

# Chapter 3

## Household Division, Intra-generational Inequality and Marriage Prospects of Single Men in Multi-son Families in Rural China

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### 3.1 Introduction

In China, a large group of single men is receiving extensive scholarly attention from researchers interested in why these men remain single in a society where marriage is the social norm. The macro-perspective views the shortage of women as the cause of the inability of single men to marry (Ebenstein and Sharygin 2009). Given the imbalance in local marriage markets, long-distance migration for marriage plays an important role in adjusting the distribution of women, as female migration for marriage has happened far more frequently than male migration in China. The 4th and 5th national population censuses show that interprovincial movement of the female population has increased 2.5 times from 1990 to 2000, whereas the number of males moving across provinces has grown by only 1.85 times. There is a reduced risk of failure to marry for men who live in provinces with an influx of female migrants. For men living in provinces where there is an out-migration of females, the opposite may be true. In addition, women tend to migrate from central and western China to the eastern regions. From a geographical perspective, the villages that lose women

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to other provinces are said to be less developed, poor, backward and remote (Zhang and Zhong 2005). Poor health such as disabilities and chronic diseases, less education, low social status and low income may contribute to the difficulties men face in finding a mate (Das Gupta et al. 2010; He 2010). From a family institution perspective, children's mating opportunities depend on their family's economic status, as it is viewed as the parents' duty to pay for their son's marriage (Sun 2005). Therefore the household's economic status has become one of the main obstacles for a son to marry, especially since the 1990s as the costs associated with marriage have risen rapidly and enormously. Yan (2005) analyzed bride price in a northern Chinese village from the 1980s to the 1990s and found that the cost had increased tenfold. The expenses for a wedding, including a betrothal gift and setting up a new household, amount to more than CNY100,000 (USD17,000), a sum which would take parents about 10 years to earn (Gui and Yu 2010).

Whether from the perspective of the individual, family or community, factors related to poverty are frequently used by researchers to describe the reasons for men's failure to marry (Das Gupta et al. 2010; Gui and Yu 2010; He 2010; Zhang and Zhong 2005). However, this explanation falls short in capturing how these factors come together to contribute to the failure to marry. Factors affecting whether or not a man may find a spouse may include social events (such as the social classes classification in the Chinese countryside beginning in the 1950s), national policy, population structure, geographical location, family structure, competition between family members and family events (such as household division). Brothers from the same household may have vastly different life trajectories based on their birth order, even though they are of the same low socioeconomic status and were raised in the same community. Due to the high cost of marriage, men from a large family with multiple sons will face competition upon marriageable age for the limited resources available in their family. In a multi-son family, traditional Chinese custom in most areas is to give the first married son priority over the assets available to him through household division, and the rule of wedding is that the younger should respect the older and follow the birth order (Ban 1940). The eldest son carries the obligation to perpetuate family lineage. As a result, household division, which transfers the property of the stem family to married sons, usually the eldest one, might have a significant impact on those sons who are unmarried. This chapter will focus on household division as an important family event in analyzing and understanding single men's lives. This will be done within societal, spatial and temporal, family and individual contexts to capture the situation of men who are unable to marry. Through in-depth analysis using qualitative methods, we will explore the mechanisms underlying poverty, which seemingly presents the biggest obstacle for men who wish to be married. In the following section, the practice of household division is introduced based on a review of the literature. Household division is central to understanding the situation of single men in multi-son families in rural China. Section 3.3 then discusses data collection including information on field sites and a profile of single men as evident from the interviews. Section 3.4 examines how the marriage prospects of single men are affected by household division, loss of parent(s) and their living arrangements. Section 3.5 concludes.

## 3.2 Household Division

Family property is inherited through household division, a custom in traditional China that was institutionalized through policy implemented by the central government in order to break apart large influential families into smaller ones that would pose less of a threat to the regime (Jiao and Zhang 2008). Household division in rural China has been a common practice throughout Chinese history (Wang 2010a). Why do the Chinese give up the ideal of a united family? The most frequently cited reason in the research on this topic is that of sons contending for family property (Fei 2001; Freedman 1965). Economic independence is seen as an urgent need for the married son, and family property is a key component of this much-sought independence (Fei 2001; Freedman 1965). Although in well-off families the father wields a high degree of power in holding the family together, in families experiencing poverty, the father may be less able to exercise his authority and household division is more likely to occur (Wang 2008; Freedman 1965).

Davis and Harrell (1993) argues that sons are eager to be independent of other family members and live their own life. Additionally, the bride can contribute to household division through her status as an outsider, which motivates her to establish a uterine family within the larger household, in which she is the centre (Wolf 1972). In the past, household division happened mostly because of family conflict; however, household division has become common since the 1980s when one of the sons gets married, and has gradually become customary practice. Why did this change happen? Yan (1998) noted that the concept of personal property has shifted with a change in the way a family accumulates wealth. China's economic transformation in recent decades has increased the possibility for a family to rapidly accumulate large amounts of wealth, and sons desire to control their own wealth outside of their parents' influence. Household division also reveals new characteristics. Firstly, household division happens earlier. Previously, household division occurred once the father lost his patriarchal authority after his contribution to the family wealth decreased, especially when his contribution is less than that of his son(s), or at his death; however, this division is now occurring immediately after the son is married. Secondly, rather than a one-time practice, family property is divided by brothers multiple times, which means that the property is divided in instalments by each of the sons upon marriage and when sons become independent from the stem family one by one. These practices are rapidly creating nuclear families in China (Wang 2003, Wang 2010a; Yan 1998; Cohen 1992).

Fei (2001) asserts that household division is one of the most important processes through which parents pass property on to the next generation. Although separate cooking is usually regarded as a basic symbol for household division, most scholars qualify it through the division of property, separate dwellings and living independently (Ma 1999; Cohen 1976; Lin 1947). Common sense indicates the core marker for household division is property separation, including means of production, consumption goods, and savings and investment such as land, livestock, farming machinery, cereal and cash. Property may be divided more than once. One-time

property division is common upon death of parents. Multiple divisions occur in serial household division, which prevails in contemporary society where each son takes his section of family property after a wedding. In most instances, each son has the right to obtain from the united family a portion of the means of production and some consumption goods to maintain his new family after he is married (Wang 2003; Fei 2001). Yan (1998) argues that livestock, agricultural machinery and bank savings are excluded from serial family division.

The new couple may take only the land that is assigned to them by the government, along with the rations and belongings obtained through marriage, such as the house, furniture, clothing and jewelry. Therefore, the new couple is likely to ask for more valuable betrothal gifts as a “seed fund” for the development of their new family. As a result, property separation not only exhausts the united family’s property but also makes it more difficult for the family to accumulate wealth, as the means of production is divided and decreased, and the sons who perform the labour are reduced one by one. Clearly this would be unfavourable for the son who is married later, especially when the united family is indebted because of a previous (son’s) wedding. The debts are paid back mainly by parents and unmarried sons, creating inequality between sons who are married and those who are not (Wang 2010a; Yan 1998). Moreover, unmarried sons living and working in a different city will send home remittances, which are often used for the wedding of an older brother or redistributed through household division. Their earnings should have contributed to their own marriage, but being lower in the birth order may deprive them of this opportunity, and they have to wait until the family earns enough money to pay for their betrothal gifts and wedding.

Household division occurs not only at the economic level but also through the transfer of family authority between generations. After household division occurs, the father’s power to intervene in situations where his married son sells off or redistributes property is diminished. The father can no longer require his married son(s) to bear the burden of the unmarried son’s weddings and related debts. As a matter of fact, escaping from the younger brother’s wedding expenses is also one of the reasons for the first-married son to desire independence from the united family (Wang 2010b; Freedmen 1965). Once married, the independent son would not contribute economically to the united family, and the financial resources for an unmarried son’s wedding would shrink significantly. However, household division will not completely sever the economic link between parents and children. Prevailing family norms embedded in Confucian culture across China dictate that sons support their elderly parents. This duty is expected of all sons, regardless of their marital status, or even if they live separately from their parents (Shiga 2013; Fei 2001; Ma 1999). Unmarried sons generally live with their parents and the expectation is that if one of the parents passes away, that son would no longer leave but would support the surviving parent by living with him or her (Fei 2001).

It is clear from the discussion so far that household division may cause inequality among sons. Firstly, married sons may take away part of the family wealth and leave debts behind; secondly, married sons will not contribute economically to the united family after they live independently; thirdly, the custom that unmarried sons live

with their parents and are expected to care for them can be viewed as a burden for unmarried sons. These practices further contribute to the difficulty faced by unmarried sons in a multi-son family in their search for a spouse.

In this study, the household division made by a family is the main focus. Specifically, the chapter investigates the role that household division plays in single men's failure to marry.

### 3.3 Data

The chapter is based on data collected in two sites that are both Han nationality settlements and have similar traditional family culture involving the custom of household division. The single men in this chapter were 28 years old or older at the time of the interview, and were born before the implementation of strict family planning policy in 1978. Therefore, most of them are from families with multi-sons with married brothers, which in turn allows us to examine the effects of household division on marriage prospects of single brothers. As per the "Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China 1981) which came into effect in 1981, age of marriage for men is 22 years or older. But rural men usually get married at a younger age than the stipulation. A village administrator said "...men [who get married] older than 22 or 23 are very few..." His son, at the age of 20, had already married and has a 2-year-old child.

...after graduating from junior high school [the Chinese government stipulates a nine-year compulsory education], they find nothing to do at home if they don't continue receiving higher education, so their parents seek to find them mates with the result that most of them get married very early. The better the family economic status is, the more opportunities there are for them to find a good wife and the earlier they get married.

For men older than 25 years, it becomes difficult to find a bride. Therefore, we set 28 as the upper age limit for the single men in this study.

The chapter is based on interviews conducted in two counties in the northwest and southeast of China in 2012 (see Fig. 3.1).<sup>1</sup> Because of the gap in economic development, people are migrating primarily from the west and northwest to the east and southeast for work and marriage. The northwestern village selected is located in Shaanxi province and the southeastern village in a coastal province, Jiangsu. These two places are quite different in their economic development. Jiangsu is covered partly by the Yangtze River Delta, and GDP per capita of Jiangsu in 2011 was CNY61022.20 (USD9447.92) and CNY33196.28 (USD5139.70) for Shaanxi. Both locations have a high sex ratio at birth; in Shaanxi province mass female outflow prevails, and in Jiangsu province there is a high female inflow for work or marriage.

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<sup>1</sup>Field work for this chapter and for the chapter by Zhang and Belanger was conducted in Baijia and Lijia. Both chapters are based on research funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



**Fig. 3.1** Locations of two fieldwork sites (BaiduMap (2013))

Baijia is located in Zhashui county, Shangluo City, Shaanxi province – a 90-min drive from Xi’an City (capital of Shaanxi province)—and from where many unmarried women migrate for work. The number of single men in Baijia is much larger than the average in the 364 villages involved in a previous nationwide survey<sup>2</sup> of single men. We asked one of the first author’s students, who comes from Baijia, to help facilitate the research there by introducing us to the villagers. Lijia is located in Feng county, Xuzhou City, Jiangsu province, and has a large number of women coming in for marriage. A local colleague introduced us to this village and its residents. According to the 6th national population census (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2010), the sex ratios of unmarried males to females beyond 15 years of age are 168 for Baijia and 132 for Lijia, and sex ratios at birth in the two provinces are beyond the normal range.

The respondents (see Table 3.1) at the two sites include single men, their family members, married males and females, unmarried females and the village chief. Table 3.1 presents two sets of respondents. Direct collection covers all respondents we directly interviewed. Second-hand collection refers to those whom respondents told us about, and we also noted down their stories. A semi-structured interview outline was used to explore the cause and consequences of failure to marry and to collect information including basic data on an individual and his family, the impact

<sup>2</sup>The survey was conducted by authors and their team in 2009, which covered single men from more than 350 villages all over the country. The survey covered the number of single men in a village, their age, health status and other factors.

**Table 3.1** Interview respondents in two sites

	Baijia	Lijia	Total
Older (>28 years) single men <sup>a</sup>	9	16	25
Young (<28 years) single men	1	2	3
Divorced men	4	2	6
Families of older single men	4	10	14
Married men	7	8	15
Married women	10	11	21
Migrant bride		9	9
Parents-in-law of the married women	8	7	15
Young single women	6	8	14
Administrators	2	4	6
Matchmaker		1	
Total	51	78	129

<sup>a</sup>Only seven of the nine respondents in Baijia and 10 of the 16 in Lijia we interviewed directly. For the remaining information was provided by someone else other than the older single men

of failure to marry on single men and their families, their strategies to cope with failure to marry, others' attitudes toward them, evaluation of their failure to marry, and married people's marriage experience.

### 3.4 Profile of Single Men

The socioeconomic status of rural single men plays an important role in their possibility of marriage (Das Gupta et al. 2010; He 2010). Most single male respondents are in good health, but almost all of them have completed only primary school education or lower, and five out of 18 are illiterate. The annual income of most single men is less than CNY10,000 and some below CNY5000 against a rural per capita yearly net income in Jiangsu province in 2011 of CNY10,805 and CNY9490 for the city where Lijia is located. We may conclude that the socioeconomic status of interviewed single men as evidenced in their education, economic and health status is similar to that found in previous studies (Das Gupta et al. 2010; He 2010). This chapter highlights other factors that are likely to cause a delay in marriage for men.

Table 3.2 shows single men's birth order and the time period when they were 22 years old, which is the legal age for marrying according to the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Table 3.2 shows that 72% of single men reached the age of 22 before 1992. Birth order does not necessarily determine the likelihood of staying single. However, the youngest and the middle sons may have a higher risk of failing to marry, and they accounted for 64% of single men while the eldest sons accounted for only eight per cent of those still single.

Although we conducted interviews with seven single men who were the only son in the family, the analysis focuses on single men from multi-son families. While

**Table 3.2** Birth order of single men and year at age 22

Year at 22	Number	Birth order among single men	Number
Total	25	Total	25
Before 1984	7 (28)	Only one son	7 (28)
1985–1992	11 (44)	The youngest	6 (24)
After 1993	7 (28)	The middle	10 (40)
		The eldest	2 (8)

Figures in parentheses are percentages

China has had a very strict one-child family planning policy since the 1980s, the family planning policy in China is diverse across regional, demographic and geographical distributions (Attane 2002; Short and Zhai 1998). Only 35.4% of the population must follow the very strict one-child policy,<sup>3</sup> while the rest may have more than one child. As a result, a national policy fertility rate<sup>4</sup> could have reached 1.47 children per couple at the end of the 1990s (Gu et al. 2007). The 6th national population census in 2010 showed that women in the age group 15–64 have on average 1.33 children who survive. The average number of surviving children for women at 35–39 is 1.51, 1.67 for 40–44 and 1.82 for 45–49. For women under 40, it is possible to have more children as China has relaxed its fertility policy since 2014, which now allows couples to have two children, as long as one of the parents comes from a one-child family. For women 40–44, we estimate that roughly 70% have two children; the average of 1.67 can be reached if we include only one-child and two-children families into account (three or more children families are very few). In the sixth census 10% sample of households, there are more than 5.89 million women in the age group 40–44 years.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to what the one-child policy might suggest, there are and will be many multi-son families.

Family economic status is regarded as an important factor affecting an individual's opportunities to get married (Sun 2005). Parents in poor physical condition may become net consumers rather than earners of family fortunes. Table 3.3 shows single men's family structure and their parents' health status before they were 30. Most single male respondents were from multi-son families. Families with two or more sons accounted for 72%, and those with three or more accounted for 36%. For nearly half of single men, either one or both of their parents had died before they were 30 years old, implying that a parent's death may have strongly affected a son's marriage prospects.

<sup>3</sup>The one-child policy applies strictly to those living in urban and rural areas of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing, Jiangsu and Sichuan.

<sup>4</sup>Based on the provincial fertility policy, the researchers estimated fertility levels that would be obtained locally if all married couples had births at the levels permitted by local policy. This is referred to as "policy fertility."

<sup>5</sup>The sixth Census sampled 10% of the households to fill out the complete information form involving about 9.55% of whole population (number of those in the complete form/the total population).



**Table 3.3** Number of sons and parents' health status before single men were 30 years of age

Number of sons	Number	Parents' health	Number
Total	25	Total	19 <sup>a</sup>
One Son	7 (28)	Good	9 (47.5)
Two Sons	9 (36)	Poor	1 (5)
Three Sons	4 (16)	One or Both Dead	9 (47.5)
More than Four Sons	5 (20)		

Figures in parentheses are percentages

<sup>a</sup>The total does not add up to 25 because of missing information

**Table 3.4** Dwelling pattern and employment of single men after age 30

Dwelling pattern after 30	Number	Single men living with parents	Number
Total	22	Total	15 <sup>a</sup>
Live alone	2 (9)	Farming	3 (20)
Take turns to co-reside with parents	2 (9)	Part-time job near home	8 (53)
Live with parents	18 (82)	Work out of county	4 (27)

Figures in parentheses are percentages

<sup>a</sup>The total does not add up to 25 because of missing information

Table 3.4 shows that 81% of single men in this study, lived with one or both parents. They worked near their home rather than far away. Although further exploration is needed to learn why they did not migrate for work, possible reasons are that they were unwilling or unable to do so, or needed to support their aging parents.

## 3.5 Intra-generational Inequality Among Single Men

### 3.5.1 Family Events and Failure to Marry

An individual's life is always framed by society, history, culture and institutions (Neugarten 1996; Elder 1975). The age at which a man should marry is also decided by (in)formal rules. Those who do not marry at the time in their life that society deems normal are less likely in turn to find a bride and may be forced to remain single, especially under a demographic female deficit. This section discusses a number of events that may hinder the family in finding a wife for a son(s). The early death of one or both parents can play a deciding role in the marriage fate of rural males. Table 3.3 shows that nearly 50% of single men experienced the early death of one or both parents by the time they were 30. How does the early death of parent(s) influence single men's marriage prospects and life? The socioeconomic environment holds clues to understanding the impact of a parent's early death.

Before the 1990s, a centrally planned economy had lasted 30 years in China's rural areas. On the one hand, the Chinese government fixed farmers to their birth-

place by the household registration system, the procurement system and the material quota system. On the other hand, the government transferred the residual value from agricultural domain to industrial domain, and from rural to urban, through a price differential between agricultural and industrial products, resulting in long-term low productivity and economic lag in rural China. Although the land-contract responsibility system encouraged peasants' enthusiasm for production and improved agriculture productivity after the policy of reform and opening was implemented in 1978, the household registration system still limited the migration of rural labourers. Rural people had few sources of income except land. Agricultural taxes further increased a farmer's burden. Under these circumstances, the loss of one or both parents meant that a source of labour was lost, heavily affecting the family's production capabilities.

Our interviews offered evidence that the early death of an adult labourer not only reduces the family's income directly but could also have continuous negative effects on the family. Dong, 80 years old, told us her story:

I have six children: three boys, three girls. When I was 40, my husband passed away. At that time, the children were very young, the youngest was no more than 10 years old and the eldest was nearly 18. I raised them alone, and I had to beg for meals when there was nothing to eat.

The early death of her husband not only involved Dong's family in an economic predicament, but it also affected her son's marriage opportunities. Although son(s) may fail to marry even in a family with both parents still living, the death of a primary source of labour/income in a family can rapidly and significantly worsen their financial situation, leading to a reduced capacity to bargain in the marriage market. Therefore, a young man who has lost one or both parents will be more likely to involuntarily stay single throughout his whole life.

Because our family was very poor, we were looked down on by others. The eldest son had dated several girls, but it was not until nearly 26 years of age that he got married. My second son still has not married. The village leader asked: "Why didn't you buy a wife from other places?" It would cost a lot of money to buy a wife, and I could not afford it. Two women from other places paid a visit to us, but both were not willing to marry my son after the visit. Because we were too poor, it was still useless though a new house was built. You may see the situation of our family (which is really bad). I am useless; my son has a painful leg; we are poor, and no one is willing to marry my son. My husband went away when I was 40, but now I am 80 years old.

Dong's experience shows us that both the timing of death and the death of one or both parents can have a significant influence on a son's marriage prospects.

The idea of "marrying-up," or hypergamy, under which women tend to marry men with superior socioeconomic status, is a rule in Chinese society (Davin 2005; Fan and Li 2002). Young women in many impoverished, remote rural areas in the west would like to marry young men in the economically developed countryside in the east (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte 2012). As a result, men in impoverished rural areas with low socioeconomic status are vulnerable to becoming victims under a marriage squeeze. Men from poor families are more likely to fail in the marriage market.

The 70-year-old Mrs. Zhao has two unmarried sons who are 39 and 42 years old, respectively. Her experience offers further evidence about how the early death of a parent may affect the family's economic situation and men's marriage prospects:

I have two sons and my husband died early, when they were still young. At that time, my eldest son was 17 years old and the younger around 15 years. Both of them only received two years of education in primary school. When their father died, they dropped out of school. My husband suffered cerebral thrombus and we asked for a loan from the rural bank in order to cure him. However, he still died, and we had to pay off the loan and interest.

A Chinese saying, "God closes a door, but unfortunately forgets to open a window for you," aptly describes Mrs. Zhao's compounding difficulties. Mrs. Zhao described the influence of the social environment on her life:

My family was too poor, and I could not build a new house. As you can see, my house [that was a mud house, about 60 square metres] collapsed last year because of heavy rain. Now it is a one-floor brick house with two bedrooms and a sitting room, about 60 square metres. Getting married would cost a lot of money in addition to building a new house, and we did not have an opportunity to work outside. At that time, there were few people moving out for work, and we just did part-time job in local construction sites, earning CNY10 a day. At that time, building a house would cost CNY1,000. If there is no new house, getting married is impossible.

During the early period after reform and opening policy<sup>6</sup> were coming into effect in 1978, market reforms were experimental and limited to four special economic zones and 14 coastal cities, which hindered uniform employment opportunities. Non-farming employment was not common at that time. Therefore, Mrs. Zhao and her sons were able to find only temporary, low-salary employment near their home. However, with more reform and opening, coastal provinces created more and more job opportunities, which encouraged a large number of rural people to migrate for jobs in cities. Personal characteristics and family conditions may limit whether or not the son can migrate for a job. Mrs. Zhao's son told us of his experience:

I found a job nearby after I quit from the primary school at grade two, at that time I did physical labour and earned only CNY 5 a day. [When asked why he did not go to a big city for a job, he said] I have no house, no money and no skill. I only have two years of education and I can only earn a little money. Even if I migrate to a big city, I cannot afford to buy a house. What's more, daily consumption is relatively high in cities. If I go to work in southern China I would not find a job because I am too old and useless, and they need young people in their 20s with some skills.

### 3.5.2 *Household Division and Failure to Marry*

Most of the study's single male respondents (72%) come from families with more than one son. Sixty-four per cent are the second son or the youngest (see Table 3.3). In order to study the relationship between family structure and failure to marry, we

<sup>6</sup>The reforms launched in 1978 were a key turning point in China's economic development from planned economy to market economy.

**Table 3.5** Birth order of single men in complete and incomplete families

Complete families	Number	Incomplete families	Number
Total	6	Total	7
The eldest	1 (17)	The eldest	1 (14)
The middle	1 (17)	The middle	3 (43)
The youngest	4 (66)	The youngest	3 (43)

Notes: Figures in parentheses are percentages. The single men in this sample are in good health, and there are two or more sons in the family

singled out incomplete families (one or both of the parents of multi-son families died before the single men were 30). Table 3.5 shows that the youngest son may be more likely to stay single in both complete and incomplete families, while the risk of failure to marry may be expanded to the middle son in incomplete families.

This table shows that the middle or younger sons in a poor rural family may be more likely to encounter difficulties in getting married, which is then compounded by the practice of household division.

The practice of household division among poor families can lead to two outcomes. In the first, the united family's accumulated wealth is transferred to the son's new family through betrothal gifts, through the wedding itself and through items needed to establish a new household. Additionally, part of the property, including land, rations, farming tools, house, furniture, jewelry and savings are transferred to the son and his new wife. In the second outcome, the parents' duty to raise their son is seen as completed once he is married. Part of this duty includes providing financial support, which ends once he weds. Married sons seldom contribute financially to the marriage of their unmarried brothers (Wang 2003). Therefore, a kind of inequality may exist among sons, and as the economic capability of rural multi-son families weakens with the independence of sons one by one, those sons still unmarried are likely to have limited resources to back them in potential marriage opportunities.

Mrs. Song, nearly 70 years old, told us her story:

I have three [married] daughters and two sons. The eldest and the third are sons. My husband died early and we were poor. The eldest son got married at the age of 27, and the younger could not get married and is now 44 years old. Our house has three rooms in total, only one room for each son [a house with several rooms is a necessity for men to marry]. This is because we are poor and my husband died too early. I had no ability to help him find a wife.

Mr. Liao is the youngest of five sons of a family with seven children, healthy but unmarried. He said:

I have many siblings. Beginning from the eldest, my parents tried to find wives for sons one by one. When it was my turn, the family left nothing economically... my father died at 64 years old [before his father died, household division had already been practised because he told us he conducted the funeral of his father by himself], I lived with my mom and two younger sisters until my 40s while I had less opportunities to find a wife. After the wedding, the married brother and his small family start a new life, with property such as house, furniture and farming tools passed on

from his parental family. For families living in poverty, while the property passed on to the newly married son is significant, in terms of its monetary value it is quite small. The new couple begins to focus on accumulating their own property and raising their own children rather than contributing wealth to an unmarried brother's marriage.

Mrs. Song comments:

After my eldest son got married, he put forward to separate from the family as there were always conflicts between him and his younger brother. We have only three stone-made rooms, and I live in the central one, and the two brothers lived in the other two rooms.

Although Confucianism stresses love and respect between brothers, there is also an old Chinese saying, "Even brothers keep careful accounts".<sup>7</sup> Once he marries and lives independently, the older married brother has no financial responsibility to support his younger brother with respect to his marriage. Even if the older brother wishes to help, he may lack the ability since he has his own new family with children and additional financial burden. When asked whether the oldest and first married son would help his unmarried brother to find a spouse, Mrs. Song replied:

He would like to do so, but he could not afford it. My grandson [her older son's child] is going to middle high school and a granddaughter is still studying in the senior high school, which burdens my son heavily. His family is also not well off.

Mr. Nei is the youngest of a family with one brother and two sisters. He has lived alone since 1972 when his parents passed away. Excerpts from the interview:

Mr. Nei: ...parents lived with me [at that time], later they were gone and life was very hard afterwards.

Interviewer: You were very young in 1972 [he was 27 years old]. But you had brothers and sisters....

Mr. Nei: Yes, but they all were married and involved in their own families.

Interviewer: Why did your parents not live with your brother?

Mr. Nei: He had several kids and also lived a hard life, even worse than me.

We may conclude that his married brother escaped the responsibility to take care of parents, let alone helping him with getting married.

Mrs. Song further demonstrated the constraints imposed by the social environment:

It was not a good setting at that time [for rural men to save enough money and find a wife, meaning that there were few ways to earn money in the past]. He stayed at home as a farmer in the past. In recent years, national policy encourages farmers to transfer cultivated land to forestry, less farming work makes it possible for him to take non-farm jobs away from the village [and has a chance to earn more money and get to know more women].

Mr. Nei has the same complaint about the lack of opportunities when he was young.

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<sup>7</sup>The saying means financial matters should be settled clearly even among brothers or good friends and clarifying property and responsibility between two parties can lead to long-term relationship.

If there were opportunities for me to migrate for job at that time, I might have married. You see, nowadays young men can seek a good job outside, know more girls and bring girlfriend even if they also come from families of poverty and cannot offer a house. I am so envious of them.

In short, the first married son has priority in receiving part of the parental family's property through the practice of household division. However, he makes limited economic contribution to his parental family and younger brothers' marriage. Unfavourable family events, such as the death of a parent, worsen the situation. Moreover, before China's shift to a market economy, there were fewer opportunities for single brothers to migrate and find non-agricultural jobs.

### ***3.5.3 Family Institution, Failure to Marry and Resource Deprivation***

The above analysis showed that single men's failure to marry is associated with significant historical events, family structure and life events. Caspi and Roberts (2001) believe that an individual's failure to switch roles successfully at appropriate times not only creates difficulties but also may hinder his future development. Below, we discuss how failure to marry and family institutions affect single men's career and life, and how inequality between married and unmarried sons occurs.

Household division is an institutional arrangement to guarantee that the family line carries on in rural households, especially in multi-son families (Gao 2006). Therefore, household division is prevalent in rural multi-son families. Parents will reside with unmarried children, while married sons live separately. Mrs. Zhang is 39 years old, and her husband is the third in a family of four sons. He married at the age of 29. She told us the dwelling pattern of her in-law's family before her marriage:

His two elder brothers lived separately from the stem family after they got married; at that time we had not married yet, and my husband lived with his elderly parents and his younger brother, but his two married elder brothers never took care of their parents or two younger brothers after the family divided.

The experience of Mrs. Lei's husband also provides information on the situation of unmarried men after older married brothers live independently:

The elder brother lived separately after he got married, at that time my husband was still in middle school. His elder brother did not want to share the load of the united family—take care of his elderly parents and younger brothers. He lived with his new family, leaving his blind mother, my husband and the younger brothers behind.

Household division is prevalent in the two communities where we conducted our study. Although parents are more likely to live with the youngest married son or take turns living with all sons after they all get married, the most popular co-dwelling pattern is that of parents living with the unmarried sons after the married sons have left the stem family to live with their new family. The interview shows that 81% of

single men live with one or both of their parents (see Table 3.5). Also, as illustrated in the interview excerpts in Sect. 3.5.2, parents usually live with their unmarried sons after the family practises household division. However, this co-dwelling pattern can impact the sharing of support duties among brothers.

As shown above, household division can fragment the united family's property. With limited family resources, multi-son families usually exert all that the family has to match each son one by one, and start to accumulate money for the marriage of the next son after one son is married and lives independently. However, for those sons who remain unmarried for a long period of time, living with their parents becomes accepted as the norm. Although the arrangement is to some extent beneficial to the unmarried sons when parents are still healthy, these unmarried men gradually take on a major caring role as their parents age. But taking on care responsibilities for parents that are socially constructed as feminine could lead to the perception of unmarried men as less masculine.

Forty-eight-year-old Mr. Liu is still unmarried. His elder brother is married and went to live separately from Liu and his parents after the wedding. Since then, Liu has been living with and taking care of his parents. His father died 3 years ago, and Liu continues to live with his senior mother who is nearly 80 years old. He detailed some of what is involved in his mother's care:

I have the duty to care for my mother, and recently she does not feel well because her leg has become swollen. If she was feeling well enough, I would go out to work. Besides, I want to earn some money to pay for my mother's medical fees.... My mother is growing older and older and I cannot go too far, thus I work around my hometown. Sometimes I go to work in the morning and come back to see her during the break, and go back to work in the afternoon.

Because Liu looks after his mother, his elder brother works in places far away from their hometown.

Both my elder brother and sister-in-law are working outside, and my nephew, who is 17 years old, dropped out of school and is also working outside. My elder brother may start looking for a wife for his son, which is not a small sum of money. Money is still a big problem.

Although looking after senior parents can affect single men's work arrangement, there are exceptions under some circumstances. We found that some single men in multiple-children families still have chances to find a comparatively high-salary job in the city, but the financial support they give to their parents is still more than that of their married brothers.

Mr. Lu, 49 years old, is the third of eight children. He has four brothers and three sisters. He lives with his 80-year-old parents as well as an unmarried younger brother. As his parents can care for themselves, he can work outside his village for a long period of time. All his married brothers support his parents, but he and his unmarried younger brother take on the majority of the financial burden.

Now my brothers and I take care of our parents together. Usually I come back in the farming season for farm work, and then I work outside when there is not much work in the village. My married brothers also give our parents money, but my younger brother and I give more

to them. The two elder brothers give our parents less support because they burden themselves with their own family, building houses and finding wives for their sons, and they are short of money. Compared to them, my younger brother and I have lesser burden in this respect.

Based on the above cases, it seems that single men's living patterns may lead them to give more support to their parents financially and in daily life. In many instances especially with elderly parents, single men have to give up migrating for work and uxorilocal marriage as they are tasked with looking after their parents. Liu spoke about a missed marriage opportunity:

In the early years, someone introduced me to a girl from Qinghai province [which was ranked No. 30 among 31 provinces in China in 2014] whose brother-in-law was working in Yangzhou [a city located in eastern China, close to Shanghai]. She paid me a visit, but thought that my family was too poor and did not agree to marry me here. However, she wanted me to follow her to go to her hometown, but I gave up. I couldn't leave my senior mother alone.

But as Zhang & Belanger (this volume) show, caring for parents is not the only reason that men may not prefer uxorilocal marriage.

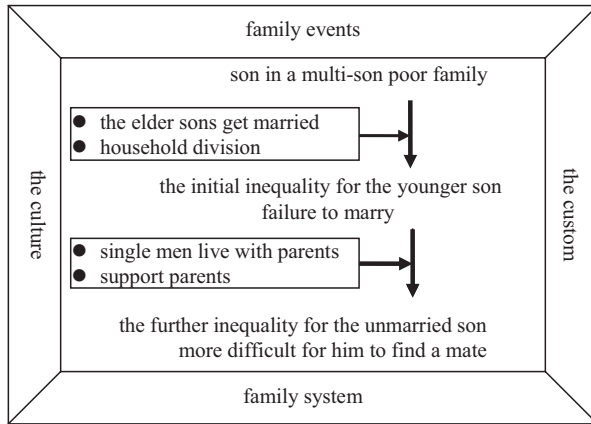
The living arrangement of unmarried sons enables them to give more support than their married brothers to their parents in daily life. What contributes to making this arrangement—a pattern of responsibility-sharing between married and unmarried sons for parents' elderly care? We discuss below how the arrangement is accepted and taken for granted by families and the community.

Getting married symbolizes adulthood. A married man means not only a new branch of the family line but also a new role as husband and father. With marriage, the married man is treated by his family members and villagers as an adult with the responsibility to provide for his new family. The Chinese situate themselves in relational networks and identify themselves by their relationship with another person: so-and-so's son, so-and-so's husband, so-and-so's father. Single men have fewer identities than their married counterparts. The most frequently used one might be so-and-so's son who, due to his single status, will always be viewed as a child. A single man never grows up to be a man, loses his identity and is always treated from the perspective of an individual but is expected at the same time to take on the responsibility of feeding a family or caring for their well-being. Although unmarried sons live with their parents and are members of a family, they lack a clear identity or role in the family (see also Mishra in this volume). A 50-year-old village leader commented on married and single men as follows:

Single men are not pitiful as they are alone and only need to feed themselves. They can find a job, earning at least CNY 80 a day and CNY 800 if they work for 10 days, which can support them for a few months. The whole family is not hungry if he is full. Under a hat is a home [means they can go anywhere with nothing to care about]. What's more, they are free of pressure. But for us [the married men], it is quite different because we need to feed a big family, such as sons, grandsons and daughters-in-law.

In the opinion of most villagers, single men are responsible only for feeding themselves, whereas married men are responsible for supporting a family. Thus, it is reasonable that single men should and are able to have more responsibility to care





**Fig. 3.2** Diagram depicting the continuing impact of household division on men’s marriage prospects in rural areas

for their parents. The case of Mr. Lu also illustrates that marriage as a symbol of becoming an adult is widely acknowledged. Single men generally accept that they are not viewed as an adult by their family or community and that their married brothers are tasked with lesser responsibility in those same eyes when it comes to caring for their aging parents.

Summarizing the above analysis, Fig. 3.2 shows that the youngest son in a multi-son family might face inequality in sharing family resources with his older brothers. Furthermore the inequality might happen more than once. Misfortunes, such as the death of a parent, may worsen the economic situation of the household as competition between sons for household resources becomes stiffer. The son who marries will likely have advantages over others in receiving a share of the family property and contributing less to his parents’ care.

### 3.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter argued that failing to marry is decided not only by a demographic scarcity of brides but also by structural and systematic factors relating to the family and society. At the same time, failure to marry can impose cumulative negative effects on single men. Using qualitative interview data from two rural counties, this chapter examined the macro social environment, family structure at the meso-level, and personal characteristics at the micro-level vis-à-vis men’s marriage prospects. It demonstrated the continuing impact of household division on men’s marriage prospects in rural areas and found a vicious cycle unfavourable for the unmarried younger sons in a multi-son family.

In our study, younger sons were comparatively more disadvantaged, but Tao (2011) found that in some rural areas of southwest China, those commonly single

were in fact the eldest sons. He noted that the eldest son carried the largest part of the duty among all sons to support the whole family and, as a result, lacked access to marriage until other siblings are married. However, he may miss the time to match with a suitable woman, and the family may not be able to afford a bride for him, especially if their resources are already limited (Tao 2011). Tao conducted his survey in a southwestern village with a different regional culture governing parents' responsibility for their sons' marriage and the eldest son's responsibility for the family. The local custom relating to family intergenerational relationships does not hold parents responsible for their sons' marriage; it is mainly up to the son himself. The eldest son has to bear part of the family burden, which translates into fewer women wanting to marry the eldest son in a multi-son family. That is why 58.1% of 105 single men were the eldest son in Tao's study. Our research found that parents carry the obligation to ensure the marriage of their sons and that marriage occurs according to the sons' birth order, with eldest sons having priority over the others. The more general point is that not all sons are treated equally or are equally entitled to family property and family effort and resources to marry.

As discussed previously, the financial costs associated with marriage have increased alongside rapid economic growth and overall societal transformation stemming from the policy of reform and opening. The development of a market economy has strengthened the significance of money in all respects of social life, with marriage and family being no exception. Economic status has become a key part of the decision-making process when women and their parents evaluate prospective grooms or sons-in-law. In a society with intensifying economic polarization, marriage acts as a mechanism by which women can improve their socioeconomic status and gain security. As a result, women try their best to marry men who are of a higher economic status, or gain as much property as possible from their husband's family through betrothal gifts. Yan (2005) found that bride price has increased 10 times between the 1980s and 1990s, but rural per capita net income was CNY191.3 in 1980, CNY686.3 in 1990 and CNY2253.4 in 2000, suggesting that the income of farmers grew far more slowly than the expected expenses for a wife, which is part of the current predicament faced by multi-son families.

The Chinese government has already removed the restriction on the second birth in all families since 2016 with the result that the number of multi-children families may increase. Today, young men have relatively more opportunities to find jobs in wealthier areas and meet young women, which indeed is the marriage strategy used by many single men. However, brides may leave when they learn the real situation of their husbands' families. Therefore, the adaptation of brides to local life is vital in settling the marriage of single men.

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