

The Spatio-Temporal Evolution of Marriage Attitudes and Behaviors among Rural Residents in China: An Empirical Study Based on Typical Villages in the Southwestern Loess Plateau

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Abstract: Driven by modernization and population mobility since China's reform and opening-up, rural marriage patterns have undergone profound changes. Based on survey data from the southwestern Loess Plateau, this paper examines the spatio-temporal evolution of rural marital attitudes and behaviors. Temporally, marriage has shifted toward individual autonomy, free love, delayed first marriage, the pursuit of personal happiness, and egalitarian gender roles. Spatially, the marriage radius has expanded cross-regionally, wedding venues have shifted from homes to commercial restaurants, and living arrangements have transitioned from multi-generational co-residence to independent nuclear families. Together, these shifts reflect a broader transformation from clan dependence to individual autonomy, revealing how macro-social changes restructure private life.

1. Introduction

Marriage concepts represent evolving emotional, ethical, and legal understandings of marital relations. Modern marriage emphasizes love, mutual consent, responsibility and mutual development, aligning with the Marxist notion that only affection-based marriages are morally legitimate[1-2]. Traditional Chinese marriage prioritized kinship alliances and lineage continuity, but the 20th century witnessed a turn toward free marriage choice, which was institutionally consolidated by the 1950 Marriage Law through the principles of marital freedom, monogamy, and gender equality[3]. This institutional transition has transformed marriage from a lineage-oriented institutional obligation to an individual-centered pursuit of personal happiness[4]. Modern youth hold diversified and pragmatic marital values that prioritize self-development and tolerate new marital norms including premarital cohabitation. These universal modern marital transitions exhibit unique localized characteristics in rural China, offering critical theoretical implications for studying marital evolution in underdeveloped rural regions.

Since China's reform and opening-up, institutional overhaul and population mobility have

thoroughly transformed traditional marriage matching on the Loess Plateau[5]. The emerging rural marriage market has shifted marital pressure from household reproduction to individual competition, driving a transition from family-controlled to autonomous marriages that prioritize emotional fulfillment over lineage, a shift accelerated by clashing traditional and modern values[6-8]. Simultaneously, intra-household gender roles and power structures have grown more equitable[9], a phenomenon explained by Iyigun and Walsh’s theory that spousal bargaining power is endogenously determined by relative labor earnings and resource allocation[10]. Furthermore, urbanization and mass migration have dismantled closed rural markets into an integrated national system, popularizing cross-regional and inter-ethnic unions while fostering cultural integration[11-13]. However, this out-migration and subsequent gender imbalance have created severe marriage strains on the Loess Plateau; local men typically adapt by delaying marriage or widening spousal age gaps, ultimately pushing marriage circles across provincial borders[14-15].

Against the above theoretical and empirical background, this study takes typical rural areas in the southwestern Loess Plateau as the research object and constructs a two-dimensional time–space analytical framework based on field survey data (Figure 1). It systematically explores the spatiotemporal evolutionary characteristics of rural marriage patterns from six core dimensions: marital autonomy, marital value rationalization, household gender equality, spatial expansion of marriage scope, wedding ritual changes, and post-marital residential patterns. This paper further explores the individual and structural driving mechanisms behind rural marital transformation, aiming to enrich and deepen the academic understanding of the evolutionary process and internal logic of rural marriage pattern changes in China since 1949.

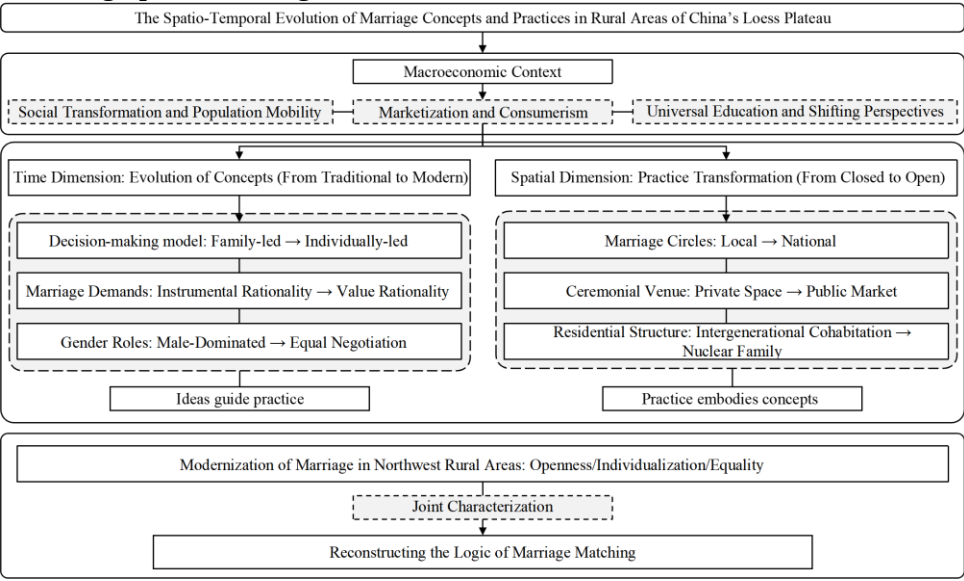


Figure 1: Research Framework Diagram

2. Study Population and Data Sources

The research site, Dazhuang Village in Anfu Township, Qinan County, Tianshui, Gansu, sits 7 km from the township government on the hilly gully terrain of the Loess Plateau, sloping northwest to southeast. This typical agricultural village relies on terraced farming, with an overwhelmingly Han population organized around two major clans and strong traditional family norms, making it an ideal sample for exploring shifts in rural marital perceptions.

This study’s data were collected in summer 2024 through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, covering marital acquaintance modes, decision-making patterns and marital motivations.

The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions, yielding 340 valid responses from rural residents of varied ages and genders (Table 1). The sample had balanced gender composition; most respondents were farmers with only compulsory education. Door-to-door surveys with on-site guidance ensured valid and accurate data.

Table 1: Basic Characteristics of Survey Sample (N=340)

Variable	Attribute	Proportion	Variable	Attribute	Proportion
Gender	Male	51%	Education Level	Illiterate	27%
	Female	49%		Primary School	10%
Occupation	Student	5%		Junior High School	28%
	Farmer	48%		Senior High School	15%
	Migrant Worker	7%		College and Above	19%
	Self-Employed	2%	Marital Status	Never Married	15%
	Freelance	7%		Married	76%
	Enterprises and Institutions	23%		Divorced	1%
	Other Occupations	7%		Widowed	8%

3. The Temporal Evolution of Marital Attitudes

3.1. Shifts in Autonomy over Marriage Formation

Against the backdrop of institutional reforms and large-scale rural population mobility, the decision-making power of rural marriage has undergone a profound individualized transformation, which can be interpreted from three interrelated dimensions: who chooses a spouse, how people meet their partners, and when young people enter marriage. Existing rural marriage studies have long documented the gradual erosion of patriarchal family authority, yet most scholars treat these three indicators as isolated research objects and ignore their joint reflection of rising individual autonomy in marital choices. Drawing on multi-period survey data from Dazhuang Village, this paper systematically sorts out the sequential transition from clan-dominated arranged marriages to youth-centered independent partner selection. The three subgraphs of Figure 2 visualize long-term chronological variations in marital decision-making logic, acquaintance channels, and the timing of first marriage.

Seventy years of available survey data document consistent growth in individual marital autonomy across three interwoven dimensions, corresponding to the three panels of Figure 2. The left subgraph tracks shifts in spousal decision authority: all marriages were clan-arranged in the 1950s, and family-led marriages declined steadily from 71% in the 1960s to 60% in the 1970s. The 1980s and 1990s marked a decisive turning point, as self-determined marriages climbed from 43% to 59% and surpassed family-controlled unions. Personal choice continued to dominate after 2000, peaking at 91% in the 2010s before a mild decline to 80% in the 2020s. The middle panel illustrates evolving acquaintance modes: professional matchmakers controlled all marital matching in the 1950s, still accounting for 57% of introductions in the 1980s alongside 17% kin exchange marriages. Migrant labor broadened young residents' social circles, lifting freely formed unions from 9% in the 1990s to over 80% in the 2020s, with 20% of contemporary marriages being uxorilocal marriages. The right panel reflects law-driven delays in the timing of first marriage. Successive updates to marriage regulations gradually raised the legal marriage age; while all villagers married under 18 in the 1950s, 70% married between 26 and 30 and 30% married above 30 by the 2020s, driven by personal development demands and mounting wedding expenditures.

Collective shifts across these three indicators reveal a consistent core evolutionary logic governing rural marital transformation. Legal frameworks including successive revisions to the Marriage Law have institutionalized young adults' right to autonomous partner selection, whereas large-scale rural migrant flows have dismantled geographically bounded social networks constructed around kinship clans. Escalating costs associated with wedding ceremonies further postpone the timing of first marriage and erode households' decisive power over spousal matching. While subtle tensions persist between inherited customary norms and modern individualistic orientations in the 2020s, individual autonomy has solidified as an entrenched, irreversible feature of local marital arrangements. The multi-dimensional changes identified herein lay a clear empirical foundation for understanding the reconstruction of gender relations within rural households.

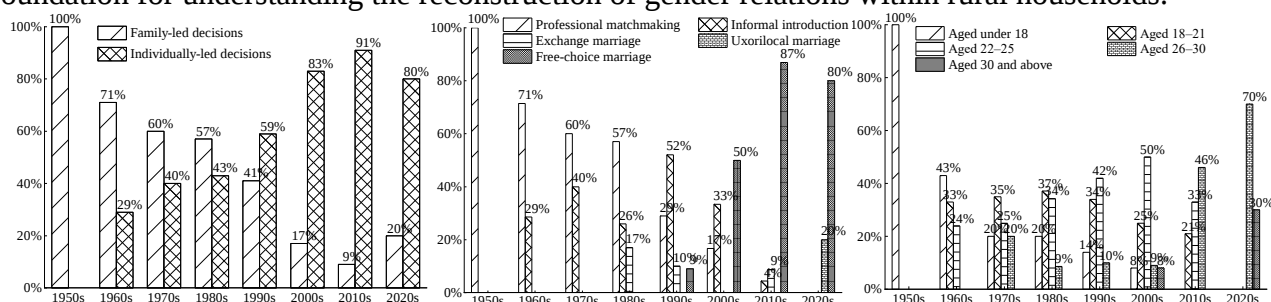


Figure 2: Temporal Changes in Three Dimensions of Rural Marriage Autonomy: Decision-Making Power, Spouse-Meeting Channels, and Age at First Marriage in Dazhuang Village, 1950s–2020s

3.2. Transformations of Rural Marital Values and Gender Role Perceptions

Existing gender and marriage studies generally separate marital motivation, household decision-making, and domestic labor division as independent research dimensions, yet these three dimensions jointly reflect the internal evolution of rural family value systems. Against the background of marketization and population mobility, traditional patriarchal norms have gradually disintegrated, while individual emotional demands and egalitarian gender awareness have steadily grown across rural China. Using long-term successive survey records from Dazhuang Village, this paper dissects multi-layered changes in villagers' marital values and gender perceptions. Figure 3 traces chronological shifts in marital motivations, spousal power distribution and gendered labor norms, exposing how social transition reconstructs value frameworks within rural households.

Seventy years of continuous survey records outline three coordinated evolutionary paths displayed in the three subgraphs of Figure 3. The left graph documents dramatic transformations in core marital goals shaped by shifting rural social needs. During the 1950s–1970s, 83% of local marriages centered on childbearing to maintain clan heritage; the proportion dropped to 67% in the 1980s–1990s and merely 20% by the 2020s. By contrast, emotional intimacy became the dominant driver of marriage at 60%, with economic partnership and social acceptance making up 15% and 20% respectively. The middle subgraph charts the collapse of male-centric household management. Patriarchal one-sided decision-making fell to 60% in the 1980s–1990s, whereas spousal joint consultation climbed to 87% in the 2010s and fully supplanted male dominance in the 2020s. The right subgraph illustrates the gradual weakening of conventional gender labor biases. The pervasive "male breadwinner" standard fell from 71% to 55% between the 1980s and 1990s, and shared housework arrangements were accepted by 83% of rural residents in the 2010s, breaking rigid gender divisions of domestic chores.

Coordinated shifts in marital goals, domestic power distribution, and gender labor perceptions together expose the erosion of long-standing patriarchal norms in hilly rural areas. Expanding market participation and popularized education enhance women's economic capacity and

bargaining power within families, cultivating equal gender mindsets and joint household governance. These empirical findings align with core viewpoints in gender economics, which confirm balanced spousal bonds boost household investment in individual growth and children's education. Distinct from the external shifts in marital decision-making autonomy discussed earlier, these inner value changes form a full evolutionary framework of rural residents' marital outlooks and furnish key empirical evidence for follow-up spatial research on marital behaviors.

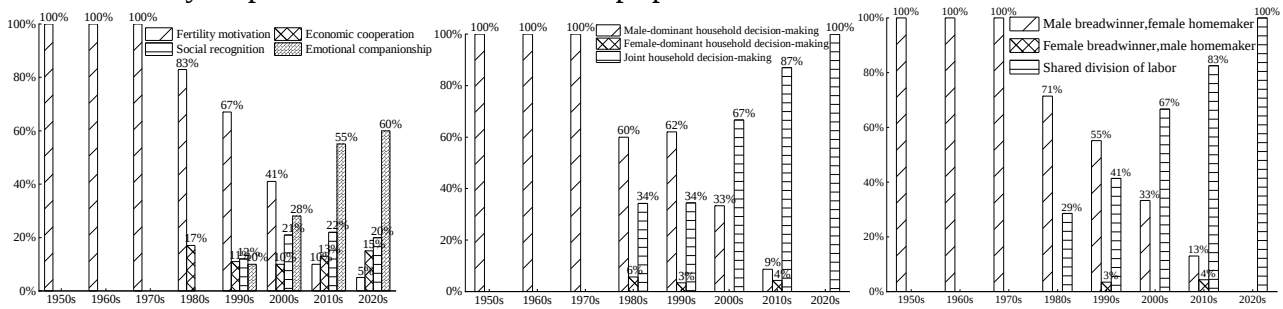


Figure 3: Temporal Shifts in Rural Marital Values and Gender Perceptions: Motivations, Household Decision-Making, Gender Labor Views, Dazhuang Village, 1950s–2020s

4. Spatial Transformation of Marriage Practices

4.1. The Spatial Expansion of Interregional Marriage

Against the shared backdrop of institutional reform, market penetration, and cross-regional labor mobility observed in the evolution of rural marital values, rural residents' mate selection has broken geographically confined boundaries formed by clan-centric rural societies, driving continuous outward expansion of the spatial scope of marital matches. Analyses of shifts in residents' marital decision-making power and gender value perceptions uncover profound ideological transformations within rural households; this study further shifts focus to tangible spatial characteristics of real marital behaviors, tracing multi-decade changes in the geographic range of spousal matching via long-term statistical data summarized in Table 2. Long-term variations in marriage geographic scope illustrate how population mobility restructures rural social networks and reshapes the geographic logic of mate selection.

Drawing on long-term chronological statistics of mating geographic distances, Dazhuang Village's marital social network has expanded outward decade after decade. Restricted by closed agricultural livelihoods and rigid clan bonds, all marital matches were confined within village limits in the 1950s. With rudimentary inter-village travel becoming accessible in the 1960s, 57% of marriages took place within the township, alongside 43% inter-village unions with neighboring settlements. The 1970s expanded the primary marriage geographic radius to the county level, where 60% of matches stayed intra-county and 40% occurred within the same township. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of cross-city and intra-provincial marriages: intra-county matches dropped to 42%, intra-city unions rose to 25%, and intra-provincial ties made up a mere 4%. Intra-city matches became mainstream in the 1990s and 2000s, reaching 38% and 50% respectively, while inter-provincial marriages emerged for the first time and occupied 17% by the 2000s. Cross-provincial unions surged to 30% in the 2010s alongside 35% intra-provincial marriages, and cross-provincial matches grew to the dominant share of 60% in the 2020s. Intra-provincial and intra-county marriages each accounted for 20%, while narrow village- and township-level matches have almost disappeared from modern marital patterns (Table 2).

The gradual expansion of marriage geographic boundaries constructs a full spatial evolution chain that closely aligns with the individualized shifts in rural marital values uncovered in this

research. Mass rural migrant flows and improved regional transport infrastructure break down insular local social circles that once restricted mate choice to nearby relatives and residents. The gradual fading of short-distance local marriages and sharp growth of cross-provincial unions signal the collapse of geographically constrained clan-based marriage institutions. The transition from enclosed village-level matching to nationwide open marital networks constitutes the external spatial manifestation of internal value reconstruction within rural households. It further confirms that population mobility functions as the core driver reshaping both rural residents' ideological outlooks and real marital practices in mountainous countryside.

Table 2: Changes in Marriage Distance

Marriage Sphere	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
Intra-village marriage	100%	0%	0%	0%	14%	0%	4%	0%
Inter-neighboring marriage	0%	43%	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%
Intra-township marriage	0%	57%	40%	29%	34%	33%	0%	0%
Intra-county marriage	0%	0%	60%	42%	14%	0%	9%	20%
Intra-city marriage	0%	0%	0%	25%	38%	50%	9%	0%
Intra-provincial marriage	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	35%	20%
Inter-provincial marriage	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	17%	30%	60%

4.2. Spatial and Commercial Evolution of Rural Wedding Ritual Venues

With the continuous advancement of rural commercialization, and the transformation of household structures, traditional family-centered marital spaces have undergone profound restructuring. Drawing on chronological survey records from Dazhuang Village, this paper analyzes two closely correlated spatial shifts in marital practices, which are visualized separately in the left and right panels of Figure 4. The dual evolution of wedding banquet venues and post-marital residential layouts jointly reveals how market forces and individualized family values reshape the physical spaces of rural marriage.

Two parallel evolutionary trends are reflected in long-term chronological statistics. As illustrated in the left subgraph of Figure 4, wedding banquet spaces exhibit a distinct market-driven development trajectory. Severe material shortages and state-led frugality campaigns meant nearly all 1950s weddings held no formal banquets; casual family meals appeared occasionally yet never gained popularity between the 1960s and 1970s. Increased disposable income following rural reform made self-hosted home banquets the mainstream option throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The 2000s marked a vital turning point: zero-banquet weddings completely disappeared, home banquets hit a peak of 83%, and commercial wedding catering services emerged, shifting wedding celebrations from private domestic areas to commercial venues. Hotel wedding receptions grew rapidly in the 2010s, reaching 80% of all weddings by the 2020s and supplanting home feasts as the primary form. The right subgraph further captures drastic changes in post-marital housing patterns. All newlyweds lived with elderly generations to sustain extended families from the 1950s to the 1970s, while independent housing gradually became available after the 1980s. By the 2020s, 80% of young couples chose separate nuclear households, with only 20 still living in multi-generational homes.

The synchronized evolution of wedding banquet spaces and residential layouts demonstrates the dual spatial breakdown of traditional clan-centered rural families. Rising household incomes and evolving rural consumption norms fuel the commercialization of wedding customs, while the desire for private independent living speeds up young couples' separation from multi-generational households. In line with existing research on rural family change, the move toward commercial

wedding venues and neolocal living arrangements signals the decline of clan collective rituals and growing priority placed on individual nuclear family needs. Such spatial shifts act as the tangible carrier of the individualized rural marital value trend, and provide systematic empirical support for unpacking the multi-dimensional transformation of rural marriage institutions.

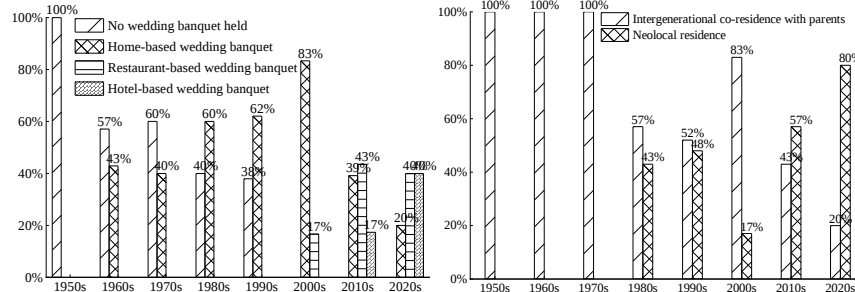


Figure 4: Temporal Shifts in Rural Marriage Rituals and Post-Marital Residence: Wedding Banquet Venues and Residential Patterns, Dazhuang Village, 1950s–2020s

5. Conclusions

Drawing on survey data from typical villages on the southwestern Loess Plateau, this paper systematically analyzes temporal and spatial evolutions of rural marital norms and practices centered on marital matching, revealing that China’s social structural transformation and faster population mobility have shifted local rural marital matching logic away from clan-centric, geographically enclosed traditions toward individual-oriented, cross-regional openness, with six core transformative trends: growing individual autonomy manifested in individual-led marriage decisions, free partner encounters and delayed first marriage; a shift of marital purpose from lineage reproduction to emotional companionship; equalized spousal power replacing male-dominated household governance and gender labor norms; continuous spatial expansion of marriage networks from intra-village to inter-provincial unions; the replacement of home wedding banquets with commercial restaurant and hotel venues; and a shift toward independent nuclear families rather than co-residence with parents, all of which represent profound structural reshaping of rural social networks, marital culture and the local marriage market beyond mere geographic extension of marital choices.

Acknowledgments

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview data, are not available due to restrictions outlined in the data usage protocol and participant confidentiality agreements.

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