

The Adaptability of Uxorilocal Marriage on the Sichuan-Yunnan Border: Male Brides in Yishala Village, Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

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Introduction

In *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, Margery Wolf (1972) states that Chinese men in uxori-local marriages are “in a limited sense, male brides.” On March 18th, 2006, a male bride from a Han village in Pingdi township, Panzhihua city, Sichuan, was collected, from his natal family, by the female “groom” and her friends after a simple wedding ceremony. His relatives delayed the ceremony intentionally in an attempt to publicly display and vent their discontent toward the marriage. While leaving his family, as a female bride in a virilocal marriage would do normally, he quietly wept due to the sorrow that from now on he is no longer a member of his patriline.

Anthropological writings about uxori-local marriage in China are mostly based on three types of methodologies. The first are studies of historical Ming and Qing documents (Waltner 1990). The other two are micro ethnographic studies conducted in Taiwan (Wolf & Huang 1980, Pasternak 1985) and large surveys of contemporary rural China (Shuzhuo Li working paper). While these methods are valuable by themselves, only when they are combined can they permit longitudinal information about the institution’s changes and endurance.

In 2005-2006, our research team investigated the impacts of migration and industrialization on marriage, kinship, and gender in South West China. Our interests in uxori-local marriage grew stronger after the local people showed us their old family contracts. Dated back in late Qing and Republican periods, these contracts described vividly many family practices that appeared to be common to the time and to the locality. As legal papers, they provided rules and customs for regulating household division, land and money transaction, inheritance, marriage, divorce, etc. The information in these documents validated previous observations of present cultural behaviors, but at the same time they raised additional questions. For instance, the current motivations and drivers for uxori-local marriage did resonate somewhat with what was depicted on the documents. They shared similarities with what previous studies have shown, namely that uxori-local marriage was undertaken to preserve the patriline and to overcome various practical

concerns imposed by a lack of male heir, labor, etc. However we knew little about the reasons for its endurance and persistence. Although never a prevalent form of marriage in China, why has it not died out completely? Although men in China might have naturally resented and tried their best to avoid it if they could, why haven't they put an end to this practice, once and for all? In contemporary China, have the economic benefits and needs for intimacy reduced the emotional costs of abandoning a man's natal family, and therefore made the practice more appealing? What are men and women trading off when it is time to negotiate love, marriage, and family? Based on both historical analyses and an ethnographic case study of marriage and sexuality in a village in Sichuan, this paper hopes to answer the above questions. It concludes with an outline of the future of uxori-local marriage and its broader implications on gender and sexuality in rural China.

The village

The village of Yishala 迤沙拉 is situated among the low mountains in the southern tip of Panzhihua city, Sichuan province. About 500 meters below a low ridge of hills that looms above the village the Cheng-Kun railway zigzags alongside the roaring Jinsha river. Yishala is currently under the administration of Pingdi Township, historically part of Yongren County, Yunnan but now the southernmost township in Panzhihua. The close social and economic ties between the village and Yongren have never been completely severed. In fact, people in Yishala relate themselves much more to Yongren than to Panzhihua, whose residents are largely the descendants of immigrants who came from all over China when the Panzhihua Steel Works was built as part of Mao's Third Front industrialization in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Shapiro 2001, Naughton xxxx).

In 2006, there were 522 households in Yishala with a total population of 2094 people, 94% of whom belong to an ethnic group who call themselves the Lipo (傣濮). Lipo form about two-thirds of the population of the 8 administrative villages in Pingdi Township. According to local history, the direct patrilineal ancestors of the Lipo were Han soldiers and businessmen from Huguang, Jiangxi, and Nanjing. Each of the four prominent lineages in the village, the Qi 起, Mao 毛, Na 纳, and Zhang 张, keeps a written genealogy that traces the lineage's immigrant ancestors to one of these places of origin in Central China, whence their ancestors were sent by the Ming and Qing governments as military colonists, to Yunnan to fight rebels and develop trade. Some of them married aboriginal women and stayed. Out of this intermarriage came the Lipo. Today the Lipo are classified as one branch (支系) of the Yi (彝族), but their customs and culture are a hybrid, as are the people. They still speak the Lisu language (closely related to Lisu) at home. They have also retained many practices of their Han ancestors, such as worship at ancestral altars, sweeping the tombs on Qingming, burial in permanent graves, and keeping genealogies. The lineages are structured much more like the lineages we know from the literature on Han Chinese society (Freedman, Cohen, etc) than like the clan systems of other branches of the Yi. And since uxori-local marriage was not a common practice among most Yi groups, we believe that we can study the history and form of uxori-local marriage in Yishala as a variant of a regional Yunnanese pattern that has for a long time been prevalent in those areas where local and migrant people have interacted to form hybrid cultures. Our analysis is in accord with the image that

local cadres and folk intellectuals in Yishala have formulated for themselves when promoting their culture internally and to tourists as a hybrid of Yi and Han (Figure 1a, b). The other 6% of Yishala's residents are classified as Han, but they are culturally identical to the Lipo, and have intermarried freely throughout history. In 1988, the respective percentages were 92% and 8%; the decrease in Han percentage reflects the preference of participants in cross-ethnic marriages to give their children minority *minzu* 民族 status, with its accompanying affirmative-action benefits, and perhaps also to make them members of a community that is building a Lipo identity (Figures 1a, b).



Figure 1a “Cherish Lipo Girls; Attend to the Future of the Yi”



Figure 1b: China's first Lipo Yi Village--Yishala welcomes you.

A brief history of Uxorilocal Marriage in China

The history of uxorilocal marriage (招赘婚, 招女婿, 上门婚) in China can be dated back to the pre-Qin Period (221 BC) (Shuzhuo Li xxxx). Traditionally uxorilocal marriage took place when at least one of the parties experienced demographic or economic conditions that made patrilocal marriage impossible. In these conditions, families might take in a son-in-law to provide labor, ensure descendants, or both. Depending on the family's need and on specific local customs, uxorilocal marriages could take a variety of forms.

The extent to which uxorilocal marriage was an option available to families with problems in ensuring labor and descent varied widely by time, place, and class. During the Song, uxorilocal marriage was legally regarded as analogous to adoption. The legality associated with uxorilocal marriages was further documented in a Yuan handbook of administrative law dated in 1273 which prohibited only sons to marry uxorilocally (Waltner 1990:101). As indicated in the marriage contracts in Yishala, a written contract had become a pre-requisite for uxorilocal marriage in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In these contracts, families specified as well as legalized the agreements on the duration of uxorilocal residence, property arrangements, the naming of the children, and other pertinent practices.

In modern times, uxorilocal marriage was known everywhere, but was quite rare in many places, as for example the North China Plain. In some places, notably the Pearl River Delta (Watson 1986), large lineages forbade their sons to marry uxorilocally, on penalty

of expulsion, and also forbade their members from obtaining an heir by uxori-local marriage, prescribing adoption of a collateral agnate instead. The same was true in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang, where we conducted another field project. In parts of Taiwan, by contrast, uxori-local marriage was a commonly-practiced alternative, and took many different forms.

In general, wherever uxori-local marriage was known, there was flexibility in its exact characteristics; it almost always took the form of a *negotiated* relationship, with residence, labor, succession, and inheritance arrangements workable to both parties. For example, some marriages were temporary, in which case a son-in-law would return to live with his own family after having successfully produced a healthy male heir, or perhaps after a wife's much younger brother was grown up and could provide for the family's labor needs. In northern Taiwan, this form was known as "half-uxori-local viri-local marriage" (半招娶). In such cases, an uxori-local son-in-law would rarely change his surname or assume any permanent obligations to his wife's family or their ancestors. He would also ordinarily be exempt from paying any but a nominal bride-price (聘金, 彩礼), giving labor instead of money and goods, which made this an attractive arrangement for a man from a poor family, especially if he had several brothers. Other uxori-local marriages were permanent, with a son-in-law giving up all or most of his rights in his natal family. In such an arrangement, a man might or might not change his surname; changing the name seems to have been the most common practice in East China and in the Southwest before the revolution; in Taiwan a man rarely changed his name when he moved into his wife's family.

From the perspective of the wife's family, a uxori-local wife could be a virgin (most common) or a widow who took a husband in to live with her, her children, and perhaps the parents or other relatives of her deceased husband. In rare cases, polyandry could take place in which a married woman called in a second husband after the first husband was no longer capable of providing the family due to sickness.

Regardless of their forms and residence patterns, uxori-local marriage everywhere in China had a few common characteristics. First, it was flexible, an institution designed to meet specific and contingent needs. Second, it was a negotiated relationship, with few rigid rules in any time or place. Third, because it was a negotiated relationship, it was most often an explicitly contractual one, guaranteed before the wedding with a detailed written document signed by both parties, specifying the obligations of both sides. We believe that the flexible, negotiated, and contractual nature of uxori-local marriage is one reason that has enabled it to survive the present-day changes that may be the greatest revolution in marriage and the family in Chinese history. Finally, uxori-local marriage often carried with it a certain amount of stigma. Because their families were often poor, and sons-in-law often had to give up their membership in their lineage, sons-in-law were often looked down upon. In the literatures on uxori-local marriage, there is no shortage of derogatory words for men in uxori-local marriage. Metaphorically, they were parasitic worms or tumors; openly they were labeled as "hostages" "morally wrong" "suspicious" "incompetent" "worthless", and without face. (Arthur Wolf 1995, 1980, Margery Wolf 1972, Pasternak 1985, Lu Xun 1925).

Historic Uxorilocal Marriage in Yishala

The history of Yishala might be conceived of as beginning with some form of uxorilocal marriage, when the male Han ancestors of the Lipo married the female Yi ancestors. But we know little of the particulars, other than that these marriages led to cultural hybridization. However, by the late Qing, we have much fuller documentation. A partial survey of documentary resources kept by Yishala households was made by Chen Shi 陈适 in 2006. Among the over 140 documents collected were three uxorilocal marriage contracts, from the late Qing and early Republican periods. These contracts give us an insight into the reasons why Yishala people contracted uxorilocal marriages, and into the specific arrangements they arrived at in their negotiations.

Marriage contract no. 1

Dated on the 23rd of the 11th lunar month, 1898, this contract documented the uxorilocal marriage of Qi Guangting (起光廷), a young man from Mu Yi Li, and a woman from the Na lineage in Yishala. He was the younger son of Qi Kaijia (起开甲) from Leng Shui village, (冷水村) in Mu Yi Li (慕义里) township. Signed by a matchmaker named Na Youchao (纳有朝), a guardian named was Qi Kaiji (起开祭), a lineage member Qi Kaiming (起开明), and drafted by Li Shiming (黎什明), the contract stated that:

Because the younger son of the (Qi) family couldn't find a wife who would be willing to marry him patrilocally (难以娶妻), his father, brothers, and uncles arranged an uxorilocal marriage for him. He was to marry the eldest daughter of the Na 纳 family to continue her family line. He was to change his name to Na Yicong (纳以聪). Whenever he was called upon [by her kin], he ought to answer and present himself immediately. He should be dutiful and avoid running freely to the east or fleeing to the west. He should not resume his own surname [in any circumstances]. If he violated any of these conditions, the assigned guardian [in this contract] would assume all responsibilities. Because people were not trustworthy these days, they constructed this written uxorilocal marriage contract to assure the marriage and party responsibilities. [Contract no. 1, 1898].

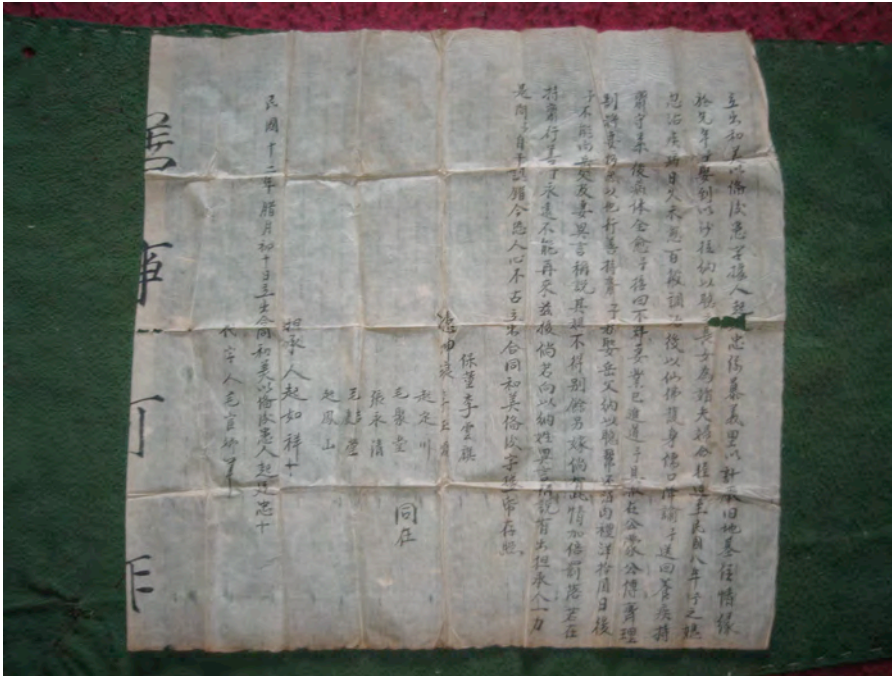


Figure 1. Marriage contract of Qi Guanting, 1898. Note the characters split in the middle on the last line; the other half of those characters goes with the other copy of the contract; matching them prevents later forgery.

This contract demonstrated that people in Yishala did take on uxori-local marriages for economic reasons. And, it was not a joyful life transition for the sons-in-law. In the contract, the lack of sensitivities toward Qi Guangting was so apparent that it might not be mistaken to stipulate that he was having a tough time. In *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology* [1899], Arthur Henderson Smith stated that

The giving of a daughter in marriage represents a form of tribute from a lower-status party to a higher-status party. A nonreciprocated provision of a bride connotes the subordinate status of the bride's family vis-à-vis the groom's family: thus the Chinese saying, 'the family of the married daughter holds its head down, while the family of the man whom she has married holds its head up.' [Arthur Henderson Smith, *Village Life in China: A study in sociology* (New York: F.D. Revell, 1899), p. 286]

In the case of uxori-local marriage, the situation is opposite; giving away a son was a form of tribute. Like a bride in viri-local marriage, Qi Guangting's fate was determined by his patrilineal kin. He was given away cheaply to fulfill duties prescribed by strangers. The harshness and formality in the written language announced openly his subordinate status and ill fortune, which perhaps he had not wanted to be associated with. No matter who he was before, how he felt, and what the circumstances were, he was not considered as the equal of his in-laws, but a lesser man.

Marriage contract no. 2

The 1918 uxori-local marriage contract documented the arranged marriage between the

eldest son of Mao Chao Fu (毛超富), who was a member of the local Mao lineage, and the second daughter of a Qi (起) family in Yishala. Because both families were from Yishala, the marriage was also village-endogamous. The situation under which the contract was made was dismal as well. Constrained by the difficulties caused by his wife's death, Mao Chaofu wasn't able to have his son married. He sought help from his lineage to arrange an uxori-local marriage for the young man. Upon marriage, the son-in-law should change his name to Qi Longtai (起龙太) in order to:

Add a new branch to the lineage and wear mourning gowns at his in-laws' funerals [by requiring him to wear the mourning gowns, which only the sons were to wear, it was made the official that he was fully incorporated into his wife's family]. To ensure a peace of mind, a guardian was appointed who would take full responsibilities for the son-in-law's behaviors if he became undisciplined and disrespectful.

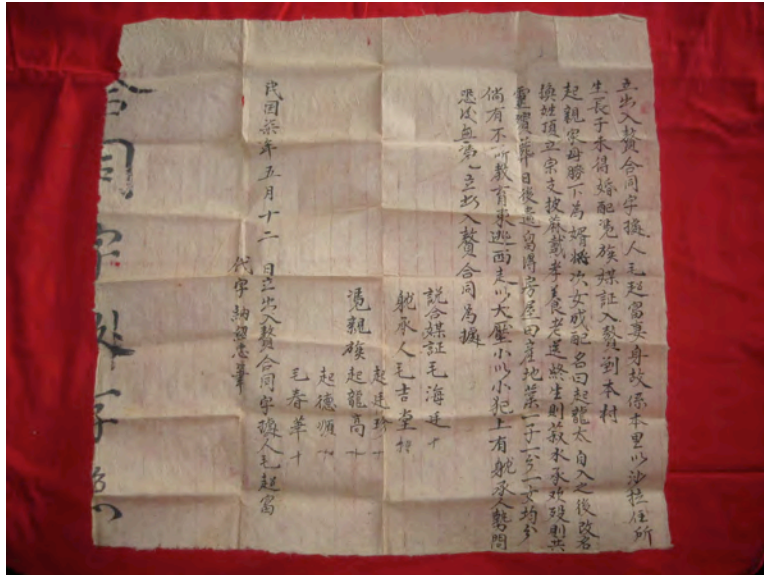


Figure 3. Marriage contract of Mao Chaofu, 1918.

Unlike the 1898 contract, this contract not only described the circumstances under which the parties entered the contract, it also made detailed arrangements about inheritance which would have direct implications on the wellbeing of daughters. It stated that if the couple bore only one son, he would be eligible to inherit all family properties and land. However, in the case that they bore both a son and a daughter, the family estate would be equally divided between them.¹

Marriage contract no. 3

In the third uxori-local marriage contract (Figure 2), dated 1899, it was the old mother of the son-in-law who arranged his uxori-local marriage. It stated that:

¹ Female inheritance was rare in traditional China. Further investigation is needed to find the incidence and causes of this practice in Yishala.

It was such a pity that Mao Cuiming's wife Mao Mao Shi [Mao, née Mao] was becoming old and fragile. She was not capable of marrying her three sons and one daughter. Classical teachings stated that green caterpillars (moll worms, *mingling* 螟蛉) were taken by solitary wasps (*guoluo*, 蜾蠃) in order to produce sons. (Therefore) the Mao lineage arranged to marry out (one of the three sons) uxorilocally to the second daughter of a Qi family. After marrying in, the son-in-law should change his name to Qi Longyou, adding a new branch to the Qi lineage. The couple should live happily after. Upon death, they would be buried together. If there were family properties and lands left (after their death), they would be divided equally among the sons; if they had only one son, he would inherit all. Children should behave properly according to birth order; they should obey the orders from heaven, not mistreating others. If they disobey teachings, running east or west, a guardian from the Mao lineage whose name is Mao Tianshou would be responsible. (contract no.3 1899)

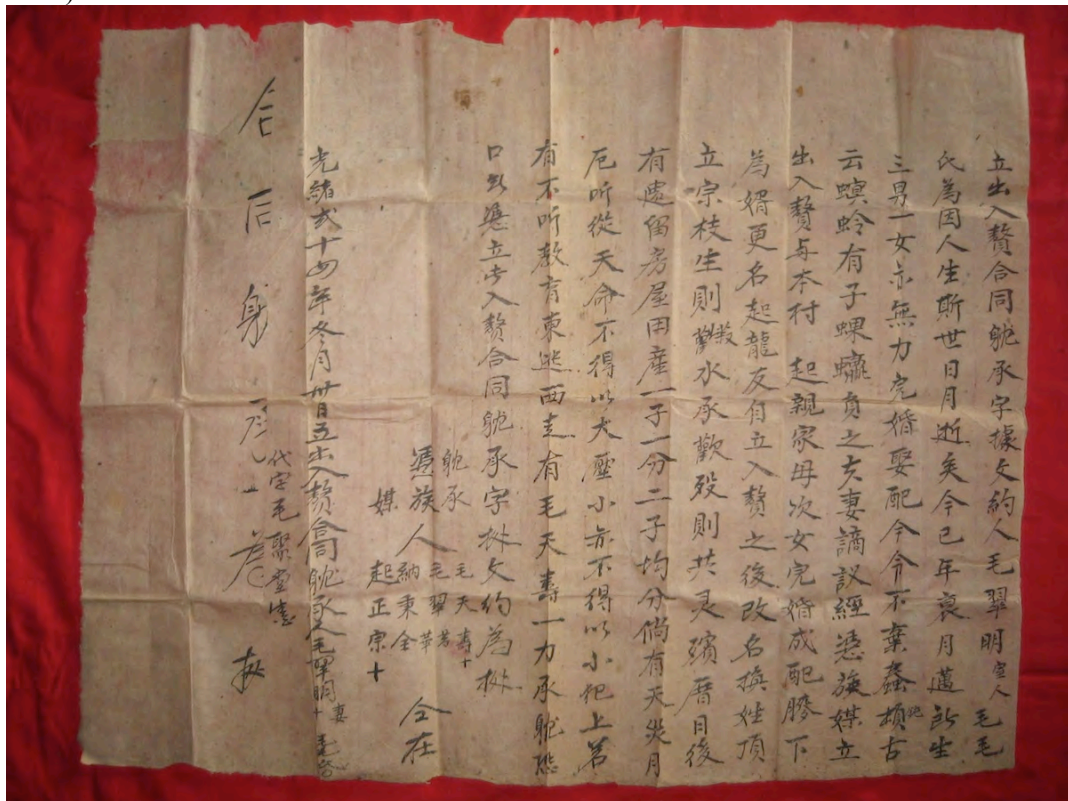


Figure 4, Marriage contract of Mao Cuiming, 1899.

As in the other two cases, this contract blamed the poor and desperate conditions of the son-in-law's family for making a normal virilocal marriage impossible. Arthur Wolf argued that uxorilocal marriages were stigmatized as abnormal inversions of the natural order of things (1995:324). The contract challenged this belief by citing a classical Chinese insect story about seduction, transformation, and reproduction. It said that under a mulberry tree, a male moll worm was trapped by a female wasp in her cocoon. Day and night, the wasp sang to the cocoon "be like me, be like me, be like me!" Indeed, after several days, the worm inside the cocoon was transformed into a male wasp, with whom

she successfully reproduced her offspring. Using the metaphor, the contract made the seemingly abnormal uxori-local marriage logical. The message it wanted to convey is simple-- even the insects have the desires and instincts to do whatever they can to propagate, needless to say us humans.

We can see that, at the end of the Qing and the beginning of the Republic, uxori-local marriage already fit into the general system of marriage and affinity in Yishala and Pingdi in more or less the same way that it fit in so many other communities in China where the practice was common. Families arranged uxori-local marriages, often between two of the village's dominant lineages, and they did so to alleviate problems of labor shortage, lack of descendants, and inability of poor men to find viri-local marriage partners, probably because they could not raise the necessary bride price. We also find that the specific arrangements were negotiable, and also that people considered a contract necessary in order to prevent cheating or misunderstanding.

Persistence and Change in Recent Years

In 1988 Stevan Harrell conducted ethnographic fieldwork and directed a household survey among the families in Yishala.² At that time, several villagers spoke of the patterns of uxori-local marriage and the way they fit in with the complex intermarriages among the four lineages and other affinal groups from outside the village. People stated that uxori-local marriage was “fairly common,” but one pattern had definitely changed since the late Qing and early Republican marriages described above. Married-in sons-in-law no longer changed their surnames, which meant that there needed to be understandings about how to assign surnames to the offspring of uxori-local marriages. They often did so by a mechanism called “returning to the lineage in the third generation” 三代还宗。In this practice, the *children* of an uxori-local marriage would all take their mother's surname, but in the *grandchildren's* generation, at least one would take the surname of their uxori-locally-married paternal grandfather. Figure 5 illustrates how this works:

² The survey was conducted in cooperation with the Sociology Research Center in the Philosophy Department at Sichuan University 四川大学哲学系社会学研究中心 and the Artifact Management Bureau of Panzhihua City 攀枝花市文物管理处。

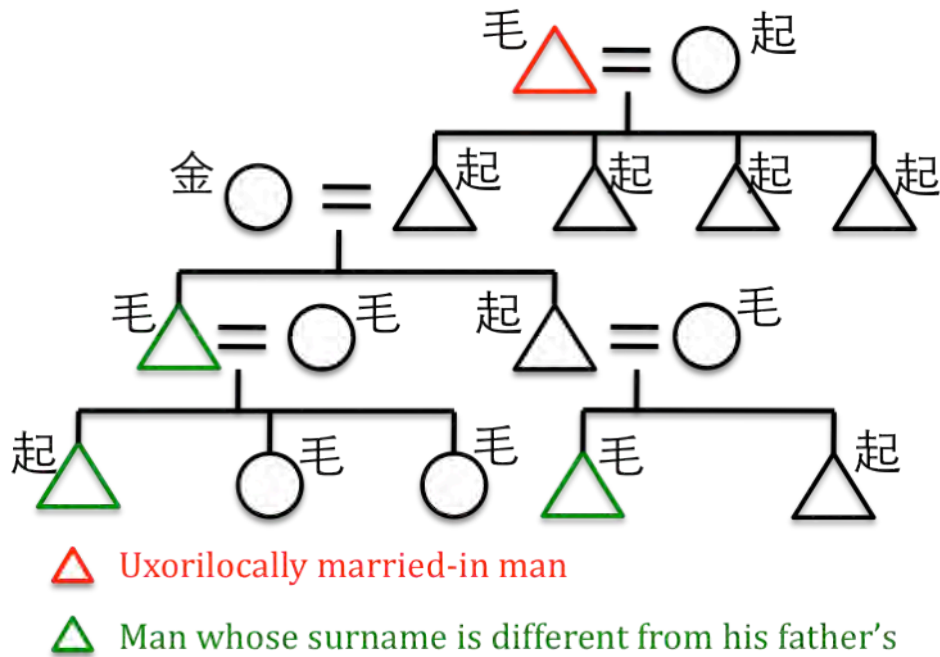


Figure 5: A case of uxori-local marriage and returning to the lineage in the third generation.

In the first generation, a man from the Mao lineage became an uxori-local son-in-law in the Qi family. He and his wife had four sons, all of whom bore the surname Qi. The children of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th sons kept that surname, and transmitted it to all their descendants (not shown in the figure). The first son, however, had the obligation of “returning to the lineage in the third generation.” Since his wife, surnamed Jin, was married virilocally, her surname did not transmit to his family. But his father’s Mao surname did, and his eldest son (indicated in green) took the name Mao. He married a woman whose surname was also Mao (this was permissible outside the “five mourning grades 五服), but in spite of both his parents’ being named Mao, the eldest son of this third-generation marriage (also in green) was surnamed Qi after his grandfather. The other son in the third generation was named Qi, but married a woman named Mao, and of his two sons, one bore the Mao and one the Qi surname.

People in Yishala recognize that uxori-local marriage of this sort is a limited form of gender reversal, and in fact the decorative couplets 对联 that they post on the doorway at an uxori-local wedding reflect this:

五服堂内婿为子
 三代还宗女为男

In the clan within the five mourning grades, a son-in-law is a son
 Returning to the lineage after three generations, a daughter is a son

According to the 1988 survey, there was at least one uxori-local marriage in all but one five-year marriage cohort (Harrell 1992). In addition, the survey confirmed that as elsewhere the percentage of uxori-locally married men to all married men by cohort rose to its highest during the peak during the Cultural Revolution, then decreased to 14% toward the end of movement. Then it further decreased to 7% for the cohort of 1978-82 (See Table 1). Our recent study in 2005-2006 among the same families shows a similar pattern. In the past several decades village endogamy has decreased whereas village exogamy increased. However, the percentage of uxori-local marriage has stayed between 9% and 13% (see, Han 2009:53, figure 5). The changes in marriage practices are more predictable and can be explained intuitively by the economic transition from farming to a mix of various modes of livelihood (Zhou, Han, and Harrell 2008). Because of the increased economic mobility, there has been a rapid out-migration of the young farmers to townships and cities where they work, find mates, and eventually marry. However, these factors do not answer the question why there are family practices including uxori-local marriage that have shown great continuity amid the large social and economic changes. To be specific, why has uxori-local marriage been so persistent whereas other forms of marriage fluctuate? If its persistence can be explained, what are people trying to gain from it, even though it is culturally deemed to be an abnormal inversion of the natural order of things? Are the current motivations different from earlier ones? Or do they by and large large resonate with the preservative and practical concerns of their ancestors? What has changed? What has remained? To answer these questions and more importantly to foresee the future of uxori-local marriage in China, we will share with you the story of an uxori-local wedding that took place during my stay in Yishala.

Table 1. Percentage of Uxori-locally Married Men as a Percentage of all Married men, by Birth Cohort, Yishala

Cohort	Total Marriages	Village Endogamies		Village Exogamies		Uxori-local marriages	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1976-80	45	18	.40	21	.47	6	.13
1971-75	107	46	.43	49	.45	12	.12
1966-70	121	66	.55	44	.36	11	.09
1961-65	97	55	.56	31	.32	11	.12

Note: The cases only include married males who were born in Yishala and males who married into the village uxori-locally Sources of the information was based on the tally of women in reproductive age from 20-49.

The Marriage of Da Hua and Lao Zhang

In 2006, Da Hua was a beautiful 19-year old girl, strong headed and outspoken. She is the elder daughter of the second richest family in Yishala. As the chief tax officer in Pingdi township, Da Hua's father was influential both politically and economically in the local community. His house was one of the largest in the village. In addition, he controlled a publicly owned apartment in township where Da Hua and her husband-to-be Lao Zhang had been living together before they got engaged. Lao Zhang, in comparison,

was from a relatively poor family in Da Bu Zha (大不乍), a Han village where people are known as “the worst business people in the township, for they are too calculating. They are different from us, the Yi” (personal conversation). Not only was Lao Zhang’s family among the worst business people, they did not have strong connections to the local government. Since Da Hua had only one younger sister while Lao Zhang had a younger brother, it is natural that their marriage should be uxorilocal.

In many ways, Lao Zhang and Da Hua’s wedding shared characteristics of a typical Han wedding in rural Sichuan or Yunnan. These characteristics include elaborate rituals performed by a village priest, many rounds of wedding banquets throughout the day, detailed book keeping of gifts received from fellow villagers and kin, etc. Instead of elaborating on these similarities, we focus here on what makes an uxorilocal marriage different from others. Specifically, we argue that to a Chinese man, marrying uxorilocally, is still undertaking an emotional journey that at times can be difficult to travel. Although similar to other types of marriage, uxorilocal marriage entails the classical negotiations about money, bride price in particular, and goods between the families, in the case of Lao Zhang and Da Hua, their process is much more subdued.

1. Marrying uxorilocally is an emotional journey for a Chinese man

The night before the wedding, I [Han Hua] visited Da Hua. She was hanging out with her close friends in her newly decorated room. The Volkswagen owned by the township government had just been parked in the family courtyard to be decorated. Tomorrow, she would ride this car to pick up Lao Zhang from his home. Under the glittering tinsels hung from the ceiling light, she looked a little tired but appeared to be in high spirits. A few days earlier, I had learned that she was four months pregnant with Lao Zhang’s baby. Although her pregnancy had become apparent, she never brought it up during our conversations, nor did her mother during my interview later on. Whenever possible, she would hold a pillow or a sofa cushion tightly on her abdomen. She said she would discuss with Lao Zhang about the possibility that he might change his name later. And she would be fine if he decided not to.

Later in the evening, her cell phone was ringing. It was Lao Zhang calling from his parents’ home. He was stressed because earlier during the day, one of his uncles was upset about his marriage. Da Hua said that Lao Zhang cried. He was going through mixed emotions about tomorrow. Wolf (1972:194) described that “just as the bride must be quiet and submissive, watching carefully to anticipate the moods of her parents-in-law, so should the young groom behave.” Lao Zhang’s emotional reactions and manner were indeed like those of a typical bride in a virilocal wedding. He was happy about marrying the girl he loved dearly, however, he was saddened to leave his parents.



Figure 6: Lao Zhang and Da Hua on their wedding day.

There was so much to do on the wedding day. Da Hua got up very early to have her hair and makeup done. Her mother and girl friends helped her put on her red Chinese style wedding dress. For the first time in her life, she was going to wear high heels. She looked happy, content, and eager to pick up Lao Zhang, her “bride,” from his natal village. When she got there, Lao Zhang wasn’t ready. He was still wearing his casual clothes after Da Hua arrived, and his shoes were dirty. After having greeted her quietly, he disappeared into his room to change. While Lao Zhang cried discreetly, his parents displayed their sorrow and belligerence openly. Customarily, they were supposed to hold a small banquet at their place and then a ceremony shortly afterwards. Instead, the ceremony was delayed until almost two o’clock in the afternoon. Later I learned that Lao Zhang’s parents did so intentionally so that they could delay his departure and let the public know that they would not have agreed to this union if Lao Zhang had been younger. He was nearly 30, reaching the threshold of becoming an old bachelor (Han 2009).



Figure 7: Lao Zhang leaving his natal home, protected from spiritual attack by an umbrella as a bride would be in a virilocal wedding.

2. Uxorilocal marriage is an economic affair

A recent study in Northwest China discusses the demographic, social, and cultural benefits of uxori-local marriage (Shuzhuo Li working paper). It states that uxori-local marriage can help stabilize low fertility, alleviate son preference, lower sex ratio at birth, and improve female child survival and women's family and social status. It is an alternative for "no son" families to provide support for elderly parents." While all these statements are true, they do not help to explain why uxori-local marriage has been persistent in the first place.

To rural Chinese families, marriage is both an emotional and economic event. It entails economic activities that would build the foundations for the couple's future. As in all family arrangements including marriage, people negotiate in order to get it right and to optimize. As indicated in the marriage contracts, negotiating kinship practice to allow any unfitting doctrines to be transformed into workable solutions was not rare in the late 1800s, and it is still common these days. In fact, it is through negotiations that Chinese families resolve ideological conflicts and alleviate practical concerns. In the case of uxori-local marriage, economic negotiation is even more crucial since its outcome helps solidify a weak alternative family structure that is historically dependent upon a contract rather than on the strong morally sanctioned relationship between a father and a son. The effects of economic status on one's ability to marry and reproduce are so deeply rooted in China that traditionally not only did the rich get children (Harrell, 1985), they got to marry virilocally. As the story of Da Hua and Lao Zhang demonstrates, the tendency of the poor and the vulnerable to marry up has remained salient in rural China. In any event, it is simply much more economical to marry out a son (嫁儿子) than to take in a wife for him (娶媳妇). And it is in the economic as well as social differentiations throughout the Chinese history that the flexible, negotiated, and contractual natures of uxori-local marriage have formed and developed making it an enduring fixture in the landscape of Chinese kinship.

On December 26, 2005, Da Hua and a male cousin went to Lao Zhang's home to propose the marriage (ti qin 提亲) and to negotiate a reasonable bride price. Her parents didn't go because it was considered inappropriate for them to talk about money directly with their future in-laws. Lao Zhang's parents had asked for 4400 yuan, twice the prevailing amount for an uxorilocal marriage, yet 50% cheaper than a typical dowry in virilocal wedding at the time. Later, following a local tradition, his parents returned 200 yuan to him. On their wedding day, the couple received a total of 1000 yuan wrapped in red envelopes from Da Hua's parents and grandmother. In addition to this present, she received dowry in the form of new furniture, which was worth about 5000 yuan. Although Lao Zhang's family originally wanted to publicly show off the furniture on the wedding day by carrying them across the village, Da Hua argued that since the furniture was already in their wedding chamber, it was not practical nor necessary to take them out again and carry them around in the village.

In short, like virilocal couples in the village, Da Hua and Lao Zhang's engagement and wedding involved traditional exchanges of bride price, dowry, and gifts such as cigarettes, sweets, clothes, and liquor between their families. The wedding ceremony held at Da Hua's family was one of the most opulent in village history. The amount of monetary reciprocities Da Hua's family received from their guests was nearly 40,000 yuan. It was phenomenal according to the local standard. Among the important guests were the township party secretary and the head of the Ethnic Affairs Bureau of Panzhuhua, along with two videographers, Han Hua and one hired by Da Hua's family.³ In comparison, the wedding ceremony at Lao Zhang's natal home was much more subdued, and the amount of money and goods that he received was significantly less in comparison to what female virilocal brides ordinarily receive, further demonstrating that Chinese men in uxorilocal marriages are vulnerable and depreciated.

3. A New factor in the equation : effects of pre-marital sex and pregnancy on marriage decisions

So what has changed? Marriage is not an isolated life event. In the case of uxorilocal marriages, "it has always been said that the man who marries into his wife's family brings nothing but a set of testicles." (Cited in Waltner 1990: 102). Though derogatory, this was true historically as shown in three marriage contracts. Mencius famously declared that there were three things that were unfilial, and to have no posterity was the greatest of these (不孝有三，無後為大). Uxorilocal marriage was often legally registered after the conception was confirmed in order to ensure the continuity of patriline, resulting a higher incidence of bridal pregnancy than in other marriages (Wolf & Huang 1980:163). As a result, fertility was also higher for women in uxorilocal marriages than for women in virilocal marriages (Pasternak 1985). However, this is no longer true in contemporary China. Kinship defines rights and obligations that may be

³ See the ethnographic film "Dahua's Wedding: Marriage, Migration, and Social Change in Rural China."

transferred under specific circumstances. In the case of Lao Zhang and Da Hua, their sexuality did influence their decisions to marry promptly, however it was not intended as a vehicle for reproduction. Da Hua's pregnancy was an accident.

In Yishala, pre-marital sex is no longer frowned upon for couples whose relationships are built upon love and affection. Pre-marital pregnancies seem to be very common.⁴ Although people are reluctant to talk about it openly, it is welcome as long as the young couple can marry before the baby is born. However it could cause complications if the female is too young to marry legally. There are several cases of teen pregnancies, including Da Hua's in which marriage would be impossible because of the age restrictions. Lao Zhang and Da Hua had lived together in the township for nearly a year before she got pregnant. Like their pals in the village, they decided to marry instead of seeking abortion. Since she was only 19, her family had to bribe a local connection in order to have their marriage certificate issued.

In Yishala, many young girls become sexually active in their late teens if not younger. While the village stores do sell condoms, there are no effective birth control methods readily available for young unmarried females. Obligated by the state birth control policies, township and village birth planning personnel devote their effort and resources solely to married, reproductive age women who have already met their birth quota. Moreover, the locals believe that if taken for too long, birth control pills may cause female infertility. This being the case, young females usually depend on men's initiatives for prevention, which is not reliable, to say the least. The lack of effective birth control for young females increased their risks for unplanned pregnancy, and possible undesirable marriages thereafter. A close friend of Da Hua told me that if it had not been for the pregnancy, she would probably have not married so early.

In summary, although uxorilocal marriage has demonstrated strong endurance in Yishala, it is rarely for purposes of perpetuating the patriline. The practice of naming change has long been defunct as evident in Harrell's 1988 survey. While leaving their parents and other close kin behind is still emotionally difficult, modern male brides are not discriminated against or completely alienated from their patriline. A couple of days after the wedding, Lao Zhang's parents came to visit. More importantly, in contrast to what the historical contracts described, the choices of marriage are no longer based on the collective good (Han 200x) as defined by kinship ideologies. It is now a matter of individuals, including their needs for intimacy and love. For Lao Zhang, although leaving his natal family was sad, the greater level of intimacy he has developed with Da Hua through pre-marital cohabitation makes the transition much less an ordeal than it was before.

⁴ This seems to be part of a trend in many rural areas in China. Liu Fuqin reports (personal communication) that in Tonglu County, Zhejiang in 2009, almost all brides were pregnant at the time of marriage.

Future implications

The endurance of uxori-local marriage in Yishala manifests the fluidity of Chinese kinship practices. And although the technicalities of uxori-local marriage may differ from other forms, the mechanisms are the same. It is through the careful navigating of conflicting interests that all marriages are constructed, destroyed, and rebuilt. As Wolf and Huang argued that in many respects, Chinese kinship in general and marriage in particular are similar to the shifting power relationships between a strong state and a weak one that “was never more than a relation of convenience.” (Wolf & Huang 1980:107). The story of the male bride in Yishala demonstrates that despite the rigid rules prescribed by belief systems, the dynamisms in human relations often permit fluidity and deviance which have permitted the survival and the endurance of uxori-local marriage in rural China. As there were many variations in the motivations for and arrangements of uxori-local marriages in the past, there can be many different forms of uxori-local marriages in contemporary China. The institution has retained its flexible and adaptable nature. As the forms of uxori-local marriage continue to evolve, so will its potential effects on Chinese families as they are deeply affected by the profound demographic as well as social consequences of population aging and decreased fertility. In the words of Susanne Brandstädter and Gonçalo D. Santos (2009: 2) “people’s kinship practices and representations are everywhere not just about what is inherited or given from the past but also about what is acquired in the present and aspired to in the future.”

Arthur Henderson Smith

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