

Implications of rural/urban backgrounds on Conjugal Decision-making power in China

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Over the past five decades, the topic of conjugal decision-making power has received a lot of attention from scholars in various research areas, because marriage is an important site for the discussion of gender stratification. And conjugal decision-making power on the family level also tends to have more general social implications. Existing research almost always focuses on individuals' current characteristics such as income, education, occupation statuses or personalities, when looking for the determinants of the balance or imbalance of conjugal decision-making power. Research that focuses on the effects of people's broader social backgrounds (for example, the social environment in which one is brought up) on conjugal decision-making power is rather rare. This trend is well captured by the dominant theory in the field, "resource theory", which states that the balance of power in conjugal decision-making power will be on the side of the partner who contributes the greatest resources to the marriage (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). When researchers do take some broader social contexts into consideration, such as explaining conjugal power through the "patriarchy perspective" (Zuo and Bian, 2005; Omeje, Oshi and Oshi, 2011; Tichenor, 2005; Zuo, 2003) or comparing couples from different cultures, the emphasis is usually on the family as a union rather on the power dynamics between the partners (Charsley, 2005; Mbweza, Norr and McElmurry, 2008). What happens, then, if two partners were brought up internalizing different norms and traditions about gender hierarchy? Would that have an influence on their conjugal decision-making power? Or, would one's upbringing backgrounds not matter at all, since one's current resource and status alone decide one's power in marriage?

This gap in research actually reflects a significant phenomenon in contemporary China. The ever-growing rural-to-urban migration in China is bringing more and more rural migrants into the urban areas. And it is not uncommon for people with rural backgrounds to marry those with urban backgrounds, and vice versa. At the same time, the rural areas in China are still found to be deeply influenced by patriarchal ideology, while a more egalitarian gender landscape has emerged in urban China (Gaetano and Tamara, 2004; Chen, Liu and Xie, 2010). Thus one may wonder what would be the implications on conjugal decision-making power when people from different urban/rural backgrounds get married. Would there be a power struggle between the rural patriarchal ideology and a more egalitarian gender view in the urban area? More specifically, would different patterns of conjugal decision-making power be identified among different marriage types (urban couples, rural couples, rural husbands and rural wives, and rural husbands and urban wives)? If the answer is yes, can those differences be explained by the individual factors such as income disparity, socio-economic status difference? Does one's background and socialization process really matter for the discussion of conjugal decision-making power? Addressing questions like these will not only contribute to the study of conjugal

decision-making power in general, but also give insight into the changing dynamics of the conjugal decision-making power in currently transitional China.

Using data from a rather new dataset “Jiangsu Fertility Intention and Behavior Study (JFIBS)” based in China, this project makes an attempt to analyze conjugal decision-making power in the context of China’s massive rural-to-urban migration. First, I will differentiate among four types of marriages based on husbands’ and wives’ rural/urban backgrounds. Then women’s conjugal decision-making power will be compared across the groups to see if distinct patterns exist in the different types of marriage. Second, I will check step by step whether these differences can be explained away by the factors that are already identified by researchers to have an impact on conjugal decision-making power, including, basic demographic characteristics such as age difference and women’s ages at first marriage and factors that are important in the resource theory, such as education level, individual income, and occupation status. What is more, I will put parents and parents-in-law into the picture and try to figure out whether the effect of rural/urban backgrounds (if there is any effect) is exercised independently through the couples or is mediated by intergenerational practice.

Research Hypotheses

I will first test whether or not women’s conjugal decision-making power varies across the four types of marriages. To facilitate the comparison, I build a 2 x 2 typology based on the urban/urban backgrounds of the wives and the husbands. The typology is visualized in Table 1 below. And the first group of hypotheses will be laid out with the guidance of this typology.

Table 1 Marriage Typology

		WIVES	
		Urban	Rural
HUSB-ANDS	Urban	Type I	Type II
	Rural	Type III	Type IV

H1a: Existing studies show that rural China lags behind urban China in developing more egalitarian attitudes toward women’s autonomy and status. Thus I expect to find women fully embedded in “rural marriages” (i.e., Type IV marriages where both wives and husbands are from the rural areas) to have the lowest power status compared with women from other types of marriages.

H1b: On the other extreme are the urban wives who are married to urban husbands (Type I marriages). Since Type I marriages do not involve any rural ideology of gender hierarchy, I expect them to enjoy the most egalitarian conjugal decision-making power compared to women in other types of marriages.

H1c: The picture becomes more complicated when it concerns partners who are from different backgrounds, one from rural and the other from urban, as in Type II and Type III marriages. In the Type II marriages, given that these husbands were brought up in an open urban environment that treats women more equally, they may give their wives more autonomy and power. Therefore, compared to women in the Type IV marriages, women in Type II marriages are likely to possess more decision-making power. But their power status is unlikely to be higher than women in the Type I marriage. And in the Type III marriages which involve urban wives and rural husbands, the women's power status would be predicted to be lower than women in the Type I marriages, because their rural husbands may shadow their conjugal relationship by the less equal gender attitudes cultivated in rural cultural backgrounds. But they should still possess more power decision than rural women in IV marriages. At the same time, it is rather difficult to compare between Type II and Type III, since the result could take either direction and there is more than one way of reasoning.

H2: To demonstrate and disentangle the nuances of the power comparisons across the different types of marriages, it is important to analyze whether these differences are caused by factors that are already identified by exiting theories and studies. For example, do women in Type I marriages possess more conjugal decision-making power only because she is able to make more money thus bring more resource to the marriage? Or, are women in Type III subjugated only because their urban husbands are more socio-economically privileged? It is important to know whether the mechanisms here are really about the different gender ideologies in rural and urban China or just another manifestation of existing theories and research findings. Therefore, as a second step, I will test the mechanisms of the association between the marriage types and women's different conjugal decision-making power.

To test the resource theory, both partners' economic contribution to the family and their respective socio-economic statuses will be included in the analysis. It is expected that once these factors are taken into consideration, the magnitude of the association between the marriage type and women's decision-making power will be significantly reduced. Yet at the same time, it is hypothesized that the association will not be completely accounted for, as individuals' rural/urban backgrounds and the gender ideology associated with them are expected to have an impact on the conjugal decision-making power.

H3: Furthermore, one's rural/urban backgrounds are closely related to the backgrounds of one's parents. Given the fact that it is not uncommon in China for a married couple to live with at least one partner's parents, the project will analyze whether the influence of parents and/or parents-in-law play a role in mediating the impact of the couples' rural/urban backgrounds. This analysis is especially important for Type III and Type IV marriages where the husbands have rural background, because part of the patriarchal ideology in the rural area emphasizes younger people to obey their parents and other elderly family members. So the last hypothesis is about the possible intergenerational role played by the parents and parents-in-law. More specifically, it is hypothesized that for couples co-residing with parents/parents-in-law, the effects of the rural/urban backgrounds will be strengthened. For example, for urban women who are married to rural husbands, their power status tends to be lower if they co-reside with their parents-in-law, with other factors being equal.

Data and Measurement

Data

This project will use the data collected by Jiangsu Fertility Intention and Behavior Study (JFIBS). JFIBS collects data on women's fertility intention, fertility behaviors and some relevant family issues in Jiangsu Province of China through two waves of survey conducted in six counties in Jiangsu in 2007 and 2010. The survey adopts a two-stage clustered sampling method. First, a weighted sampling scheme randomly selects the primary sampling unit, either a rural village or an urban neighborhood. Second, women aged between 18 and 40 years are selected for a face-to-face interview, using a standardized survey questionnaire. Overall, the survey collects data on 18,638 women regarding their fertility intention, childbearing behavior and other relevant issues. The sample age structure is consistent with data for the same six counties from the Women Information System of Jiangsu Province, and with that from the 2000 National Census (Zheng et al. 2009)

These data are appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, located in the lower reach of Yangtze River, Jiangsu Province embraces Shanghai to the southeast and faces the Pacific Ocean to the east. Its geographic situation has helped it become one of China's most populous and economically advanced provinces, and one of the most popular sites for rural-urban migration. This makes a survey conducted in Jiangsu ideally suitable for a study related to China's internal migration. Second, JFIBS is aimed at collecting data on women's fertility intention and fertility behaviors which also accounts for several relevant family issues. For example, since conjugal decision-making power is likely to have impact on women's fertility intention and behaviors, data are collected on a series of questions on this topic. Furthermore, parents and parents-in-law also influence women's fertility intention and behaviors, thus some data are also collected concerning their roles in family.

Measurement

-Dependent Variable

Women's Conjugal Decision-making Power. There is a question in JFIBS which asks, "When your family needs to make the following decisions, whose opinion is more important, yours or your husbands?" Below the question are eight items indicating various situations for conjugal decision-making. They are "family daily consumption" "buying high-quality goods" "buying big agricultural machines" "having children" "children's education/employment" "buying houses or building houses" "decisions about agricultural production" and "financial investment". Each item is followed by six options – "the husband makes the decision" "the wife makes the decision" "discuss and decide together" "discuss together but the husband makes the final decision" "discuss together but the wife makes the final decision" and "not applicable". With this set of items, it is not difficult to generate a numeric index to indicate women's conjugal decision-making power. And an index as such facilitates comparison across the four different types of families.

-Key Independent Variable

Rural/Urban Background. Both the respondents' and their husbands' *hukou* is recorded in JFIBS. *Hukou* is an official identification adopted by Chinese government that directly shows

whether a citizen belongs to urban or rural population under China's registration system. Yet *hukou* alone may not accurately catch an individual's rural/urban background, because it is possible for some rural migrants to obtain urban *hukou* by becoming an official urban resident. The standard is high, but it is not impossible. Fortunately, there are questions in the questionnaire, which ask respectively the occupations of the wife's parents and that of the husband's parents. Agricultural work in China is usually associated with rural residency and rural origin. So if one's parents once was or still are agricultural workers, it is very likely that he/she grew up in a rural background.

-Control Variables

In order to test the resource theory, the wives' and the husbands' education, income and occupation will be put into analysis, as well as their differences on these measures. And couples' co-residence with the parents and/or the parents-in-law will be taken into consideration so as to spot the intergenerational effects.

At the same time, some other factors will also be controlled which are suspected to have a role in conjugal decision-making power yet are beyond the theoretical discussion of this project, for example, the age difference between wife and husband, a household's rural/urban location, a household's socio-economic status, and whether a marriage is first marriage or not.

Analytical Plan

First, a bivariate analysis will be carried out in order to analyze whether the typology of different marriage types as a whole really is associated with any difference in the index of women's conjugal decision-making power. The general model is expected to be statistically significant. Furthermore, the results are also expected to prove the validity of the first group of hypotheses.

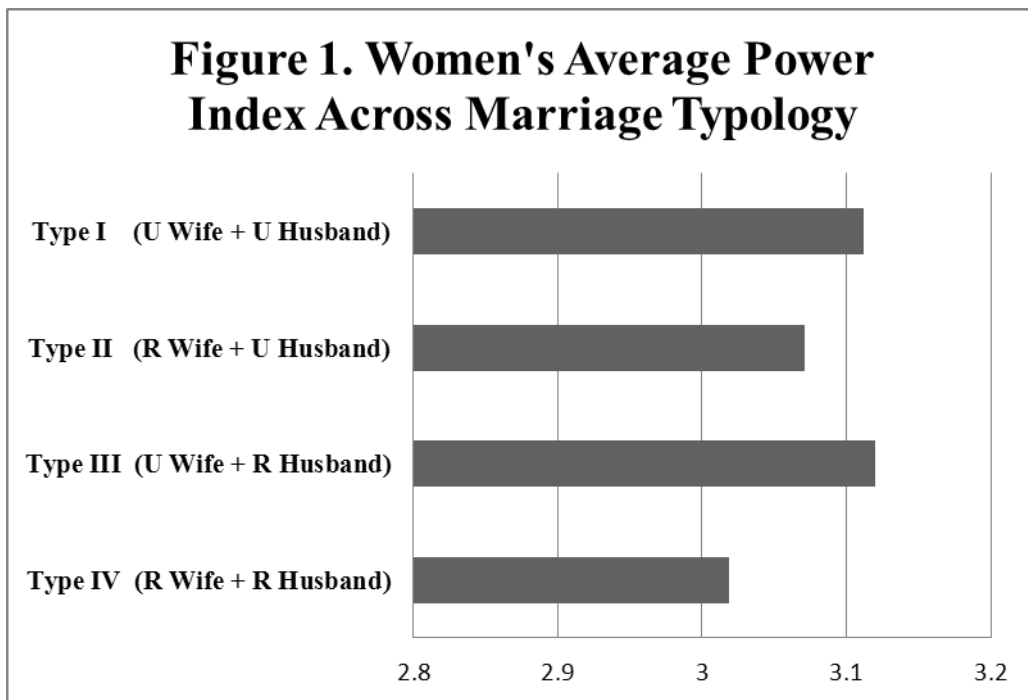
Second, I will use multiple regression method to carry out several sequential models. The simple bivariate analysis consists the first model. The second model will test the resource theory by including the variables of wives' and husband's socio-economic status and their disparity. Intergenerational influence will be tested in the third model, by including the indicators of couples' co-residence with the parents/parents-in-law. The last model will be the most comprehensive, including not only the main factors that are the focuses of this project but also the secondary independent variables.

Preliminary Results

For the preliminary analysis, an additive scale is produced to measure women's conjugal decision-making power in general, without differentiating among the different types of conjugal decisions. The highest possible score would be 5, which means that the wife makes every decision on each item. The lowest possible score would be 1, indicating that the husband makes all the decisions asked about.

Figure 1 presents the preliminary results of the bivariate analysis, with the bars showing women's average power index within each marriage type. As can be seen from the figure, the results generally confirm what have been expected in the first group of hypotheses:

- (1) Women in Type IV marriages have the lowest decision-making power.
- (2) Women in Type I marriages have arguably the highest decision-making power. The Type III seems to have a slightly higher average power score, yet the result is not statistically significant.
- (3) The power of women in Type II marriages are somewhere in between.



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