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Marriage Payments: a fundamental reconsideration

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Abstract

Marriage payments: a fundamental reconsideration

Abstract This paper is a constructive critique of the well-known book by Jack Goody and Stanley Tambiah (1973), *Bridewealth and Dowry*. Given the general acceptance of Goody's framework in contemporary studies of marriage and marriage payments, it is essential that we refer to this framework as we advance new theoretical concepts of marriage-related socio-economic processes. As some reviews of this paper have observed, this critique is certainly overdue.

In the course of this discussion we shall set forth analytical conceptions of wealth and consumption goods that we find to be foundational to an understanding of marriage payments and other economic processes; and we provide consistent criteria for studying the cross-cultural incidence of payments, gifts, bequests and inheritance that are often associated with marriage.

For cross-cultural analysis it is important that the dimensions of social process be clearly delineated, in spite of confusion that arises at the level of common discourse. Unfortunately, the Goody-Tambiah presentation amplifies this confusion in the interest of an ethnocentric evolutionary scheme. And in the context of the study of marriage payments in China, Goody's construction of the "indirect dowry" is particularly unfortunate.

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Keywords: Marriage payments, gifts, bridewealth, dowry, groomwealth, indirect dowry, inheritance, bequest, wealth-holding corporation

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Introduction

In 1973 Jack Goody and Stanley Tambiah published a book on bridewealth and dowry. This book can, at this point in time, be recognized as a classical document, foundational to economic anthropology. And while some of its specific ethnographic suggestions have been questioned, especially those of Tambiah (to which I shall make further reference shortly), the theoretical concepts that they presented (advanced primarily by Goody) have not been subjected to necessary critical examination. Rather, one finds a continuing use of Goody's framework sprinkled among the studies of marriage and marriage payments that have emerged over the last thirty years. Most scholars are able to employ Goody's terminology without serious distortion of the underlying ethnographic material, provided that the terminology is not taken seriously. Younger scholars, especially, *must* use Goody's concepts in their work in order to display their knowledge of the contemporary literature and of the new concept of "indirect dowry." Given Goody's prestige, many anthropologists, including most Chinese anthropologists, have felt obliged to defer to his theoretical constructions. However, I believe that such constraint is unfortunate. In this paper, I wish to present a rather comprehensive restructuring of our understanding of marriage payments; and in doing so, it is essential that I address Goody and Tambiah directly with unmodified frankness.

In the interest of advancing an ethnocentric evolutionary scheme, Goody's formulation ignores generally recognized differences between payments and gifts, as well as the differences between gifts and inheritance. It relegates into the domain of primitive simplicity the many elegantly complex systems of marriage and bridewealth and presents dowry as it has been found in European societies as being exemplary of higher ethical standards. Between those extremes is the indirect dowry, presumably found within Eurasia, especially China, where there are cultures that represent an evolutionary upward step toward European ethics. And in order to accomplish this schema, he mischaracterizes the ethnographic record. First, it was necessary to remove bridewealth from many non-African societies (by constructing the "indirect dowry"); and, secondly, the ethical status of dowry was augmented by characterizing it as a "pre-mortem" inheritance (by confounding gifts with inheritance) when, in fact, the incidence of inheritance by women is ethnographically quite rare.

Tambiah, who occupies the second half of the Goody-Tambiah volume, presupposed that dowry in north India is a "gift to the bride" (which is one of Goody's characterization); but in his return to this subject (Tambiah 1989), he admitted the error, referencing "recent" ethnography that contradicted that thesis. He admitted that while some of the things that come with the bride can be said to belong to her, the money that she brings is generally seized by the father-in-law and the clothing may be claimed by her husband's unmarried sisters for use in their own weddings. It would appear that Tambiah had initially believed that north Indian practice corresponded with the moral injunctions of classical Indian texts. But those classical models are very distant from the increasingly prevalent practice in India of abusing and killing brides when demands for "dowry" are not met. The Indian Crime Records Bureau reports that a bride is killed over "dowry" every 77 minutes. Clearly, those who respond to those demands are offering *payments to the groom's kin* (i.e., groomprice: Table 1)—not gifts to the bride.

Tambiah's discussion is particularly interesting if one recognizes it as an expression of an elite Brahman ideology that rationalizes the exploitation of those of inferior rank by their ritual

superiors in the form of a “gift of a richly endowed virgin.” Certainly, this has been an astoundingly clever stratagem by which a ritually high status group may claim possession of countless virgins, even when many of their members lack the wealth necessary for formerly conventional (via bridewealth) wife acquisition. Indeed, having changed the marriage rules (after invading north India around 1500 BCE), they are able to condemn bridewealth as the province of lower castes and of the poor. While it is to be expected that Brahman culture would assert the ethical superiority of Brahmans in its classical texts, the export of this view of bridewealth onto Africa is entirely inappropriate. The Brahmans’ reception of the endowed virgin involves the conveyance to a man of rights to the *sexuality* of a woman whose fertility is commonly restrained, whereas the relevant process in Africa has been a transfer to an agnatic group of rights to the valued *fertility* of a woman, potentially independent of access to her sexuality (see Evans-Pritchard 1990).

Wealth and consumption goods

In the beginning of his presentation, Goody presents Figure 1, below, wherein the resources associated with bridewealth and dowry are both identified as “goods.” Later, Goody and Tambiah make reference to non-movables for bridewealth versus movable property for dowries. However, being movable or otherwise is hardly important, since animal stock is movable and acts as the form of bridewealth in many societies, and in no event would live animals be said to be “goods.” So, the question arises, what are the special characteristics of the resources that are commonly inherited by males in patrilineal societies and which function as bridewealth in those systems? And what are the special characteristics of resources transmitted in dowry? Unfortunately, customary English usage leads to confusion and I beg your patience in allowing me space to provide a set of analytical distinctions on which our discussion can proceed as an alternative to those in Figure 1).

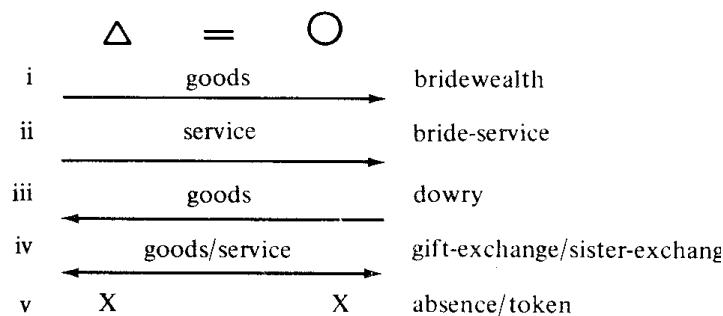


Figure 1: Goody’s characterization of resources transferred at marriage (Marriage Transactions). From Goody (1973: 1)

Although Goody refers to all forms of economic resource as “goods,” a serious discussion of resource allocation in any economy requires a distinction between consumption goods (and consumer durables) and the underlying substrate of resources that combine to produce those consumption goods. In a capitalist system, that substrate is capital and wage-labor. Capital is the engine that drives the capitalist system—constituting the object of accumulation for its ruling elite—and in any model of the dynamics of capitalism, capital or more precisely the capital-labor ratio is the critical variable. However, capitalism is only one among a number of modes of accumulation. With the exception of those hunter-gathering societies that survive in marginal ecological niches, all societies are analyzable as systems of accumulation. And in non-capitalist

systems of accumulation the design of its system of marriage has been a central instrumental feature. So, understanding marriage and marriage-related resource transfers requires that we embed our discussion within an analysis of the structure and dynamics of wealth accumulation.

Having examined social processes within most of the 186 societies of the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS)¹, I have concluded that objects of social accumulation have had only four significant forms: human fertility, the fertility of animal herds, land and capital. I shall refer to these cross-culturally manifested objects of accumulation as *wealth*, where capital is a contemporary manifestation.²

It is necessary that I construct a term here because customary usage in contemporary Western cultures allows that “wealth” can refer to anything of value. This makes sense because in a modern capitalist society anything of value can be sold for money and the money can be converted into capital. However, in many societies this fungibility of resources cannot be presumed; and we should avoid imposing socially delimited concepts from capitalism onto elements of very different alternative social formations.

Wealth, as a cross-culturally recognizable object of accumulation, can be recognized by four necessary and sufficient characteristics or criteria:

(a) *It must have a potential to grow in number or magnitude over an indefinite future horizon.*

Under favorable conditions human and animal fertility have been shown to grow quite prodigiously over time, rapidly crowding any geographic domain. In an agrarian regime (such as imperial China) land was a wealth-asset in the possession of its elite center of power, facilitating demographic growth; and, of course, capital is the central object of accumulation under capitalism.

The *power of a wealth-asset* is a function of its rate of growth, analogous to the rate of interest or dividends. And even if the ultimate purpose of a herd of cattle is to facilitate the acquisition of human fertility through the exchange of bridewealth, the herd can be said to be more powerful than women, given its higher rate of growth; and as we shall show later, it is this higher rate of growth that makes it feasible to the use of cattle as a form of bridewealth.

(b) *Its social valuation is derived from the value of the anticipated future flow of consumer goods attributable to it.*

The value of any form of wealth is derived from its product; it possesses no value in itself, except as it may be transformed into consumption goods. For example, the value of cattle is generated by the production of meat and milk that support the demographic power of those who have rights to it; the value of land in an agrarian regime is derived from the consumer goods that are produced by a growing population; and the value of a unit of capital is the expected discounted future flow of dividends that accrue to owners of stock.

(c) *However, its full value can be realized only when a social entity has rights to its benefits over an indefinite time-horizon.*

¹ Murdock and White, 2006.

² It is quite possible that some other forms of *wealth* will arise in the future; and if so, they should be recognizable in term of the general characterization of wealth that I shall present, here.

Bourgeois theoreticians sometimes deny that wealth-assets can be “owned” by collectivities, such as lineages, in order to avoid the implication that socialism is theoretically feasible. In fact, corporate groups, such as families, lineages, tribes and states have been the primary controllers of wealth over the course of human evolution. These are entities that, in principle, have indefinite life. This characteristic of wealth-holding groups is required in order for assets to achieve their highest social value. The fact that *individuals* are typically the holders of wealth under capitalism is largely attributable to the invention of dividend-yielding shares to productive wealth, whose valuation reflects the indefinite future (expected) flow of dividends from the asset, discounted to the present.³

(d) *However, a resource that satisfies the above criteria may cease to qualify as a wealth-asset if auxiliary resources essential to continued growth experience short supply, thereby limiting the growth of the resource.*

A human or animal population may become too large relative to the resources necessary to its continued growth, prompting an interference with fertility (abortion, infanticide) and the conversion of animal stock into consumption goods. The arrival of the “demographic transition” announces the end of human fertility as wealth within the relevant society.⁴ And at least theoretically, the quantity of capital may be excessive relative to existing consumer demand (under capitalism), leading to a collapse in the value of shares and ending, at least temporarily, the growth of capital stock. And if the collapse in the value of shares were permanent, then capital must cease to be an object of accumulation.

The relevance and significance of these properties of wealth-assets will become clear in the course of discussion.

Bridewealth versus brideprice

In this discussion, *bridewealth* will always refer to a resource that satisfies these four analytical criteria.⁵ And I shall refer to payments by the groom’s kin that do not involve wealth-assets as *brideprice*.⁶ The ethnographic sources that support the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS)

³ One reviewer raised doubts about the uniqueness of individual wealth holding under capitalism. Surely, things that anthropologists have called “wealth” include resources that might be individually owned. And resources that are *managed* by individuals, but subject to systematic inheritance, have been said to be individually owned, when *rights* to those resources are claimed in fact by an group of indefinite duration. It appears that capitalist individualism rebels against the notion of group ownership, especially when that group may include the yet unborn.

⁴ We strongly endorse the view of John C. Caldwell (1976) to the effect that there are only two demographic regimes: one where fertility is not restrained and the other where it is. This analytical result is implied by the fact that fertility can either be wealth or not wealth, and these two states of being are fully disjoint. However, at any point in time circumstances may vary among members of a given population.

⁵ In agrarian societies, bridewealth does not include land, explicitly. Rather, land must be sold or monies that might otherwise be devoted to the purchase of land are designated for a marriage payment. In either case, there is a reduction in the parental wealth-estate.

⁶ Anthropologists replaced brideprice with bridewealth in order to remove the stigma of wife-purchase from the transaction, thereby elevating its (Western) moral standing. They were not motivated by a conceptualization of wealth versus the product of work. So, I apologize if some readers remain offended by

show that for the 186 societies included therein there is never a customary offer of *wealth* except in exchange for another form of wealth. And we find that when fertility fails as *wealth*, as evidenced by infanticide and other restraints on the expression of fertility, *wealth* (as defined herein) will not be used in marital transactions. Equivalently, we find that when *wealth* is not transferred by the kin of the groom, the wives thereby acquired are not able to fully express their fertility because of a deficit in auxiliary resources.⁷

Brideprice arises when marriage payments are concluded by the transfer of the *product* of work rather than by a sacrifice of wealth-accumulation. For example, poor peasants who lack access to wealth may reduce their consumption over a long period and use such savings in marital transactions. In such a case, there is no compromise in the amount of wealth that might otherwise be transferred to heirs. The compromise falls entirely upon consumption.

The work-power and conjugal services of wives can never prompt the delivery of *wealth* to their kin. Instead, the groom's kin may offer the product of their own work-power for the anticipated work-power of the bride. When human fertility fails as wealth-asset in the course of a demographic transition, it is no longer *rational* for an individual or group to offer bridewealth, as defined. The cultural logic behind this fact becomes quite evident when one notes that wealth is held by a group of indefinite duration, whereas the conjugal services of wives are enjoyed by a single individual. Hence, if wealth were sacrificed for the acquisition of conjugal services, the entity that pays would be different from the entity that benefits. Only when the bride is endowed with wealth, such as fertility, would a wealth-holding entity seek rights *in* her (that is, rights to her wealth-endowment). A man will seek marriage for the sake of conjugal services, but his kin are seeking wealth. Typically, wealth-holding groups intervene into marriage arrangements in order to secure their advantages, sometimes with an indifference to the interests of the marital pair.

My reference to "rational" in the above paragraph has raised, no doubt, a few eyebrows. However, we are discussing here the management of wealth by wealth-holding groups; and any wealth-holding groups that we might examine ethnographically have been able to survive through a long period of competitive struggle during which their wealth was forever at risk. Groups whose customary rules violate the principles discussed here will simply not survive. Its members would be scattered into the hands of other groups and they would become agents, ignominiously, to the augmentation of the social power of others.⁸

Bridewealth

In pre-colonial Africa, men had rights to cattle for use as bridewealth at a time to be established by the group of elders. And over time the group of elder agnates who managed the growth of the herd and the acquisition of wives would effectively allocate additional wives to themselves and first wives to young men. This, however, was not a simple process.

There exists a widely accepted myth that the resources used in African bridewealth created a "circulating fund" whereby sons (or fathers) could obtain wives with the *wealth* received for their

a resurfacing of the older term. However, we are explicitly discussing an offer of the product of past work in exchange for expected future work in contrast with reciprocal offers of wealth.

⁷ See Bell (2003, Ch. 4)

⁸ In Africa the losers would often become slaves; and in agrarian regimes they would become tenant farmers or day-laborers.

sisters (or daughters). Goody and Tambiah presume this to be an obvious fact; and indeed there has been the concept of cattle-linked siblings, such that men await the marriage of sisters in order to gain the cattle necessary for their own marriages. However, these linked-siblings arise from micro-management decisions that control growth of the herd; it is a matter of fiscal discipline. However, one cannot understand the logic of bridewealth if one focuses on the issue at the level of individual marriages, although quite naturally that is the level which dominates the mentality of individuals within the system and, hence, of ethnographic reports that depend on ideas gained from informants.⁹

We can escape this confusion only by standing back and conducting a formal analysis of the process. Consider: A cattle herd grows in magnitude over a multigenerational time horizon; and under suitable conditions it will grow exponentially.¹⁰ Consequently, there are always new cattle becoming available for marriage in addition to the cattle already in circulation. Secondly, some of the cattle in circulation become too old for this circuit and must be replaced by elements of the growing herd. And, finally, since the fertility rates of cattle are normally higher than those of the human population, the amount of marriage-cattle in circulation grows continually, along with the growth of the lineage that manages the herd. Clearly, then, the notion that marriage-cattle are a circulating fund is incorrect. On the contrary, it is an aspect of a growing herd, whose natural growth is sacrificed in order to augment the growth of the wealth-holding group.

The management of bridewealth and wife-acquisition in an African cattle-herding society is fundamentally the management of two complementary forms of wealth. It is a sophisticated process that requires recognition of the fertility rates of animal stock, the fertility rates of women, the typical age of marriage for women and the level of bridewealth. If a particular generation of the group acquires too many wives for itself, it will force future generations to suffer a deficit in herds, thereby threatening continued growth of the lineage. Or, symmetrically, if they acquire too few wives, the growth of the human group will be reduced unnecessarily—diminishing the demographic power of the lineage. Only a certain percentage of the growing herd should be made available for marriage payments and the rest should be reserved for increasing the size of the herd in order to accommodate future marriages of a growing agnatic group. In computer simulation of this process, we have shown how the rate at which cattle are to be expended in bridewealth is affected by the age at which women are married, the rates of human and animal fertility and the level of bridewealth (Bell and Song (1990)). While the computer program demonstrated a complex management process, the real world is far more complicated, given variability and uncertainty in the growth rates in the cattle and the human populations, together with uncertainty in the availability of brides.

I reproduce below a diagrammatic representation of the decision-space that defines the optimal growth paths for cattle-based lineages, as a function of female fertility rates and marriage ages, and the level of bridewealth, given the “standard growth structure of cattle” provided by Dahl and Hjort (1976).

⁹ In general, an understanding of system dynamics under capitalism or any other system cannot be gained from the local informants.

¹⁰ In order to understand the nature of the process, we begin by accepting an unrealistically simple set of assumptions about it. But in spite of its simplicity our model is far more complex and realistic than the model that is implied by the concept of the “circulating fund.”

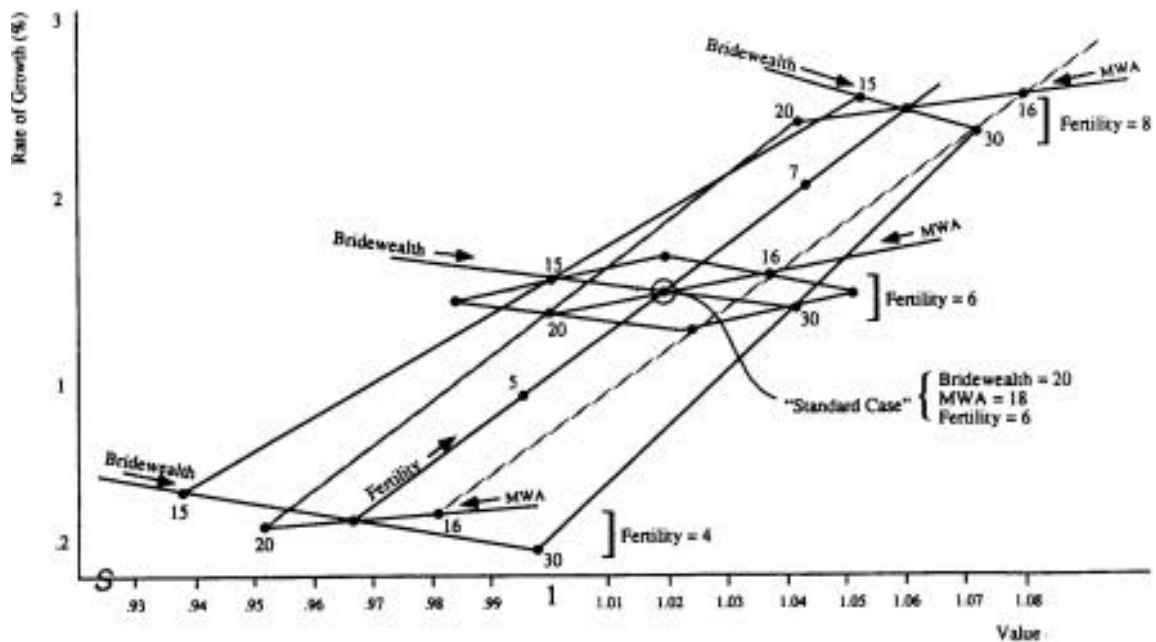


Figure 2: Factors affecting the rate of demographic growth of an African lineage, using cattle as bridewealth. From Bell and Song (1990: 252).

Effectiveness in this decision process is essential to maintaining the growth and power of a lineage, but it is something that ethnographic observation cannot readily recognize. If marriage-cattle were nothing more than a “circulating fund,” bridewealth transactions would be a colossal waste of time. But since cattle grow at a faster rate than the human group, there should remain some quantity of cattle available for obtaining wives from outside of the group; and, consequently, at any point in time *an agnatic group should be able to obtain more wives than it has produced as daughters*. They take more wives than they give to others—thereby achieving a net gain in human fertility at the expense of some other groups. It is in this way that the transfer of cattle in bridewealth becomes a means of gaining demographic dominance and social power.¹¹

Circumstances are very different for those Bedouin who use camels as bridewealth. In this case the growth rate of stock is less than the rate of growth of the human group; and the use of camels in bridewealth would impose further reductions in the growth of the herd. Hence, it is not rational to give a daughter in exchange for camels, unless there are sufficiently compensating ancillary resources that may be accessed thereby. The commonly chosen option is to promote the marriage of daughters to close agnates (who are a members of the same herding collective), with a special right to daughters by the father’s brother’s son. However, if a group has lost its camels to disease or raiding, it may be willing to offer daughters for camels, but this is an indication of severe weakness. The more honorable way of maintaining a desired camel/man ratio, in the face of

¹¹ Since cattle are often at risk of diseases and climate, the relative statuses of lineages are generally variable over time. This is the meaning of “equalitarian” relative to societies that consist of cattle-based lineages. However, the status of a group with many cattle relative to those with few can be permanent, especially if the demographic strength of the former enables it to raid, freely, the cattle of the latter. Unfortunately, in order for the weaker group to become richer in cattle/man, it must marry out its daughters, causing the number of men to be reduced, and making the group more vulnerable to raiding.

relatively slow herd growth, is to urge brave young men of the agnatic group to take (“raid”) camels from others (at serious risk to their lives), with the ultimate result that some agnatic groups lose camels and are forced from the desert. The right to claim a father’s brother’s daughter can be seen as a suitable reward for services to the agnatic group that are essential to its survival. In any case, it is not possible to understand marriage with cattle or with camels without understanding the dynamics of wealth accumulation (see Bell 2004 for a fuller discussion of the Bedouin problem).

In a pre-colonial, traditional, context that has not been severely disturbed by commodity relations, African bridewealth was typically not open to negotiation; it was established by custom or chiefly edict. As such, it can be presumed that many, if not all, transactions in bridewealth have involved less than might have been offered in a competitive context, unlike the unregulated levels of bridewealth (or brideprice) of India, China and the Middle East. Hence, in order to secure a bride, a group would have to exploit friendship relations or similar personal characteristics in order to be advantaged relative to other groups that are willing to offer the same amount of cattle. This being the case, one can say that the prevailing level of bridewealth was less than an imputable market valuation; and the difference between the customary and the competitive market levels of bridewealth constituted the value (“shadow price”) of the friendship relation that made the selected marriage possible. In other words, the competition for brides would arise outside of the bridewealth transaction; and the delivery of the bride would be a gift prompted by a pre-existing relationship (or as a means of establishing a new relationship).

One of my favorite examples of bridewealth arises in the contemporary United States. Although fertility has lost social value at the margin and cannot properly prompt a transfer of *wealth*, a woman may possess other wealth-assets for which a man might make considerable sacrifice. And it arises particularly within certain elite marriages. I refer here to the use of “pre-nuptial agreements” in the many states where spouses have the right to one-half of all wealth (“property”) that is accumulated during the marriage by one or both parties, distributed at the time of divorce. By use of a pre-marital agreement, a woman may forfeit her right of inheritance (to her share of the future marital estate) in exchange for a specified payment in the event of divorce. In this way she forfeits her right (by state law) to one-half of all *wealth* gained during the marriage. His promise to compensate her for this wealth transfer is a marriage payment—*bridewealth*. This process is symmetric, so that a woman who anticipates great future *wealth* and who fears being married for her money may demand a pre-nuptial agreement that secures her right to the totality of the marital estate. This would be a case of *groomwealth*.

However, even purely ritual transactions, involving gifts of consumer goods, have been called bridewealth. Given the centrality of bridewealth within the dynamic of corporate group development in many societies, other kinds of transactions can enjoy the aura thereof. The idea of “token bridewealth” is a case in point. It would be better to name it by reference to what is actually is, rather than as a token of what it is not.¹² On the other hand, cases of bridewealth and groomwealth can manifest themselves in front of anthropologists without being recognized as

¹² I doubt that any instance of “token bridewealth” makes use of wealth assets; so the category is, at best, a form of brideprice. Further, one must inquire into the extent to which the amount of the relevant resource is determined by negotiation or by ritual specificity (a small brideprice) or offered freely without negotiation (a gift). However, if the amount of brideprice is truly only a token from the perspective of system participants, it seems unlikely that it would be deserving of negotiation, and this fact leads me to suspect that “token bridewealth” is actually a gift of non-wealth resources. Anthropologists are likely to use the term, “token bridewealth” when they are working in an area where bridewealth payments are common, contaminating their characterization of wealth-deficient groups.

such, given a presumption that bridewealth can exist only under exotic circumstances and given the invariable designation of groomwealth as “dowry.”

For us who live in individualistic commercial cultures, things that enter the “utility functions” of individuals acquire great cultural significance. However, the general orientation of this paper on marriage payments is a concern for the survival of lineages and societies; and wealth-transfers associated with marriage are particularly important as instruments of social survival and social domination—features of culture that generate powerful evolutionary dynamics. Marriage payments that do not involve wealth-transfers inhabit an entirely different domain. We will now consider such payments.

Brideprice

We have defined bridewealth as a form of wealth that is offered in exchange for rights to a wealth-attribute in the bride. In societies that have experienced a demographic transition, bridewealth will not be offered, except in the special case that the bride possesses a wealth-attribute other than fertility. And when the bride lacks a recognized wealth-attribute, only the product of work will be offered. When the marriage payment is the product of work rather than wealth we will call it *brideprice* and *groomprice*. This distinction is complicated by the fact that the material substrate of marriage payments may differ across social classes at a given point in time, while also changing over time. Since the poor are often entirely lacking in wealth-assets, they may choose to effect marriage payments with the product of work or avoid such payments, altogether, even when elite marriages are accompanied by bridewealth. People who lack wealth may continue to honor a family name, but they have no foundation for a wealth-holding group, as defined here and hence no foundation for the full exploitation of fertility.

Some economists and even some anthropologists (e.g., Gaulin and Boster 1990) have presumed that when a marriage payment is an element in the allocation of spouses, the relative scarcity of brides or grooms will affect the *direction* of payment. They argue that a system of brideprice will shift toward groomprice (labeled “dowry”) if the number of women exceeds the number of men in the marriage market. However, there are two very powerful reasons for the inappropriateness of this presumption.

The most important reason for behavioral rigidity in the face of changes in the ratio of men to women in the marriage market is that the direction of payment largely determines the nature of the search process. For grooms whose families are exceptionally rich in resources, it is better to offer bridewealth. It has been shown (Gale and Shapley 1962) that a groom is more likely to secure the spouse whom he most desires if he is conducting the search, rather than waiting and hoping to be discovered by her, whereas brides are unlikely to realize their optimal matches in this case. (The “male optimal” solution to the Gale-Shapley problem is “female pessimal.”) Generally, the groom’s side has been willing to pay for this advantage; and forfeiting this advantage to the bride’s side cannot be expected to arise simply because, at some macro-level, it can be said that the number of brides exceeds the number of grooms.¹³ Even when grooms are in short supply, it remains in the interest of wealthier grooms to be dominant in the search process.

The second problem with the sex ratio conception of marriage markets is that it ignores the fact that age at time of marriage can easily adjust to accommodate significant differences in the age-parity of the sexes. Most commonly, men must delay or advance their marriages or never marry. A surplus of men always disadvantages those men who lack resources and who are, consequently, least likely to be in a position to affect social rules in their favor. The ages at which women marry

¹³ The classical Gale-Shapley problem assumed an equal number of man and women.

can also vary for this reason, although other factors often dominate the chosen age of marriage for women. There are many ways of socially allocating an excess supply of women: formal or informal polygyny, assignment to nunneries, prostitution, spinsterhood and so forth.

On the other hand, if wealthy families wish to use their daughters as instruments of status maintenance and status acquisition, they can be expected to take charge of the search process. During the Song dynasty we learn from Ebrey (1991) that in an effort to raise or maintain their social status, wealthy families attempted to purchase sons-in-law who had recently passed the imperial examination. This is a case where the families of the brides decide to seize control of the search process, converting dowry into groomwealth. However, this shift was not prompted by demographic imbalances, but by changes in the status-maintenance strategies of wealthy families.

The shift from bridewealth to groomwealth (“dowry”) in post-independence India is another instructive example. While dowry and groomwealth have long been the practice among Brahmans in north India, the great majority of the peoples of India have always used bridewealth or brideprice. However, with the official ending of the caste system in India and with the belief that upward mobility across caste lines was now feasible, fathers who had previously expected to be the recipients of brideprice at the marriage of their daughters now were willing to provide a groomprice if so doing might advance a hypergamous union. This shift was not prompted by a change in the relative supply of brides nor was it prompted by changes in village economies that would reduce the value of female labor, as Schlegel and Aloul (1987, 1988) would presume. Actually, there have always been people who sought to emulate the practices of Brahman elites by adopting groomwealth. However, forces among the elite are said to have prohibited such mimicry—seeking to reserve an elite practice to the elite while morally condemning the practices of others.

Dowry

Notwithstanding the complexities associated with bridewealth and brideprice, they are easily identified ethnographically as a transfer of resources from the kin of the groom to the kin of the bride. Dowry, on the other hand, has not been so readily identified. This fact is clear from the discussion that one finds in the Goody-Tambiah volume. Those authors are not unique in referring to dowry as a pre-mortem inheritance, as a payment, as a gift to the bride, and as a gift to the new conjugal unit. If we look into the ethnographic record, we find anthropologists referring to each of these things as dowry in their studies of specific cultures. However, in Goody-Tambiah we find all of these terms used interchangeably in reference to a given cultural form. From some perspectives this confused multiplicity of forms might be thought to constitute avoidance of “essentialism” rather than careless theorizing. But I would suggest that so long as this confusion persists, dowry will be beyond effective analysis.

My concern is not with the selection of a particular definition of dowry, although that would seem to be the case. Rather, I feel that it is essential that there be a clear delineation of the critical forms of resource transfer associated with marriage. One may chose to define dowry as a gift to the bride, and if that designation appears to be salient cross-culturally, I would have no objection. However, if it is a gift to the bride, then it cannot be simultaneously a gift to the new domestic unit; and it cannot be a payment. And if it is inheritance then it cannot be a gift or a payment.¹⁴

The practice of “dowry” in Europe has its earliest manifestation in ancient Athens, where it takes the label, *dote*. From there it was imperfectly copied by the Romans, who were rightfully

¹⁴ A “bequest” is in a fundamentally different category; it is a gift that may be offered either in pre- or post mortem form.

fascinated by the higher civilization of the Greeks. Not very much is definitively known about marriage in 5th and 4th centuries BCE Greece, but we know that the size of the *dote* was correlated with the wealth of her father and that it was transferred from her father's control to the control of her husband at marriage. In the event that some elements of *dote* remained at the time of divorce, it would be returned to the woman to facilitate her maintenance and/or her remarriage (Schaps 1979). It was known to be a lure for attracting husbands. Indeed, it would appear that the search process was under the control of a woman's father. "This being the case, it is strange to see the dowry being referred to regularly as if it were the woman's" (Schaps 1979:75).

It was a sign of Callias's wealth, not merely his consideration, that he was able to offer his daughters any bridegroom they wanted, and the younger Alcibiades claimed that his maternal grandfather's wealth had made all the best youth of Greece suitors for his mother's hand. (Schaps 1979: 75)

The fact that the *dote* was a wealth-asset is made emphatically evident by the fact that it carried a stipulated rate of interest of 18 percent per annum, representing an enormous debt for the man who considered divorcing a wife who came to him with a large *dote*. Indeed, although women had no control over the *dote*, it was a source of their power because they could threaten divorce and, hence, threaten to impoverish those many husbands who would find it difficult to return the *dote* with interest, as required by law.

The *dote* contained monies and valuables that honorable men should handle with discretion, but their wives had no rights to make decisions about it. Hence, *dote* in this case is unlike any "dowry" that we find in other societies and it is said to have been a payment to husbands—a form of *groomwealth* that carried awesome entailments.

However, in nearby Crete the "dowry" evolved into a form of inheritance. It could be delivered at the time of marriage and should not exceed one-half the endowment of her brother. And it appears that "dowry" was constructed as inheritance in order to assure rights to wealth for daughters at marriage. Crete differed from Athens in that women were allowed to have wealth, to inherit. And the difference between groomwealth and inheritance was clear in that in Athens a divorced woman was the responsibility of her family (thereby relying on its wealth-estate) when divorced, whereas in Crete her inheritance separated her from the wealth-estate of her family, as appropriate. A similar situation faces women in the Moslem-Arab world who similarly have rights to shares that are one-half the sizes of their brothers', but they dare not claim their shares for fear that they could no longer seek the support of kin in the event of divorce. We see, then, that it is important to know when "dowry" is an inheritance and when it takes other forms.

Goody's suggestion that dowry is *universally* a form of pre-mortem inheritance has its roots in the European Middle Ages, when the Church urged the subordination of inheritance in favor of a system of bequests, so that persons for whom hell was much to be feared might provide, by means of a written testament, a post-mortem gift of some and perhaps all of their possessions to the Church. This change from inheritance to bequest was made while continuing to call it a system of inheritance, leading to a terminological confusion that continues to beset English terminology.¹⁵ Goody is an expert observer of this history, having discussed it quite brilliantly in work on systems of inheritance in Europe, so that his conflation of inheritance with bequests is

¹⁵ The picture is further complicated by the fact that a system of inheritance remains as the default settlement in the event that a person fails to complete a valid will or testament prior to death. However, if the will is produced, it is a document of general disinheritance.

peculiar.¹⁶ By calling it an inheritance, he is able to claim a more elevated ritual status for daughters in European societies.

Few anthropologists confuse the gifts of furniture, clothing and jewelry that may accompany a bride into marriage with the inheritance of the wealth assets (especially land) that has been commonly transmitted to one or more sons. In cases of primogeniture, for example, it is clear that daughters and younger sons do not inherit, although they can represent a drain of the wealth estate for the purchasing dowries or for the training of the younger sons to work outside of the estate.¹⁷ So, I believe that we can deny Goody's right to conflate dowry with inheritance. Being able to identify which children inherit and which do not is a rather important matter. It can be a central feature of social structure. Let us assume that Goody really means that dowry is a pre-mortem *bequest* and, as we know, bequests of the pre- and post- form are commonly received by non-inheriting individuals.

In order for the gift to the bride to be legitimately called a bequest, the gift must be the rightful possession of the bride, as it appears to be quite often in Italy (Garzilli 1996). If the elements of the dowry remain with the bride in the event of divorce and if she can control its disposition during the marriage, then quite appropriately we may say that the gift is the rightful possession of the bride and, hence, satisfies the requirement for a bequest. Nevertheless, it would be cross-culturally less problematic to call it a *gift to the bride*; and call it *dowry* if it is a gift to the new conjugal unit.

We know that in ancient China a royal bride might be accompanied by wealth in land, slaves and other valuables, as well as an enormous trousseau (Ebrey 1991). These were gifts to the bride; acting as an element of her independent power and influence. They also acted as a powerful instrument of the bride's family, because her family could expect her to reciprocate in their favor within the context of the new household. *It is for this reason that we must separate gifts to the bride from gifts to the new conjugal unit.* We all know that gifts are central to bilateral ("friendship") relations, but we cannot understand them unless the recipient is identified. And a gift that empowers a bride should not be presumed to ingratiate the groom.

In imperial and contemporary China, it has been common for the gifts that accompany the bride into marriage to be received by the new domestic unit, thereby aiding the family of the groom in its formation. This contribution is of great value to the family of the groom, because the new house or the new set of rooms for the couple is usually a costly investment, an investment that is recognized as a responsibility of the groom's parents. In general, the groom's kin must contribute more than the value of the dowry to establish a new conjugal unit; and it is in this context that we can understand the meaning of the dowry. By contributing to the new household, the bride's family joins with the groom's kin in an important venture, thereby forging an alliance of potential value and providing the bride with greater respect within her new home. In other words, a *gift to the bride* strengthens the bride and her relationship with her parents, while a *gift to the new conjugal unit* establishes or strengthens a relationship between the sets of parents (and perhaps between the related lineages).

¹⁶ See, for example, his *European Family* published in 2000.

¹⁷ In cases where all sibling or all sons enjoy rights of inheritance, the system can be partially transformed into one of primogeniture by means of quit claims that are signed by rightful heirs. However, these quitclaims are commonly obtained at the cost of investments by parents into the future prospects of those heirs. These processes are sometimes justified by the economic inadvisability of further divisions of a landed estate.

As we observe resource transfers at the time of marriage in many societies, we find that *dowry* (gifts from the bride's family to the new household) never includes wealth-assets.¹⁸ A transfer of wealth-assets to the kin of the groom will always be a payment, *groomwealth*, not a gift. When *gifts* that accompany the bride contain wealth, we can be certain that those items belong to the bride, not to the conjugal unit and not to the groom. There may be some exceptions to this rule, since I personally cannot argue its necessity.

Gifts are inherently non-negotiable;¹⁹ *bargaining converts a "gift" into a payment*. However, in his discussion of the northern and southern Iravas, a patrilineal group in south India, Tambiah (p. 107) says "In turn, the girl brings a dowry, the amount of which is previously *determined during the negotiations*" (my emphasis). Then, quoting Aiyappan (1945: 92), "The dowry consists of gold and silver ornaments, plates ... and in the case of richer people, cows, buffalos, copper vessels, servant maid and boy...'" Here, we have a negotiated payment that may include wealth-assets, as defined herein, yet Tambiah calls it dowry, as is conventional in the literature. However, it is unambiguously a marriage payment, an example of groomwealth or groomprice, parading as "dowry."

The discussion by Schlegel and Aloul

Schlegel and Aloul (1987, 1988) make use of the Standard Cross Cultural Sample (SCCS) in order to explore the relationships between forms of marriage transaction and social structure and particularly as social structure affects the position and contributions of women to subsistence. And while I respect their efforts, my own observation of the SCCS, drawn from the Ethnographic Atlas of 1167 societies,²⁰ has suggested that its value is limited in the study of marriage transactions. As a pointed example, the Atlas, by reference to several village ethnographies, characterizes China as dowry and as having a monogamous marriage system. Both statements are directly contradicted by the sources that are used by the coders of the Atlas (only one of which is used in the SCCS, and it codes for dowry).²¹ The preeminent transaction in China has been bridewealth, as every ethnographic source indicates.²² The relevance of dowry in China has varied across dynasties and across social classes; and it should be coded as a secondary transaction. And commonly, second and third wives would be secured without dowry, even among the wealthy. These secondary wives are called "concubines" in the English literature, but in Chinese they are recognized as wives, so that the set of wives might be called "big wife, second wife," Secondary wives differ significantly from "big" wives, having a very different

¹⁸ A seeming exception is offered by the camel herders of Somaliland (Lewis 1962). In this case, camels offered in "bridewealth" are largely returned to the groom who would otherwise not have camels for maintaining the new family. However, in this case, the tribal group as a whole functions as a wealth-holding group, so that the wealth-transfers are internal to a group. We have here an exception that proves the rule.

¹⁹ I elaborate on this issue in Bell (1991).

²⁰ By George P. Murdock, published in 29 successive installments in the journal, *Ethnography*, 1962-1980.

²¹ In Fei (1939) it is clear that bridewealth is the primary payment. However, the Chinese conventionally call it a "marriage gift." That fact may have confused the coders. Fei does not use the term bridewealth, but he discusses the fierceness of the negotiation (involving a go-between) that is required to arrive at an acceptable "marriage gift." So, it is clearly a payment. Yes, it is a serious miscode, as is the notion that Chinese were monogamous.

²² It is possible that the coders were confused by the term, "marriage gift," in the English versions of scholarly texts when they have reference to *bridewealth*. On closer reading they might have noticed that this "gift" is fiercely negotiated.

ritual status within Chinese culture and different respect-deference relations; but their rights and responsibilities are unambiguously those of wives by any standard anthropological definition. Although the sources on which the SCCS depends contain the relevant information in almost every case, it does not have a coding for *wealth-assets*, as defined herein. Hence, we cannot fault Schlegel and Aloul for failing to code wealth transactions occasioned by marriage. Had they been able to do so, they could have found a strict relationship between the transmission of bridewealth (in the form of wealth) and rights of female reproductivity. Having read the source materials for most of the 186 SCCS societies, I can assure you that this is the case. However, Schlegel and Aloul argue that bridewealth secures a transfer of female work power and that dowry arises in societies where women make only modest contributions. Statistics from the Ethnographic Atlas seem to confirm this position. However, I would challenge the notion that the wives of peasants make only modest contributions. What we know is that men tend to take responsibility for plowing and general management in peasant societies, but the in-house processing that is required of wives in these situations is commonly quite extensive. Wives may also be very important in planting and weeding. Yet, in every hierarchically structured society, subordinates are presumed by ideologies of those cultures to have less valued contributions. In this way, the lower rewards of subordinates can be justified. This ethical stance is strongly endorsed by the ideologies of capitalism, as well. We can readily understand, then, why anthropologists accept the myth that subordinates are less productive. However, in many societies, past and present, differential rewards are rationalized by the seemingly obvious differences in the inherent and intrinsic value of persons.

Furthermore, the suggestion from the SCCS that dowry has been the dominant form of transaction at marriage in South and East Asia is false, except perhaps for particular groups. Both India and China have featured bridewealth as the primary transaction in marriage. On the other hand, there are many societies or subcultures that feature brideprice, rather than bridewealth. And during any historical period, the poor, lacking wealth, would secure the work effort of brides by means of their own work; securing brides whose reproductivity would be limited by resource deficits. There appears to be a logical relationship between the value of female reproductivity and the availability of wealth-assets for its acquisition. Among those groups that possess no wealth assets, individuals cannot be linked by wealth over an indefinite duration and hence the reproductivity of wives cannot be effectively realized. And lacking wealth, the kin of the groom cannot offer bridewealth; they can offer only the product of work. Hence, there seems to be a joint conspiracy that eliminates the wealth-character of fertility in marriages when the groom's kin are without wealth. Lacking wealth (and, hence, lacking a wealth-holding group), the groom's family can be motivated only by more immediate concerns, such as household production and old age security; and, in seeking a bride, they can hope for no more than that.

Schlegel and Aloul say that dowry is offered in search of status. This statement may be correct, but it is more complicated than it seems. It would be more parsimonious to claim that dowry is associated with hypergamy (real or socially presumed). In India the hypergamy could be sought in the context of a seemingly strict caste system, whereby small increments in social rank within that system are potentially achievable. In China social status has been directly announced by the parading of dowry goods, per se. But status in China has been earned by ability and hard work, at least ideologically, rather than by ritual ascription. The family of the bride is socially recognized as inferior, simply because it is offering the bride, and the desire for hypergamy is more likely to be instrumental—e.g., establishing *guanxi* with a family that may offer assistance in the future (Yan 1999, Bell 2000). Hence, the role of status within marriage transactions is not easily summarized. For this reason, I prefer to refer to hypergamy in discussions of dowry when attempting to generalize across time and space.

Table 1 provides the distinguishing characteristics of different types of marriage payments according to these principles.

Table 1: Elementary Characteristics of Marriage-Related Resource Transfers
(see definitions of wealth, wealth-holding groups)

Action	Gift	Distributed to rightful claim (Gift)	Payment (including “gifts” that are negotiated)	
Label	Dowry	Inheritance (Bequest)	Bridewealth (Brideprice)	Groomwealth (Groomprice)
Transfer	Consumption goods	Wealth (Consumption goods)	Wealth (Product of work)	Wealth (Product of work)
From	Bride’s kin	Groom’s kin or Bride’s kin	Groom’s wealth-holding group (Groom’s kin)	Bride’s father’s wealth-holding group (Bride’s kin)
To	New conjugal unit; <i>or</i> to bride (see also Bequest)	Bride or Groom	Bride’s father’s wealth-holding group (Bride’s kin)	Groom’s wealth-holding group (Groom’s kin)
In return for	Alliance (if to bride strengthens the bride)	(N.A.)	Wealth (Conjugal services)	Hypergamy or Alliance
Search	Groom’s side	(N.A.)	Groom’s side	Bride’s side

The ethnographic specificity of these categories derives from the fact that (a) wealth and consumption goods are unambiguously distinguished, (b) gifts cannot be negotiated, (c) inheritance is a socially regulated distribution of wealth, and (d) payments are negotiated or socially prescribed transfers of wealth and the products of work. None of these transfers can be understood unless the recipients are identifiable. However, the purposes of transfers can be debated in many cases. For example, bridewealth can be shown to be a factor in alliance formation, especially when the level of payment does not determine the choice of spouse.

Indirect dowry

The most important theoretical innovation in Goody’s section of *Bridewealth and Dowry* is the *indirect dowry*. He refers to an old Germanic practice of the “morgan gabe,” a traditional *gift to the bride*. However, indirect dowry does not refer to a gift to the bride, nor is it a contribution to the dowry. He uses this term to refer to *bridewealth* that is received by the bride’s kin and which

he presumes is then used at least in part to purchase materials for the dowry. Ebrey (1991) interprets the term to refer to the amount of the dowry that *could have been* so purchased.

According to Ebrey (1991) dowry was introduced into China's marriage system in 657 by Emperor Kao-Tsung, who was attempting to curb the snobbish practices of leading aristocratic families. This emperor and others, both before and after him, wanted the ranks of brides to be determined by categories established by the court and not by wealth. And in an earlier day there had been stipulations as to the maximal levels of bridewealth as a function of official rank. Had these rules been effective, Chinese bridewealth would have been controlled by chiefly edict, much like those in certain African states. However, these rules were not successful in controlling the matter in China. Persons of lower social rank were willing to pay enormous prices for wives bearing certain surnames, and competition for such marriages became fierce and prices rose alarmingly. So, to avoid the "selling" of brides, Kao-Tsung ordered that all of the bridewealth be returned in the form of dowry.

We should note that these provisions were importantly to be applied to the wealthy. For the non-wealthy an ethical concern with wife-purchase was of less concern; and their wives could be transferred on the basis of bridewealth, alone. Indeed, Fei (1939), writing during the difficult years of the 1930s, indicated that almost 40 percent of brides were transferred as babies, to be raised by their future mothers-in-law, in a process that reduced the level of bridewealth and eliminated dowry and marital expense.

It might be useful, however, to analyze the process that was imposed on the elite by Emperor Kao-Tsung. Rather than consider actual practice, we might imagine that marriage-related transfers among the Chinese elite actually corresponded to the ethical dictates of Kao-Tsung. In this imagined society, Chinese practice would, indeed, correspond to an indirect dowry. The notion of an indirect dowry would have validity because the parents of the bride would not have rights to it. And, indeed, it would appear that this might have been the case, initially, for elite families. The emperor declared in 657 that bridewealth *must* be used to purchase items for the dowry. However, the ethical declarations of 657 should not be accepted as cultural practice. Anthropology should be the study of culture, not of ancient, or even modern, texts. And culture is the set of rules and practices that govern actual behavior in a society. Unfortunately, it is increasingly popular in anthropology to replace ethnography with writings and statements of the elite that bear little relationship to social practice.²³

We know that the ratio of dowry to bridewealth for primary marriages in Chinese society has been largely a function of the wealth-estate of the bride's family, being much larger than bridewealth among the very wealthy and being reduced to zero among the poor. This being the case, bridewealth must be recognized as belonging to its recipient—the bride's family—becoming part of its wealth estate. One cannot say that the resources that came with bridewealth are the very resources that were later used for the dowry, especially given the fact that contributions to the dowry arrive from the broader kin group, friends and fellow villagers. We can only say that the parents now have more resources. It is very likely that they could have purchased the dowry in the complete absence of bridewealth. And the assertion that bridewealth, itself, was returned implies that her parents were otherwise penniless. In any case, there is commonly a compensation principle associated with bridewealth; that is, it is asserted that parents deserve some recompense for the cost of raising the daughter. This principle is clearly useful in justifying the parents' right to bridewealth and denies the ethics of an "indirect dowry."

²³ The SCCS codes, by contrast, are based on texts that pertain to particular places and times for which the ethnographic texts can be pinpointed.

Observations among the Bai nationality

During the summer of 2007, a graduate student (Yang Qingqing) from China Agricultural University in Beijing and I conducted fieldwork among the Bai of Yunnan. We centered our observations on a large village (about 10,000 people) near Dali that is at least 99 percent Bai. This is an agricultural village, but much of the local income is derived from a thriving and ubiquitous cottage industry in clothing and tie-die wall hangings. Most women over the age of 35 are routinely dressed in the elaborate head gear and the red and white clothing that one finds, perhaps less prominently, throughout the Dali region; and it appears that this village is a primary source of production for such clothing.



Figure 3: A photo of women from my village study

Village respondents accepted brideprice (*cai li*, 彩礼) as a necessary transfer for securing a marriage. And “dowry” (*jia zhuang*, 嫁妆) was understood as an effort to assist the groom’s kin in the provisioning of the new unit.²⁴ Indeed, it is said that the new couple is “poor” and greatly in need of assistance. For this reason, there is a collection of *gifts* from the bride’s family and their broader kin group and neighbors, much like the process described by Yan (1996). In one reported case, there was a direct contribution of materials to the *dowry* from the groom’s parents, independently of brideprice; and it is popular in recent years for the groom’s kin to purchase jewelry for delivery to the bride at the time of the marriage. This would be a *gift to the bride*, not a contribution to the *dowry*, as we define it here.

Apparently, the cost to the groom’s kin of provisioning the new household is often known to all; and respondents suggested that large *dowry* is justified by an effort to fully share with the groom’s family in the establishment of the new household. In some cases, the *brideprice* has been much less than the *dowry*. But it is also common for *brideprice* to exceed the *dowry*. Indeed, in one case, a woman claimed brideprice of 1000 yuan and only 50 in *dowry*. The laugh that she expressed about the *dowry* suggested that even that amount was an exaggeration. In yet another case, the marriage was uxori-local and the bride’s family paid 10,000 yuan as *groomprice* to his

²⁴ The term, *jia zhuang*, appears to include gifts to the new conjugal unit (*dowry*), as well as *gifts to the bride*.

family and he brought with him about 2,000 yuan in household goods. Perhaps the most extreme case was of a couple where there was neither brideprice nor dowry, explained by the fact that she came from so far away.

The extent to which the *dowry* is costly to the parents of the bride seems never to take brideprice into consideration. Hence, even if the *dowry* were only modestly greater than the brideprice, respondents would still believe that “they lose more with a daughter than they gain from a daughter-in-law.” So, quite unlike the process envisaged by Goody, where the *brideprice* would represent dowry-in-transition, *it appears that brideprice goes into one pocket and dowry is paid out of another*, at least ideologically. The notion of an “indirect dowry” would threaten to embarrass those whose *dowry* is less than, or only slightly greater than, the brideprice. Furthermore, in the event that the *dowry* is equal to brideprice, most people would be outraged by Goody’s suggestion that the *dowry* has been provided entirely by the groom’s kin. This would be a humiliating suggestion. The demand for *brideprice* and the assembling of *dowry* are evidently two very separate things to the people involved. And, indeed, analytically those two things should not be conflated. I would say that the villagers are right.²⁵

Conclusion

The principal intention has been to avoid the carelessness that arises from use of the vernacular in the analysis of complex social processes. This is especially important in studies that consider more than a single culture. For cross-cultural analysis it is important that the dimensions of social process as in Table 1 and my discussions be clearly delineated, in spite of confusion that arises at the level of common discourse. I have argued that the logical clarification of analytic concepts for marriage transactions requires that

- Payments must be distinguished from gifts.
- Inheritance must be distinguished from gifts and payments.
- Wealth must be distinguished from consumption goods.
- Gifts to conjugal units must be distinguished from gifts to the bride.

By placing marriage-related resource transfers into these categories, one is able to make certain generalizations. We know that

- Payments are a method of transferring rights to resources.
- Gifts are a method for securing and strengthening alliances.
- Inheritance is the instrument for defining wealth-holding groups and establishing demographic power.

These characteristics have cross-cultural validity, notwithstanding the widely variable nature of their cultural representations. The different types of marriage payments in Table 1 are sorted according to these principles.²⁶

²⁵ In terms of our categories of resource transfers, this Bai village provides an example of brideprice as the primary transaction and gifts to the household and gifts to the bride as secondary transactions. An application of the “indirect dowry” would seriously distort the ethnographic facts.

²⁶ In combination with the discussions of the types of marriage payments, this table is intended as a starting point for open-ended collaborative development of SCCS codes on marriage payments. Table 1 incorporates many of the logical relationships developed here with a conceptually consistent definition of terms for marriage payments.

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