marriage is either conceived as the primary means by which domestic groups are reproduced and maintained (Fortes 1971), or as the primary mechanism whereby women are exchanged between men or groups of men (Lévi-Strauss 1969). In traditional China, marriage had been destined to accomplish both these aims. The old definition of marriage had described the purpose of taking a wife as the begetting of children to 'worship at the ancestral temple and continue the family line' (PR 8 March 1960). The other main purpose of marriage was

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to establish alliances advantageous to the interests of the descent group of the respective parties as a means of socio-economic and political mobility. The Book of Rites, dating from the second century A.D., which was held to embody the rules defining correct social behaviour, declared that the purpose of marriage was to unite two families with a view to harmonising the friendship of two lineages. The redefinition of marriage as an institution symbolising interpersonal relations between equal partners of the opposite sex was not part of a theoretically based rejection of common anthropological theories. Indeed the materials to do with the reforms make no explicit references to anthropological theories as such. But the redefinition itself and the arguments cited in favour of reform make it possible to identify a contrasting model of marriage.

Although it is recognised that marriage has the natural aim of begetting children, no longer is the primary object of marriage seen to be the reproduction of the unilineal descent group. The new definition of marriage rejects sterility as grounds for divorce. Not only is the absence of children no longer an unfilial act, but in the new socio-economic conditions of collective land-ownership and collective welfare, there was seen to be no need to 'bring up children in anticipation of old age' or to ensure 'the inheritance of family property' (HRB 8 April 1959). The new definition of marriage also rejected the establishment of advantageous alliances between kin groups, which had exerted a substantial influence on the controls over the negotiations and choice of marriage partner. In the new ideology marriage is defined and designed to add a new facet to male–female relations, which has consequences for the structures of domestic and kin groups and for the position of women.

The new marriage contract with its emphasis on free choice of partners is one of the instruments charged with reducing systems of stratification. The exercise of free choice 'without regard for social status, occupation or property' (KMRB 27 February 1957) was meant to establish an open-marriage system in which the only persons unequivocally proscribed as marriage partners were those to whom the incest taboo was extended. In many societies, anthropological studies of what are commonly conceived to be open-marriage systems suggest that in fact marriage choice usually remains structured by such factors as social class, ethnic origin, religion and education, with a strong endogamous or preferential in-group trend characterising some

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status groups. The growing literature on mate selection in North America, for instance, suggests a preponderance of homogamy, or assortative mating, in which persons choose spouses of similar characteristics over heterogamy. Wide disparities in the status of marriage partners are in fact very infrequent (Hollingshead 1950; Kerckhoff 1963-4). The role of marital choice in accentuating or confirming patterns of stratification have led anthropologists to hypothesise that to encourage random mating or at least preferential out-marriage would mean a radical change in the existing social structure (Goode 1959:475; Goody 1971:599). In China the principle of free choice without regard for property and other socio-economic factors has formed an important component of the new ideology of marriage and the media has frequently advocated heterogamy in an attempt to reduce the social divisions between the 'mental' and 'manual' and rural and urban social categories (WC 1 March 1962; SWB 14 February 1974).

In contemporary China, marriage reforms are conceived to not only have consequences for social structure, but also to themselves be a consequence of, or derive from and reflect, characteristics of the broader economic and political system. Marriage and familial forms are not only directly linked to particular stages of socio-economic development, but the movement from one form to another is a symbol of the degree to which social structures have been rearranged. In this connection two passages from Marx and Engels have been widely quoted in China:

with the development of social reproduction, there is evolved a state of marriage and family, which is in keeping with the existing state of society. (Engels, *Origin of Family, Private Ownership and the State*, HZX 15 December 1956)

where there is a certain stage of development of production, exchange and consumption, there will be a certain social system of family, grade or class organisation. (Marx, letter to B. V. Aninkov, RMRB 13 December 1963)

Recent histories of the institution of marriage published in China have followed the lead of Marx and Engels in identifying a sequence of forms from the 'most primitive period of free social intercourse and free marriage to group marriage within blood relations, group marriage without blood relations, the choice of mates and finally monogamy' and link them to a particular sequence of changes in the relations of

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production (ZQ 16 December 1956). In the People's Republic of China, monogamy based on the principle of free choice is taken as the form of marriage most appropriate to a socialist society and the substitution of arranged marriage by free-choice marriage can be taken to be one measure of the government's success in founding a new society resting on socialist principles. For instance, the degree to which the individual parties negotiated their own contracts may reflect a reduction in the influence of kin groups and in the exclusive controls of the older generation and of men over family affairs. The degree to which marriage partners are chosen 'at random' may reflect the extent to which the government has been able to introduce egalitarian policies and break down hierarchical relations through reforms affecting education, the incomes structure, the redistribution of land and capital and the ownership of the means of production.

The redefinition of marriage by the State and the intervention of the State in domestic affairs challenged the assumption common in China before 1949 that marriage is the private concern of the individual or domestic group. Marriage as a family affair has always belonged to that sphere of the social field articulated on informal and normative bases making use of kinship, friendship, ritual and ceremonial as opposed to the contractual and formal relations of society rationally based on bureaucratic lines (A. Cohen 1974:xi). Marriage which was formerly defined as a family or domestic affair has been reallocated to the social, public or political sphere. In emphasising the public and political repercussions of the new marriage forms, many of the educational materials in China emphasise that the marital bond which provides for the birth, training and education of a new generation makes it a matter of vital significance to society and not a personal affair or trifling matter of daily life (GRB 15 November 1962). In China it has become an object of public and political import: 'We must regard marriage not as a problem of the enjoyment of "private life", but as a "cell" of the entire cause of Revolution, as something important to the interests of the whole society' (TKP 22 December 1956).

MARRIAGE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

What differentiates the experience of contemporary China in introducing new marriage reforms from that of many other societies is the conscious and planned nature of social change towards certain defined

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and explicit social goals. The State has intervened and implemented reforms in marriage as part of a broad process of planned social change affecting all social institutions. It is primarily as a field for the study of this process of planned and conscious social change that social scientists have been particularly interested in the study of the People's Republic of China. Indeed it has been argued that the scope and intensity of planned social change is greater in China than in that of other social systems on which most contemporary social scientists focus (Greenblatt 1968:4). The anthropologist Maurice Freedman thought that the recent history of social engineering in China provided an ideal opportunity for anthropologists to test their ideas about social change and the degree to which a society is able to be transformed. He thought that social scientists could examine the series of experiments in China and assess the extent to which pre-existing modes of behaviour reasserted themselves within institutions deliberately designed to exclude them (1963:15; 1969:8). G. William Skinner argues that it is the 'modernisation' of China which is of special interest to social scientists studying change, not only because it was proceeding under the aegis of communism, but because of the extraordinary longevity, consistency and stability of the social system at the onset of the relevant change. He suggested that 'the very process of modernisation with its necessary disorganisation and reorganisation of the total system and the likely persistence of traditional forms whenever pressure for social change is relaxed should commend its study to social scientists concerned with the processes of change in the contemporary world' (1964:521).

The reform of the marriage system in China has been based on a dual strategy to promote a new ideology of free-choice marriage and at the same time create new and appropriate socio-economic conditions. A number of economic policies were introduced which strengthened the bargaining power of the younger generation and especially of the women. These policies provided the basis for their economic independence in the event of conflict with family and kin groups over the negotiations of marriage. In the first instance, land reform or the redistribution of a share of land to each individual member of rural households could potentially provide a source of independent livelihood for each member of the household. Measures following on from land reform were designed to remove the property base of the individual household and substitute collectivised production units for individual peasant producers. The introduction of cooperatives

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and communes in rural areas and the establishment of joint State-private enterprises, cooperatives and neighbourhood-owned factories in urban areas were all to effect the separation of production from the individual and private household and provide employment for the younger generation away from the controls of the household head. It was anticipated that such policies would eliminate the traditional interest of the older generation in controlling the negotiations of marriage and in exchanging women to the socio-economic and political advantage of the domestic group. However, while the new economic policies might provide the appropriate socio-economic conditions for the new patterns of marriage, the movement or campaign to establish free-choice marriage has itself been primarily conceived in terms of effecting ideological change.

As early as 1953, before the establishment of new economic relations, the government emphasised that 'the marriage campaign was to be largely directed against the remnants of feudal thinking'. It was defined as essentially a movement for 'ideological remoulding' to eliminate the influences of reactionary social customs within the consciousness of the people (PC 1 March 1953). The early campaigns provided a forum for intensive publicity and discussion 'to enable everyone to clearly demarcate the differences between the old and new marriage systems and to eliminate the influence of the social customs within the consciousness of the people' (RMRB 20 March 1953). The movement to introduce new marriage patterns has been generally described as a 'battle in which new ideas were pitted against the old' or 'a struggle to get people to change their ways of thought' (PC 16 November 1957; RMRB 13 December 1963). In this struggle the government has concentrated on 'consciousness raising' on the grounds that once people become aware of the meanings behind the marriage symbols and rituals they will of their own accord reject traditional customs. In this respect the government in China is sharing an assumption with some anthropologists, that once the social functions of symbols become manifest the symbols lose a great deal of their efficacy (A. Cohen 1974:8).

This strategy for marriage reform incorporating both economic policies and the development and communication of a new ideology raises a number of questions to do with the relationship of ideology to economics in bringing about social change. The function assigned to ideology and the emphasis placed on its communication in

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introducing and maintaining the momentum of social change reflects the quite central belief in China that ideology and organisation can serve as substitutes for the development of material forces, at least within certain limits and until material conditions allow for a further development of the economic base. The Chinese analysis of the important and complex relationship between the economic 'base' and its ideological superstructure not only rejects the crass determinism of the base on the superstructure, but allows for the possibility that under certain circumstances ideology has its own power or effectivity to determine the base. Thus the specific guidelines for the establishment of new marriage patterns in their every aspect, from pre-marital and marital negotiations to the appropriate age, ceremony and criteria for choice of spouse, have been constantly and consistently elaborated and publicised in the media from 1950 to the present day. It might be said that no government has been as assiduous as the government of the People's Republic of China in educating the younger generation in preparation for marriage. Yet the government has also admitted in the media that the area of marriage and family relations has proved to be one of the most difficult in which to introduce change (RMRB 13 December 1963). As well as identifying the variety of marriage patterns in China, this book attempts to isolate the specific ideological and economic variables not only working for, but also against, the establishment of new marriage patterns in China.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHOD

To approach a study of marriage patterns in the People's Republic of China from an anthropological perspective raises problems of methodology. Indeed, there have been few detailed studies of marriage patterns as they have evolved in the People's Republic of China. Freedman remarked in 1969 that there had not been, as there might have been, an anthropological enquiry into the institution of kinship and marriage, the new norms governing interpersonal relationships, the reorganisation of local groups and the change in the nature of property. Both C. K. Yang (1959) and M. J. Meijer (1971) have undertaken comprehensive documentary studies of the purposes and objectives of the Marriage Law of 1950 and the measures which were taken to implement the new laws. They both expressed some reluctance to survey the effects of the Marriage Law on the marriage patterns

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in the country as a whole and changes in attitudes towards marriage which may have resulted from the introduction of the law until it is possible to conduct sociological investigations under better circumstances than those that prevailed in China. The factor which, more than any other, has detracted from the People's Republic of China as a field of anthropological study was the closing of its borders in 1949 to foreign scholars. The number of excellent first-hand local and national studies of marriage and related familial institutions, which had been undertaken in Republican China (1911–49) came to an end and the anthropologist has been left a data base made up of numbers of policy documents, discussions of the subject in the media and collections of descriptions of marriage thinly spread over a wide range of geographical locations and periods of time. Another problem arises from the scale of the society under scrutiny with its vast size and variety.

Anthropologists normally have a certain reluctance to embark on a macro-study of a whole society which embraces many millions of inhabitants dispersed over a large area. They may argue that the demands of fieldwork and processing and analysing the data from a study of the social system of a single community of a few hundred persons is considerable, and that it is absurd therefore to attach any scientific value to the findings of those who make generalisations about large complex societies. Before 1949 anthropologists in China thought that the most suitable unit for study was the village, both because most Chinese lived in villages and because it was possible for one or two fieldworkers to make a fairly detailed study in a year or so (Radcliffe-Brown 1936). However, it has been pointed out by both Skinner (1964:50) and Freedman (1963:4) that the confinement of attention to the local community in Republican China was to miss the very characteristic of Chinese society which made it so interesting to anthropologists, that is, its scale and complexity. This is an even more appropriate comment on the People's Republic of China, where it can be argued that the State has intervened and played a more crucial role than ever before in uniformly changing social structures and integrating primary and informal groups into new and larger systems. As this book illustrates, to have taken a small single unit of analysis, even if it had been methodologically possible, may have missed the very range of variables out of which the hypotheses put forward here