

The Change of Lisu Female Status in Marriage

Na Zhao, Xuejing Diao

School of Foreign Languages, Kunming University, No.2 in Fuxin Road, Kunming, China

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Abstract: Lisu people, as one of cross-border ethnic groups in China, has attracted the attention from researchers. Lisu women, though being in the remote region, are writing their own feminine awareness, marital conceptions and pursue for better life. The thesis, from the perspective of female social attribution and their status in marriage, aims to interpret, with the development of society, the change of Lisu female role in the marriage.

1. Introduction

Lisu mainly live in Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Nujiang located in Northwestern of Yunnan Province. The previous research concerning Lisu people mainly include literature [1-3], culture [4-5], ethnic migration and change [6], religion [7], national awareness [8] and music [9]. For Lisu woman's part, some researchers have made constructive achievements, like Chen Yeqiang [10] pointed that there is more possibility for most of Lisu women, who undergo the trans-provincial marriage, suffer from their marital life. That suffering reflects their maladjustment in modern social life. Song Jianfeng and Yang Bin [11] proposed that Lisu women utilize their capability to expand their living space in marital life in a submissive or dominant way. Most of them have been aware of their mode of expression to voice their marital values. The thesis, from the perspective of female social attribution and their status in marriage, aims to interpret, with the development of society, the change of Lisu female role in the marriage.

2. The Traditional Female Status in Marriage

Traditionally, the arranged marriage is the main trend in Nujiang region [12]. Such mode of marriage is majorly resulted from the concept of social organization. Years ago, Lisu take domestic marriage as the main mode of marriage, regarding monogyny as the legal one [13]. Other modes such as the transferred marriage and sisters-as-wife marriage are recorded in related materials [14]. Before married, women are relatively free to be in contact with men. But most of them are arranged by their parents according to the extent of closeness in ties of blood and betrothal gifts, which constructs the social organization like genstes and clans based on blood ties and economic relationship [12]. In this case, marriage functions as an organizer who confines the range of marriage and the raise of betrothal gifts and its sharing.

From the view of role in society, the concept of female at subordinate status occupies the Lisu's traditions. This mainstream of thinking leads to a situation where women, whose marriage are coupled with obvious property transfer, are in a relatively passive situation [15]. In other words, they are seen as a special family property, which is closely related to labor and procreation to their parents or their husband. Therefore, they are strictly arranged by their parents for maximum benefits to genstes and clans. In this way, firstly, the husband and his family possess the right to control the wife in most aspects of live. For the husband, he thinks he has made a special exchange by offering betrothal gifts to the wife's parents, so he has naturally endowed with a superior and even absolute authorized status in marriage. Accordingly, the wife is objectified as the belongings to the husband. Secondly, women are the permanent property in husband's family. Once women get married through the arranged marriage, they, automatically, become one of belongings to the husband's family since they are objects exchanged with the betrothal gifts [16]. As a result, they are transferred to the husband's brother after he is dead. For women, the transferred marriage is her

obligation, and for her husband's family, they are committed to have the right making her stay at their home on. The control on women from the husband's family won't disappear for women has been substitutes for the betrothal gifts that are important part of family possessions.

One of reasons why women are situated in a passive and dependent position is the concept of population. The growth of population is provided with the combat effectiveness and the vicissitude of clans in Lisu traditional tribes based on the ties of blood, so Lisu people think highly of offspring [16]. In this case, women, objectified as family possessions, are consciously associated with the growth of family. In man's view, women are undoubtedly the important objects that function their capability of childbearing.

Faced with the predicament, part of women breaks bravely through the constraints for pursuing equality and freedom. In patriarchal society, women's social role is confined in the family and constrained in the marriage by men's authority and the customary law men has created for women [14]. Under such gender system, it is self-evident for women who are confronted with inequality. Some women, seeking for a way to balance the gender system, adopt run-away strategy to fight against men's control and the traditionally arranged marriage. That drive of balance provides the opportunity for women to voice their willingness and signal indirect reminder to men. But it is still too weak to shake the deeply rooted gender system where men play the leading role although most of Lisu people express their sympathy and understanding.

3. The Change of Female Status in Marriage

From 1990s until now, the female status has been changed strikingly in their intermarriage circle, marital concepts and marital modes [17]. These changes include the equality-awareness and the self-awareness. Based on the mindset of women's inferiority in patriarchal traditions, the collective consciousness exists subconsciously in Lisu people's psychological structure along with the long-run consolidations and sustains, which leads to the lengthened stability of gender cultures.

In addition, the Christianity takes an important role in forming women's equality consciousness. In 1990s, Christianity was introduced to Lisu villages by missionaries, and some concepts were embedded with local cultures bit by bit [17]. From 1920, some influential missionaries, like Yang Zhiying and Ma Daomin, came to Nujiang region to preach Christian religions endeavoring for more followers. According to the recent statistic by local government, almost half of Lisu women are Christian believers whose thinking and doing are influenced by their beliefs [18]. The Christianity preaches the gender equality, taking men and women as the equal position. They are equally created by the Holy God, and what is different is just they take varied roles in society. Women, three times in a week, get touch with the Christian preachment in church. In the process of being at church, they note the gender equality consciously or unconsciously in their own daily life. The silent transforming influence of women's concepts make them aware of the importance of freedom and equality in marriage.

On the other hand, with the development of society, Lisu women hold positive attitudes towards the foreign cultures. They develop gradually their own self-awareness by participating social activities although the traditional cultural inertia still confines them in inferior status. Decades ago, the female consciousness is just the literal words itself for Lisu women, and they perform their role in a submissive way even take their dependent status on husbands for granted. From 1970s till now, Nujiang region has been greatly changed from infrastructure to agricultural production. The relative closed Lisu tribes has been transferred into a new scene where an increasingly frequent exchange between Lisu people and other groups has come into being.

Under that historical circumstances, Lisu women has made their efforts to obtain their achievements through their social participation. That is embodied in their payments as employees in nonlocal companies or factories. In the process of social development, the social resources have been reattributed from centralization to decentralization, which is regarded as the signal of the fadeout of hierarchy [18]. That historical change gets women re-examine and evaluate their existential significance. Meanwhile, they make themselves encouraged to liberate from traditions and realize their social worth by making efforts to achieve social resources. For Lisu women,

working as an employee in nonlocal factories is a better way to get a few social resources. In a distant area, no matter the married women or the single women, they are free from the control of their parents or husbands to decide the allocation of their payments. Under such situation, women's social participation gets them aware of their role in society by taking part in social labor, distribution and consumption as the same with men.

What's more is that women have achieved marital autonomy. It is the result of the development of economy and the influence of the spread of the localized Christianity. Firstly, the economical increase makes it possible that men or women are able to be one of social mobility stream who are free from the household register and separation between districts. The social mobility is continuously strengthened, which leads to the change of living modes and range of social activities. The newly created living environments provides the chance for women to be conscious of gender equality that is legitimized after the foundation of PRC. As a result, in a tolerant atmosphere to women's marital choices, female status in marriage and the family relationship has been changed obviously. Parents no longer arrange their daughters' marriage in case that daughters would, following the predecessors' deeds, choose to run away. In that way, the restrains and restrictions lose the power to control women's performance. For years from 1990s, part of unmarried women chooses to escape from the arranged marriage to pursue their own marriage [19]. And the most of divorced women, for not paying for previous betrothal gifts, prefer to leave privately for a new area where they start a new life with a job or even a new marriage. In this case, it is hard for their husbands' family to find them again to ask for double gifts for following traditions. Compared with the previous women, consequently, they acquire more freedom to choose spouse. Nowadays, women's families and Lisu tribes would not impede them to marry those who are not Lisu people. They can go out for a job or remarry to a local people after come back as divorced women. The constrain for women from traditions has been weakened. In other words, that trend of outflow and backflow has constructed women's dominance in marriage market.

4. The Main Reason of Women's Change in Marriage

The main reason is the structural unbalance in the local rural marriage market caused by the phenomenon of the Lisu women's increasing outflow. Under that situation, women take the dominant post in marriage. More and more women tend to go out for a job, which leads to the mobility of gender, of occupation and of marriage. That brings a great impact on the balance of local marriage market. Moreover, the region is lack of the possibility to convert between inflow and outflow for integrating the marriage resources. These circumstances are meant to the result of unbalance in gender proportion.

A certain amount of women's outflow is the outcome caused by the women's renewed knowledge of exotic places. Along with the economic development, Lisu cultures is confronted with the impact from exotic cultures [4]. Women are aware of the importance of independence and freedom. Majority of them have made decision to go out for a job or even a marriage based on their own cognition of marriage. That outflow breaks through the social networks connected in a traditional way, constructing a new marriage networks which is a sign for women to change their role in marriage from being a part of family property to an individual. That phenomenon has brought about the step to move Lisu group forward by now.

Furthermore, the social factors for the outflow can be attributed to three aspects. One is the drive for better living condition. There is still the gap, in terms of rural development, between the region Lisu people dwell in and the inland. The Lisu villages are located in remote places in halfway up a hill or in high mountain, which hinder the development of infrastructures like roads, markets, schools, hospitals. It seems that most of women couldn't pursue a better life unless take advantage of marriage to change the living condition. That quick way is the result of the attraction from the diverse life styles outside. In recent years, Lisu people, with the development of culture and technology, tend to accept new concepts and living style that converges with the mainstream thinking. The marketing activities without the regional limits enlarge the range where Lisu people conduct their social activities. As women, it is difficult for most of them to change their lives totally

by engaging in a labor, simple-skilled, or service-typed job. Accordingly, women adopt, seemingly practical way, marriage to fulfill the living change.

The second is the attraction from the successful marriage case. Majority of women, who are part of outflow group, seem to obtain a better life after married. It is usual for them to return to their hometown visiting families after they have children. When they go back to the village, their styles of dress and conversation that different from the local women function as the models. That effect generates the recognition from others and then some would engender the conception to follow the models.

The lucrative bride-price functions as a drive for women to be part of outflow group. From 1990s, those who are from different provinces come to Lisu villages seeking for girls to marry with the guide of local people. As usual, they pay higher bride-price than the local level. As a result, the bride-price has become the key content in a marriage proposal meeting so long as Lisu women are married with the outlanders. The bride-price has been changed from the cattle in a traditional way to the cash nowadays. The more bride-price, the more recognition the woman can receive. Lisu people think brides can not only have a better life but reap good reputation if grooms have much more money. Thus, the lucrative bride-price can not only supply a rich life and stability but satisfy brides' family and even bring the glory for the whole clans. That choice coincides with the logic of economy and culture.

5. The Female Consciousness in Marriage

The change of the status in marriage, from the family property to the scarce resource, embodies the raise of Lisu female autonomy in marriage with the social development. Also, the raise reflects the status promotion in marriage. In addition, the change, from the run-away strategy to the arranged marriage to multiple choices for free marriage, virtually gives expression to the marital perception Lisu women adopt. In the time of arranged marriage by parents, Lisu women present their will, appealing and resistant by means of escaping from the marriage. At that time, most of them, who run away from the arranged marriage, leave for their ideal love from their hometown and return when they have children. In the case, parents, mostly, acknowledge their own marriage reluctantly or sincerely. Until now, many old people in Lisu villages express their agreement or even praise for that struggling. The perception would include the mutual debugging between marital choice and living style, and the unity between the pursuit of marriage and the living needs. At present, Lisu women has been the scarce resources in marriage market under the marriage squeeze. They have obtained relatively more freedom and autonomy in marriage decision and choice, representing their values of marriage, although their marriage is still restrained at some extent from the perspective of integrated development for women.

6. Conclusion

The unbalance phenomenon in Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Nujiang, for young people at legally marriageable age, is interrelated with the distance in economy between different regions. As it were the unbalanced social development breaks through the balance of marital relationship. Formerly, ethnic marriage, family transferred marriage and bride-price marriage, according to the Lisu traditions, are social conventions provided with certain institutional power. That power is dependent on not the force of state but the common belief belonging to traditional social values, promoting the stability and inheritance of traditions. Nevertheless, the constraints to Lisu women from conventions are weakened with increasingly strengthened social mobility. The field for group living is, under that historical social background, substituted by small-scale family and diverse living styles. In terms of women's social attribution, they have relatively powerful self-awareness and increasingly visible individuation. Forasmuch, by now, Lisu women's freedom and autonomy is the result of social change. From the view of gender, Lisu women, with individual marriage choices, have become the scarce resources in marriage market. They make progress in self-development along with the needs of marriage market to fulfill their own living objectives. In this way, their

performance adjusts the gender order.

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