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课程名称 中国文化概要

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**Please write an essay about 500-800 words in English, explaining a cultural phenomenon in China. A comparative perspective is encouraged.**

Marriage and Hefty Dowries: Women’s Social Status in the Song Dynasty

“How gorgeous are the flowers/ of the cherry trees! Are they not expressive of reverence and harmony/ the carriages of the king’s daughter?” This poem in the *Book of Songs* vividly depicted the grandeur and extravagance of the wedding procession of a bride from the noble family. Wedding day is regarded as one of the most special and important day for people anywhere at any times. Traditions and customs of wedding vary, yet dowries have always been an integral part of a marriage. Today, we can still witness the dowry culture of “*Shi Li Hong Zhuang* (十里红妆)”—which literally means people carrying dowries in the procession can stretch 10 *li*—in some parts of China. This tradition may find its climax in the Song Dynasty, when people attached great importance to the dowries of daughters. The practice is called “*Hou Jia* (厚嫁)”, which refers to a large dowry from the bride’s family, ranging from lands and furniture to mirrors and jewellery. *The Regulations of the Clan* (《宗法条目》) recorded that “the dowries prepared for a daughter should be twice as much as that for a daughter-in-law (“嫁女费用一百贯，娶妇五十贯，嫁资倍于娶费”). One story said that Su Zhe, a famous man of letter and politician in the Song Dynasty, had to sell his lands to prepare doweries for his daughter. Many believe that the emphasis on dowry is a shining example of women’s social status in the Song Dynasty. But I am more inclined to consider it as a paradox manifesting the partial upholding of women’s economic rights and the objectification of women.

On the bright side, a big dowry does serve as a protection for the bride. The laws and regulations back then stipulated that dowries were shared by the couple only in name; they were actually processed by the wife and the wife only. This fortune was not and cannot be divided with the husband (“在法：妻家所得之财，不在分限”). What’s more, the bigger doweries are, the more respect the wife could win and the stronger the tie between two families would be. In a sense, women’s economic status was raised because doweries gave them a lawful right to be included in the allocation of family wealth. In addition, the Song Dynasty held a relatively friendly attitude to divorce and remarriage. Once divorced, the wife won all her properties. This allowed women more freedom and courage to leave an unhappy marriage and to have the ability to remarry if, unfortunately, the husband died. In fact, wealthy widows were so highly sought after that once Emperor Zhenzong of Song (宋真宗) had to reconcile the fight of his two high-rank chancellors over a widow surnamed *Fu*. Therefore, the extravagance of the bride’s dowery helps to ensure women’s economic rights and raise their social status accordingly, which, in a feudal and patriarchal society, brought to women a gleam of light.

Yet on the other side, the preparation and pursuit of a large dowry also put forward many problems. To those well-to-dos, a big amount of dowery may be a showcase for wealth and social status, but it also added another burden to the already heavily-taxed lower-classes. Many girls born in underprivileged families found it hard to get married because their family could not afford them a decent dowry. Worse than that, baby girls gradually became unwanted even killed in infancy. Su Shi, a celebrated litterateur of the Song Dynasty, wrote that poor families in today’s Hubei province “expected two boys and only one girl. Any extra girls risked being killed and people were particularly fret about having too many girls (鄂渚间田野小人，例只养二男一女。过此则杀之，尤讳养女).” This is a brutal deprivation of women’s right to live, not to mention the undermining of their social status. Apart from this, the fact that women’s respect and social status were determined by how many dowries they can offer was nothing short of treating women as goods for trade. The objectification of women disempowered them to be themselves, and it was not uncommon that daughters in the upper class were married only for the two families’ common interests. As for girls from poverty-stricken families, they risked being bought or sold to be concubines and even slaves of the riches. Many of them were deprived of freedom, let alone social status.

Historian and Sinologist John K. Fairbank described the Song Dynasty as an era of Commercial Revolution. Trade and business were flourished at that time and many people began to live a prosperous life, which may contribute to the tradition of *Hou Jia.* Marriages in the Song Dynasty were not confined within social classes (“婚姻不问阀阅”), which helped to boost social mobility and openness. And the wealth bequest to the bride in the form of doweries raised their economic rights and social status, which was indeed a good sign. Yet we could not forget that the Song Dynasty was still a period of feudalism and centralism when women were treated as the inferior of the two sexes and restricted to many outdated customs. Therefore, the paradox of lifting women’s social status while objectifying them might be boiled down to the limitation of people’s mind and thinking at that time. What we can do and should do today is to learn from the history and make it better for tomorrow.