

Elisabeth Croll

THE POLITICS OF MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

ELISABETH CROLL

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PREFACE

The research for this book was undertaken while I was a Fellow at the Contemporary China Institute from 1974 to 1977. It is primarily concerned with the processes of change within the institution of marriage in the People's Republic of China, the economic and ideological factors responsible for differing degrees of change and the contest between the generations and between political and kin or neighbourhood groups which projected changes have occasioned. It is based on both documentary sources and a brief period of interviewing in China in 1977. This book, which employs an anthropoligical approach, is a revised version of an original manuscript which was presented as a Doctoral thesis in the Department of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in January 1978. I would like to thank Dr James Watson of the School of Oriental and African Studies for his advice and encouragement throughout this project. He has on all occasions been generous with his time and I am grateful for his careful reading of the various drafts of the manuscript. In addition I would like to thank Professor A. Mayer, Dr D. Parkin and other members of the Anthropology Department who have taken an interest in this project both informally and in research seminars. My thanks are also due to Dr C. Howe and the Contemporary China Institute of the University of London, where as a Fellow I was provided with both financial support and research facilities. I am very grateful for both. I would also like to thank Christine Lyall Grant of Cambridge University Press for her careful reading and editing of the final typescript.

The introduction to the book contains some discussion of the broader anthropological interest of the study and particularly the applicability of the anthropological method to a documentary study of one of the less accessible societies. Until the last year or so most anthropologists of Chinese culture have been reluctant to turn their

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attention to the People's Republic of China, partly because fieldwork has been virtually impossible in China over the last few decades. The first two years of this project were planned on the assumption that no such opportunity would materialise, but in the third year I was able to undertake some limited but intensive interviewing, and a household survey, in a few selected rural and urban locations. Although this visit in no way constituted the normal definition of fieldwork, data from this source did enable me to elaborate on certain of the hypotheses which I had previously developed from documentary sources prior to my visit. The Contemporary China Institute, the Chinese Embassy in London and the Guangdong Branch of the China Travel Service all made it possible for me to visit China and collect some data for this study. I would like to thank the many persons both in London and China who helped me to make the best possible use of a very short time in the field.

The book covers a wide time-span, but because of the reduction in publications on the subject during and since the Cultural Revolution, the case studies illustrating contemporary trends and problems are primarily drawn from the early 1960s rather than more recent years. Interestingly, in the last year and since the revision of this study for publication, there have been a number of more contemporary references in the Chinese media to the problems of marriage and especially to the persistence of 'arranged and venal marriages' and 'feudal and superstitious ceremonies' (Survey of World Broadcasts 5 August 1978, 6 and 11 January 1979). It has been forecast that there may be some revisions of the 1950 Marriage Law in the near future (Survey of World Broadcasts 13 January 1979), and a new campaign to reform marriage was launched in the earlier months of 1979. It once again publicised the fact that marriage should be determined and controlled by the principals themselves, that they must oppose marriage on a mercenary basis, that they must marry at an appropriate later age and that they must refrain from extravagance and practise economy in the celebration of marriage. The media has provided recent negative examples of all the above to add to those given in chapters 2 to 6. The campaign has also reaffirmed the principle of 'free-choice' marriage and hinted that very real difficulties have hindered this process of change (New China News Agency 29 December 1978; Survey of World Broadcasts 6 and 11 January 1979; Beijing Review 30 November 1979; Women of China 1 January 1980). Although there

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is little analysis in the media of the obstacles to change of the type presented in chapters 8 and 9, the recognition and illustrations of the problems do add further evidence that many of the phenomena, suppositions and hypotheses put forward in this book remain valid in 1979.

Finally, I would like to express my personal appreciation to James Croll, who has taken an active interest in the project and shared in the care of Nicolas and Katherine.

September 1979

E.C.

NOTE ON ROMANISATION AND WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

In this study I have mainly used the Hanyu Pinyin system of romanisation. Where well-known personal and place-names are less recognisable in this form I have placed the more familiar forms in parentheses when first cited in the text. The exceptions are a few village names associated with existing anthropological studies which are already familiar to many readers in the Wade-Giles romanisation. Where these and Chinese authors and titles have been written in or translated into English, then they remain as they were presented in the original texts.

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I catty = I jin = \frac{1}{2} kg = I.I lb

I mu = \frac{1}{15} = \frac{1}{6} acre

I li = \frac{1}{2} km = \frac{1}{3} mile
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GLOSSARY

anjia luohu settle down permanently

bai jiuxi marriage feast

biao cousins of different surnames

boxiao jieji chushen exploiting-class origins

buxiao erzi unfilial son
caoshuai jiehun hasty marriage
chengfen class status
fenija household division

fenjia household division fumu baoban ernu hunyin arranged marriage

hu household huangdao jiri auspicious days hunyin ziyou free-choice marriage

jia/jiating family

jiating chengfen family background jiazhang head of the household

jiazhuang dowry

jiehun yishi marriage ceremony

jieshao ren introducer

jindaide ziyou jiehun free-choice marriage in the modern way

jinqin close kin lianai zhishang supremacy of love

lichang standpoint

 luantan lianai
 fickleness of love

 maimai hunyin
 marriage by purchase

 meiren
 matchmaker

mingmei zhengzhu marriage properly conducted

pinjin betrothal gift

qiantu/chuxi future qiuhun proposal of marriage

shidu appropriate
shijie guan world viewpoint

tan lianai courtship

tang cousins of same surname

timian pride, 'face'

Glossary

wanhun late marriage

xianhua gossip xiaodao filial

xiaxiang sent-down-to-the-countryside youth xixin yanjiu to like the new and to oppose the old

xuanze airen di biaozhun norms for selecting a spouse

zaohun early marriage

zhao duixiang choose a spouse

zhaosan musi changeability and untrustworthiness

zhengzhi diwei political status

zhitong daohe to be of one mind and purpose

ziyou jiehun freedom of marriage

zu lineage

zunzhong/zongbai social status/respect

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INTRODUCTION

On I 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 I 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