
This newly published monograph on dowry during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) is the first book-length scholarship on this topic in the China field. Studies of dowry in Chinese society have several hallmarks in Western scholarship.¹ Mao’s book brings us a fresh view on these old issues.

This book attempts to explore the general features, as well as variations, of dowry in the Qing era. Mao identifies two general features: first, dowry was popular in many types of Chinese marriage beyond the “major” forms, including uxorial local marriage and ghost marriage (minghun 冥婚); second, dowry became increasingly extravagant among upper and middle class families, to the point where it was criticized as a heavy economic burden that caused many social problems. In her recent research, Susan Mann points out the paradoxical nature of dowry in gentry households: enabling lavish consumption as well as supporting wifely virtue.² By contrast with Mann’s emphasis on women’s spending (managerial) power bestowed by their dowry, Mao devotes her discussion to the social problems caused by lavish consumption, including female infanticide, child betrothal, and the kidnapping of brides (qianghun 搶婚). Mao believes that the demands of extravagant dowry directly caused female infanticide in the Qing, citing the records of county gazetteers. To rebut the dissenting views of several Qing literati, Mao stresses that because such practices were found even in rich families, the cause-and-effect relationship between the demands of extravagant dowry and female infanticide is clear (pp.266-67).

Following an introduction, Mao provides an overall description of dowry in the Qing. In Chapter One, she describes the contents of dowry by citing evidence from dowry lists, household division records (fenjia jiushu 分家簿), and

¹) Patricia B. Ebrey, “Shifts in Marriage Finance from the Sixth to the Thirteenth Century,” in Rubie S. Watson and Patricia B. Ebrey, eds., Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 97-132; Susan Mann, “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in the Mid-Ch’ing Period,” in Watson and Ebrey, eds., Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society, 204-30; Kathryn Bernhardt, Women and Property in China, 960-1949 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Bettine Birge, Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yuan China (960-1368) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Western studies of dowry in Chinese society tend to emphasize two points. First, they argue, dowry played an important role in social mobility, by serving as an incentive to forge affinal ties with those in a position to benefit a family, or to maintain and secure the status of a family. Second, they ask how dowry may have served as a kind of pre-mortem inheritance that gave women property rights, and ask how claims to family property influenced a woman’s status in her marital family.

accounts in county gazetteers and miscellanies. This chapter focuses on two questions: who prepared the dowry for the bride, and how was the dowry conveyed to the groom’s family? Chapter Two describes the dowry of Manchu nobles with an emphasis on emperors’ marriages in the late nineteenth century. In the author’s own words, “Since the Qing dynasty was established by the Manchus, when we discuss the problem of dowry in the Qing, we cannot avoid studying Manchu dowries and their features.” (p.96). Existing Qing imperial court documents give some insight here, but there is still room for more research on what made Manchu dowries ethnically distinctive.

Dowry and women’s property rights are a central concern of this book. Mao devotes two chapters to a discussion of Qing women’s rights in property inheritance as well as their rights to control a dowry. She observes that land and other kinds of immovable property were included in a daughter’s dowry; she argues further that dowry can be seen as an important means for allowing daughters to inherit property from their natal families. (p.145). Jack Goody once suggested such an interpretation in his study of late medieval shift from indirect to direct dowry. 3 Patricia B. Ebrey, however, has criticized that interpretation, noting that one cannot say of the Chinese case that “instead of inheriting property at their parents’ deaths, daughters were receiving it when they wed,” because inheritance was not normally bilateral. 4

Pursuing her argument about dowry as an important form of daughters’ inheritance rights, Mao analyzes several property disputes caused by “dowry land” (liantian 相田). In several cases, daughters only held the “use rights” (tianmianquan 田面權) instead of ownership rights (tiandiquan 田底權) of such dowry land. As long as they were alive, they were the beneficiaries of such land. After their deaths, the dowry land remained in the hands of their natal families. (p.193). This feature of “dowry land” provokes further discussion on dowry as a mode of inheritance. For those few cases where the record shows that daughters did hold land ownership, I suggest, it might be more appropriate to interpret them as evidence of diversity in dowry arrangements, rather than as a form of women’s inheritance rights.

To explore variations in dowry is one of Mao’s main objectives. Mao’s analysis of the variations in dowry attends to urban and rural differences, social stratification, and temporal distinctions. Here too, previous studies have something to say. Ebrey focuses on the shift from the Tang (617-907) emphasis on betrothal gifts to the rising importance of dowry in the Song (960-1279). Ebrey situates her research on such change in the historical context of rising social mobility, the increasing commercialization of society, and the free transfer of land. 5 Bettine Birge’s work argues that during the Yuan period (1260-1368) new laws enacted by the Mongol

5) Ebrey, “Shifts in Marriage Finance.”