

How is “Being Well-Matched in Social and Economic Status” Possible: A Study on Contemporary Youth’s Marital Choices from the Perspective of Family System Theory

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ABSTRACT

As society progresses, people’s perspectives gradually evolve. Nowadays, many believe that marriage is primarily a matter between young couples based on love, yet this does not signify the complete eradication of old-fashioned views from people’s consciousness, as they still influence contemporary marital choices. Families, as the fundamental unit of social organization, bear crucial responsibilities such as nurturing children’s growth. The language and behaviors of family members profoundly shape children’s thoughts and beliefs. Adhering to the theoretical frameworks of marital systems and the concept of “being well-matched in social and economic status”, this paper employs literature research and interviews to delve into the prevailing patterns of contemporary youth’s marital choices and various aspects of their post-marital lives. Consequently, regarding the ancient notion of “being well-matched in social and economic status”, this study analyzes the underlying logic and significance of contemporary youth’s marital “compatibility” from a family system perspective, drawing the following conclusions: The concept of “being well-matched in social and economic status” has undergone a certain degree of evolution, and young people are gradually understanding, accepting, and inheriting this ancient concept; furthermore, marital happiness, longevity, and stability are intimately tied to family structure, relationships, and functions within the broader family system.

KEYWORDS

Being Well-matched in Social and Economic Status; Marital Choices; Family System.

1. INTRODUCTION

The research background of this paper is based on the different understandings of the belief in “being well-matched in social and economic status” between ancient and modern times. “Men Dang” (door ornaments that signify status and decoration in traditional Chinese architecture) and “Hu Dui” (paired decorative pillars/columns by/above the gate, symbolizing the status of the household) originally referred to two components of traditional Chinese architecture, but later came to signify a principle and belief in marriage selection, indicating the compatibility of the circumstances of both the man and woman, as well as their respective families. When both parties share consistent characteristics in various aspects, it is termed a “homogeneous marriage”, whereas disparities lead to a “heterogeneous marriage”. In ancient Chinese society, young people were required to unconditionally respect and obey their elders’ decisions regarding marriage selection^[1]. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, with the globalization and modernization of thought, the criteria for marital compatibility gradually shifted towards “self-achieved” standards such as educational background and personality (Qi Yaqiang & Niu Jianlin, 2012). Finding one’s soulmate is a universal aspiration among young people, with some even resorting to checklists to expedite the process^[2]. However, in

China, a country that places immense importance on family culture^[3], it could be argued that marriage is not merely the union of two individuals, but rather the integration of two families. How do modern young people actually perceive this issue? Will they follow in the footsteps of their ancestors and share similar beliefs?

In recent years, the exploration of “being well-matched in social and economic status” has become increasingly extensive and profound, attracting numerous authors of film and television works as well as print publications to delve into this field. This is because it not only affects the happiness index of young couples but also shapes the attitudes and trends of extended families and even the entire society towards this issue. Research in the fields of “family systems” and “being well-matched in social and economic status” has already yielded significant results, such as the finding that marriages prioritizing “being well-matched in social and economic status” are detrimental to addressing income inequality (Greenwood et al., 2014), intergenerational mobility (Schwartz, 2013), and balanced social development (Piketty et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the integration of these two areas for discussion remains insufficient. Against this backdrop, this paper offers a fresh perspective and insights into the underlying logic and significance of contemporary youth’s marital “compatibility” from a family systems perspective. This paper employs interview and literature research methods to explore general patterns. Firstly, we started with the respondents’ acquaintances, gathering their views on this issue through conversations. Secondly, we conducted interviews on respondents’ marital and fertility status, educational background, gender, age, preferences, and perspectives. Furthermore, we observed and summarized the content and comments posted by respondents on social media platforms such as WeChat, Qzone, Tiktok, and Weibo (with their permission), which provided valuable support for this study. A total of 15 respondents participated in the interviews, including 6 females and 9 males. Due to geographical differences, 4 interviews were conducted through online voice calls or text exchanges on social media platforms (e.g., WeChat). The rest 9 interviews were conducted offline and face-to-face. The age distribution of respondents was as follows: 7 were aged 15-25, 2 were aged 25-35, 3 were aged 35-45, and 3 were aged 45-55. Among them, 8 respondents were married, and 7 were unmarried (2 with romantic experience and 5 without). Approximately 60% of the respondents had cultural diversity in their backgrounds (referring to overseas study or living experiences exceeding 2 years). To comply with ethical principles in scientific research and protect respondents’ privacy, we have technically and privately processed the respondents’ personal information, presenting their names using the initials of their Chinese names in uppercase (e.g., WXX, ZHB).

A family is a stable system^[4]. The rules and dynamics generated by the interaction of family members due to family relationships form the family structure. Society is composed of numerous small families; therefore, every family has its internal and external functions. Everyone in this unit is closely connected and not an autonomous spiritual entity^[5]. The family system is comprised of subsystems. They are usually categorized into one system due to shared gender, generational status, or legal relationships. Subsystems include couples, parents and children, grandparents, siblings, etc. Among them, the couple subsystem serves as the foundation of the family system, emerging immediately upon the formation of a family, and the entire family evolves alongside changes within this subsystem. Consequently, there exists an inseparable and intricately linked relationship between couple relationships and the family system. Guided by this theory, this paper will analyze how the marriage selection approach of “being well-matched in social and economic status” is manifested in modern social life from three perspectives: family structure, family relationships, and family functions.

2. FAMILY STRUCTURE

“Family structure” refers to the composition of family members and their state of interaction and mutual influence, as well as the relatively stable pattern of connections formed by this state. The family is the core of each person’s most intimate social life^[6]. Changes in small families not only affect the living conditions of each family member but also various aspects of society.

1) From the perspective of economic structure, families where only one spouse earns an income are classified as “single-income” families, while families where both spouses earn an income are referred to as “double-income” families. Income affects bargaining power, which is inversely proportional to the time spent on household chores by individuals^[7]. To some extent, this also influences the power structure within the family. The spouse with stronger earning ability tends to have more say in the family. Moreover, the total income of double-income families is more stable, providing better economic conditions for family members and contributing to more stable emotions. Therefore, young people from families with similar economic structures are more likely to be compatible, as “*marriage is a transition from romance to kinship, a stage of preparation for living together in the future*” (quoted from YXS). According to the “Measures for the Administration of Fiscal Performance of Government Revenue and Expenditure Budgets” issued by the Ministry of Finance, income levels are divided into three categories: high-income families that have an annual disposable income exceeding 15,000 yuan; middle-income families that have an annual disposable income ranging from 3,000 to 15,000 yuan; and low-income families that have an annual disposable income below 3,000 yuan. Based on marriage adjustment theory, couples with socially equivalent economic status are better able to understand, respect, and coexist peacefully after marriage, making it easier for both parties to feel happy and content with life, resulting in a more stable marital relationship^[8]. Additionally, “*the poorer spouse may bear psychological burdens and pressures that the other spouse may not easily perceive, creating hidden emotional risks*” (quoted from TZY). This is because they do not need to accommodate others’ choices in lifestyle or consumption habits but can stay within their own comfort zones. If both parties’ economic conditions are not very good before marriage, they may have the motivation to push their shared family to a new level, enjoying the process. If both parties’ incomes are already substantial before marriage, with no economic worries, they can jointly pursue spiritual resonance after marriage. Since there are not drastic changes in lifestyle and consumption levels after marriage, the affection between young couples is less likely to be eroded by trivial annoyances and economic factors.

2) From the perspective of power structure, there are three categories: “mama’s boys” and “mama’s girls” who grew up with excessive dependence on their mothers, young people who grew up under typical patriarchy, and young people who grew up in an environment of democratic discussion. “Mama’s boys” and “mama’s girls” tend to lack their own opinions when making decisions because they excessively relied on their mothers’ care and help during their growth. Consequently, in future marriages, they are more likely to be indecisive about matters related to their own families and constantly seek their partners’ opinions. Such young people generally lack the ability to build romantic love^[9]. This way of dealing with life can cause great distress to their partners, gradually eroding their expectations of their spouses and ultimately leading to the breakdown of the marriage. Children who grew up under typical patriarchy, having been suppressed since childhood, are likely to lose their ability to negotiate and may impose their underlying dissatisfaction or anger on their future partners and children to complete a shift in status. This can make the other party feel suffocated in marital life, and the marital relationship cannot proceed peacefully. Certainly, the above two situations can also be viewed from other angles: “*As long as the couple complements each other in personality and is willing to take turns in handling family affairs, their life can still be very happy and fulfilling*” (quoted from XWW). The third scenario is: if both partners’ original families choose to resolve conflicts through democratic communication, then both young people are generally reasonable, calm, and rational. They will not react excessively to daily frictions in marriage. Instead, they will continue to choose communication to clarify their thoughts, analyze problems, and reflect on themselves, making their marriage stronger and more stable.

3) From the perspective of population structure, families with more than five members are known as extended families, typically consisting of young married couples and their parents from both sides of the family; families with no more than four members are considered small families, usually comprising young married couples and their children. Families of different sizes have distinct styles. Generally speaking, extended families tend to have a more rigorous and solemn mode of interaction,

while small families place greater emphasis on fostering a relaxed atmosphere. Young people from different families may exhibit personality differences due to the inconsistencies in their family styles. Moreover, in China, there exists a “feedback model” between generations, which implies that the next generation should provide feedback to the previous generation. The previous generation raises the next generation, and the next generation supports the previous generation in their later years^[10]. This model can be regarded as a characteristic of Chinese intergenerational relations. Therefore, after marriage, the population structure of the family changes, and young married couples generally assume the responsibility of supporting their elderly parents. In extended families, there are more eyes to constrain, regulate, and supervise how young couples treat their elderly parents. However, this does not necessarily mean that every extended family will experience frictions in the process. Sometimes, it may be due to clear division of labor: “*Our family is large, but there are rarely conflicts over supporting elderly parents. Everyone is very filial*” (quoted from XWW); sometimes, it may be related to the elderly parents’ physical health and independence: “*My grandparents are relatively independent, so they don’t rely much on their children for support*” (quoted from YXS). Generally, the support model in small families is more flexible. “*Both my parents are only children, and we don’t live with our elders, so there have been no conflicts over supporting them. Everything is straightforward*” (quoted from TZY). If both sides’ original families are compatible in various aspects, they are more likely to reach a consensus on the ways and responsibilities of supporting elderly parents, as the practices of the parents from their original families will be more similar.

3. FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family relationships refer to the interpersonal relationships between family members. They can be divided into three categories: nuclear family, lineal family, and joint family. A nuclear family consists only of the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings; a lineal family includes the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (father-in-law and son-in-law) and grandparents and grandchildren; a joint family encompasses more complex relationships such as the relationship between sisters-in-law and the relationship between uncle and sister-in-law^[11]. According to Fei Xiaotong’s “Basic Triangle Theory”, every family forms a stable triangular relationship, with the husband, wife, and children as the three indispensable corners. As we all know, marriage should be the union of two families, leading to the formation of an “Expanded Family Triangle Relationship Structure Model”. The new network is comprised of the parents of the original families, the young couple, and their new children^[12].

1) From the perspective of marital relations, the marital relationship between parents in the original family: The long-term interaction patterns between parents in marriage will make children believe that this is a normal and natural way of getting along, and they will use similar ways to handle and respond to similar situations in the future, thereby perpetuating a kind of “inheritance”. “*I think I’ve learned a lot from my parents’ relationship, and I also know some issues that need to be avoided and paid attention to in my future marriage life*” (quoted from ZHB). The relationship between parents is often a matter of great concern to children, and it is closely related to their happiness index and mental health. Parents are very intimate and special existences in the hearts of children, so they will consciously or unconsciously observe their parents’ behaviors^[13]. They will understand what love and marriage are from their parents’ relationship. “*I come from a divorced family, and the breakdown of my parents’ relationship makes me cherish my own marital relationship very much now*” (quoted from WXX). Perhaps many years later, he may not remember what happened between his parents, but the witness of these experiences has already been integrated into his behaviors and words. “*I often feel very proud of the good relationship between my parents*” (quoted from QZQ). Of course, a good relationship will not only become a happy memory but also raise the threshold for finding a partner in the future and become a guarantee for a stable and happy married life in the future. On the contrary, a bad relationship will become a lifelong mental torture for children, hurting not only themselves but

also their future spouses. Therefore, it is very important to observe the interaction patterns between your partner's parents before marriage, as they will largely be the shadow of your partner in the future.

2) From the perspective of intergenerational relations, although marriage is legally a union of two individuals, in reality, the relationship between adult children and their parents in the original family can indirectly influence the marital relationship to a certain extent and have a lasting impact^[14]. Intergenerational solidarity can provide children with a sense of inner security and warmth, allowing them to maintain a healthy and stable mental state. Conversely, conflicts with the original family can increase the probability of marital disputes between the couple, leading to increased internal pressure, more severe risks of conflict, and ultimately, higher risks of divorce^[15]. If both young couples maintain close and positive relationships with their respective original families, their marriages will be more stable and enduring, with a higher level of happiness. However, if only one spouse is close to their parents, they may allocate more time and energy to them. Given that everyone's time is limited, this means that the energy they devote to their partner will decrease to some extent, which is bound to negatively impact the marital happiness and stability between the couple. From this perspective, it is more compatible when young couples and their parents in the original family have similar ways of getting along.

3) In China's traditional patriarchal society, women are expected to show filial piety more to their husband's parents, rather than to their own parents from the original family, after marriage^[16]. Among these more complex family relationships, the one that is most frequently discussed is the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is an affinal relationship derived from the daughter-in-law's marriage to the mother-in-law's son. Many beautiful love stories have ended unsatisfactorily due to the opposition of the mother-in-law (or even before becoming a mother-in-law). *"I know of a case where the man's family disapproved of the woman's conditions and dismissed her with money; this is not just a plot from a novel"* (quoted from TZY). Although modern women have more opportunities to receive education and enter the workforce, gaining more experiences and knowledge, in a small family, the mother-in-law remains the elder, so the daughter-in-law naturally needs to listen more to her advice and instructions. In general, the mother-in-law may consider herself as an "insider of the family", while the daughter-in-law is considered as an "outsider from another family". Therefore, when considering things, the mother-in-law may prioritize her own feelings and convenience over those of the daughter-in-law, leading to psychological imbalance in the latter, increased probability of quarrels between the couple, and heightened uncertainty in the marriage.

4. FAMILY FUNCTIONS

Family function, also known as family role, refers to the role that families play in human life and social development^[17]. In China, family functions are basically divided into production functions, child-rearing and support functions, educational functions, emotional communication functions, etc. Based on the connections between the research directions of this article, the following will mainly analyze three functions: child-rearing, cultural inheritance, and emotional processing.

1) From the perspective of child-rearing, although China's fertility rate among the permanent resident population continues to decline under the influence of multiple factors^[18], child-rearing remains an inevitable topic for most couples after marriage. Discussions on this topic have never ceased. Based on different dimensions of analysis, parenting styles are modernly categorized into three types: the first is widowed parenting, where the father hardly participates, leaving the mother to solely bear the responsibility of raising children; the second is intergenerational substitute parenting, where elders in the family assist young couples by sharing the responsibility of raising future generations with the mother. *"My parents were very busy at work, so I grew up with my grandparents. Many of my friends also have similar family situations"* (quoted from YXS); the third is cooperative parenting, where both the father and the mother actively participate in the process of raising children and do it

themselves. In this article, we mainly discuss the third parenting style, which involves the participation of both parents^[19]. To ensure consistency in their child-rearing philosophies, many young people discuss this issue with their partners at the stage of deciding whether to get married. Their viewpoints generally fall into two categories. The first is recognizing their own educational experiences and hoping that their children will follow the same path; the second is disapproving of their own educational experiences, believing that they made a wrong choice or did not fulfill their full potential, and wishing to replan. If both partners have similar educational backgrounds and achievements, they are more likely to reach a consensus on child-rearing. For example, if one spouse is a returnee from abroad and the other grew up in a traditional Chinese educational environment. The one with a study abroad background may consider it a meaningful experience that allows them to truly understand the local customs and cultural backgrounds of foreign countries, which cannot be replaced by books or movies. Even if they choose to return to their home country after graduation, this experience still enriches their lives. However, the other partner may argue that since the end result is still returning home, any connections made abroad are essentially meaningless. If there is a mismatch in their educational philosophies for their children, it will be difficult to maintain a good relationship between the two parties, leading to marital instability or an inability to guarantee higher happiness.

2) From the perspective of cultural inheritance, China is a country that attaches great importance to family culture, and many families have their own unique styles and rules, which are passed down from generation to generation through their own means. Generation names are an excellent form of family cultural inheritance. They are not just a single character but embody the beautiful visions and expectations of ancestors for future generations to “cultivate one’s morality, harmonize the family, pacify the people, govern the country, and enjoy prosperity, health, and success”. Many media outlets also use programs to summarize and disseminate Chinese family culture, such as the CCTV Chinese International Channel’s program *Thank You, My Family*, which takes family traditions as its theme and shares warm stories and excellent traditions of various families with the Chinese community^[20]. Each family’s culture permeates the growth process and personality traits of children, and therefore, these characteristics are manifested during the communication between young couples. Chinese family cultures are diverse and each has its own strengths, but there are also points of conflict and intersection. Some families have a radical style, while others are relatively conservative, making it easy for young people to encounter ideological clashes or conflicts during their interactions. Members of families with similar styles are more likely to reach a consensus in thoughts and opinions. Due to similar ways of dealing with life, the relationship between the two parties will be stronger and more stable, leading to a happier and smoother married life.

3) From the perspective of emotion processing, conflicts, big or small, are inevitable in every family. When encountering problems, the handling methods of young couples and their personality traits will affect their relationship. Disagreements are bound to arise in shared life. When facing issues that need to be addressed, if both parties can stabilize their emotional fluctuations, refrain from blindly blaming and accusing each other, and instead engage in self-reflection and mutual encouragement, then the problem will not be continually exaggerated and lead to more severe consequences. Conversely, if both parties are stubborn and never think from the perspective of others, they will never be able to untie their own emotional knots, which will not contribute to the maintenance and healthy development of their relationship. “*When my parents argue, they ignore each other for a long time, and it always takes a third party to intervene before they can calm down and resolve the issue*” (quoted from ER).

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As time passes, society continues to advance unceasingly. We cannot forever stubbornly cling to ancient beliefs, as they are likely to be incompatible with the characteristics and sustainable

development patterns of modern society. However, this does not mean that all theories will be replaced. Through the sieve of the time, some content and theories are preserved, while others are successively eliminated and updated, manifesting the progress of society in our theoretical cognition. In contemporary society, the concept of “being well-matched in social and economic status” is no longer limited to the compatibility of economic status between the two families, but also represents the compatibility and suitability in terms of ideological level, perspectives and beliefs, spiritual pursuits, interests and hobbies, living habits, and so on. People’s perspectives are constantly evolving. For example, more and more women are beginning to awaken their sense of independence, gradually “standing up”, no longer blindly following the constraints imposed by society, but choosing to make the most appropriate decisions after their own repeated contemplation and deliberation. Some young people are starting to pursue and support “open marriages”. The underlying logic of “being well-matched in social and economic status” remains unchanged, but its concept has been redefined and become more comprehensive, profound, rigorous, and logical: Universal patriarchy has been suppressed, replaced by a greater degree of democratic discussion and negotiation; the similarity in economic status, which was originally part of the concept, has been preserved, as ultimately, other aspects will differ due to differences in economic conditions. However, this is not a theory that fixes young people within their original economic class, as its definition incorporates other dimensions and becomes richer and more comprehensive. The collective discussion of this attitude towards marital choice and family system theory illustrates that contemporary youth engage in a more rigorous process of partner selection, with a deeper and broader scope of thought, not based on impulsive decisions or blindly following the arrangements of third parties. In fact, although the “being well-matched in social and economic status” approach to marital choice has a very positive effect on young people, enhancing their life satisfaction and marital happiness, it also poses potential risks to the social environment. Studies have pointed out that this form of marital matching can exacerbate social resource allocation inequality and class solidification. The fact that “being well-matched in social and economic status” includes considerations of economic conditions to some extent validates this conjecture.

In conclusion, the theory of “being well-matched in social and economic status” is scientifically feasible within the context of family system theory. While this article concludes here, research never stops. I believe that further evolution will occur in the interpretation and understanding of this theory. Marital life is a crucial aspect of human social life, and thus, research on this topic deserves further follow-up and deepening.

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