

# Trends and determinants of female marriage migration in contemporary China

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of China's economy, an increasing number of unmarried young women are leaving their hometowns to work in big cities without *hukou* migration. Many of these floating women marry men they meet at work. It was reported recently that nearly 10-20% of these husbands and wives are non-*laoxiangs* (that is, they come from different places with different *hukou*). This is becoming a new type of Chinese marriage migration. Using the latest Third Wave survey on the social status of women in China, jointly carried out by the All-China Women' Federation and National Bureau of Statistics in December 2010, the characteristics and determinants of female marriage migration in the floating labor market were investigated at the individual and household level. Features of marriage migration under the floating and open marriage market were analyzed by logistic regression. The results indicate that migration marriage is homogamy marriage, which is obviously different from non-marriage migration. Floating females with better individual and family conditions integrate more easily into society at their workplaces and achieve marriage migration.

**Key words:** marriage migration, marriage pattern, Chinese floating labor market, logistic regression, Third Wave survey on the social status of women in China

## 1. Introduction

The permanent residence registration system for Chinese people is called "*hukou*". The *hukou*, as a household registration record, officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth. There are many requirements for a *hukou* to be able to migrate from one district to another. In 2011, there were a total of 252.78 million migrant workers (an increase of 4.4% compared to 2010) in China. In the floating labor market, there are a huge number of unmarried young females who leave their hometowns to work in big cities. However, their *hukous* are still registered in their original districts. Many of these floating women met and married their husbands where they work.

Traditionally, women are more inclined to find young men who share their same hometown. These men are called “*laoxiang*” (fellow-villager/fellow-townsmen). Therefore these couples’ registered districts of *hukou* are the same. However, an increasing number of floating women are marrying men met at work who are not their *laoxiang*. This type of marriage with a non-*laoxiang* husband, which means the couple does not share the same registered district in their *hukou*, is increasing rapidly (Fan, 2008; Li, 2012), and accounts for 10-20% of the floating women’s marriages.

Unlike traditional Chinese marriage migration, which is usually accompanied by *hukou* migration, marriages between floating young women and non-*laoxiangs* may occur without *hukou* migration, because of *hukou* migration’s many requirements. Nonetheless, this marriage pattern shares with traditional marriage migration that in both cases the unmarried young women left the local marriage market where their *hukou* was originally registered. This has become a new type of marriage migration and is increasing with the floating labor market. It is changing China’s traditional relatively closed and static geographically local marriage market.

There is an increasingly tight marriage squeeze result in China due to the long period of imbalance in the sex ratio at birth (SRB). Will the new marriage migration pattern have impacts on the whole of China’s marriage system? Will the passive opening of the local marriage markets forced by the floating young women workers redistribute the marriage squeeze and further marginalize the males in undeveloped rural areas? How does the large floating unmarried young female population, driven by geographically unbalanced economic development, change the relatively closed static local marriage markets and the relationship between the supply and demand for marriage partners?

Among the key issues in answering the above questions are the characteristics of and factors contributing to the new type of female marriage migration. We address these issues in the present paper. Currently, there is little systemic theoretical and empirical research on China’s marriage market, marriage migration given the background of the large-scale labor migration, and sex ratio imbalance. In this study, using the latest Third Survey of the Status of Chinese Women jointly carried out by the All-China Women’ Federation (ACWF) and Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), we investigate individual and household characteristics of marriage migration in the floating labor market. We also investigate the factors behind marriage migration in the floating and open Chinese marriage markets.

## 2. Review

### 2.1 Female marriage migration and its causes

Under China's *hukou* system, *hukou* migration usually accompanies the traditional marriage migration. Marriage migration has a positive effect on promoting regional exchanges and cultural integration, and also has a positive impact on maintaining some population diversity (Bossen, 2005). However, since it has a high degree of selectivity of gender and migration destination region, marriage migration from poor to rich areas may alleviate the marriage squeeze in the rich receiving areas, while increasing marriage difficulties among the vulnerable groups in the poor sending areas. Marriage migration even leads to a large number of older young men in economically backward regions who will never marry (Shi, 2006; Jiang, 2009).

The push-pull theory of population and immigration networks has been applied to explain the traditional marriage migration in China. This theory posits that the pull into resettlement areas is the main factor in marriage migration. The first reason is that there is a high sex ratio among unmarried young people and hence a severe marriage squeeze in resettlement areas, especially in economically backward rural areas. Second, there is a big difference in socio-economic development level between the sending and receiving areas. Immigrant network theory declares that large scale long-distance migration (including marriage migration) is dependent on, and can not be separated from, immigration network support systems. The immigrants as cultural carriers, accept the new concept of marriage and family values, new behavior and attitudes in receiving areas, and then drive a new and autonomous cultural environment (Massey, 1998). Many empirical studies on marriage migration motivation and causes have been carried out, including economic, regional, and personal factors (Liu, 2009; Ai, 2010).

With China's rapid social and economic development, the largest floating labor market in Chinese history is occurring now. Because the outflows of men tend to be temporary, while the outflows of women may be permanent, and many women may not return to their hometowns, the large-scale migration of unmarried women will have a great impact on the local marriage market in the sending areas where their *hukous* are originally registered. In particular, the marriage probability of the men left behind will be affected by the young women's leaving (Lei, 2009). There are two completely different views in the theoretical study of population migration and

marriage. Some scholars believe that this migration has a negative impact on marriage and postpones the marriage time of floating people. The weak position of the floating population is not conducive to their marriage in the receiving places (Parrado, 1998; Chattopadhyay, 1999). Other studies indicate that this migration increases the mate range and marriage opportunities, improves the possibility of marriage in different regions, and is beneficial in accelerating the marriage of the floating population (Jampaklay, 2006). The frequency of this new type of female marriage migration (marrying non-*laoxiang*) along with the large-scale migration will broaden the distribution of the marriage squeeze in China. Because labor mobility is strongly affected by the level of the economic development, how the new type of floating female marriage migration evolves with the development of China's economy will have a very important impact on China's future, family structure, and population and social development. Both at the macro and micro level, studies of this new issue are few, and the subject is worthy of more attention.

## 2.2. Female marriage behavior patterns and characteristics

Many theories about marriage and family of the floating population have been proposed, including population structure theory, structural assimilation theory, sub-cultural theory, social status analysis theory, exchange theory, selective theory, and migration adaptation theory (Sun, 2010). The population structure theory suggests that marriage and family behavior of the inflow migrant population are a function of the size of the population, appropriate marital sex ratio, residence density, etc. The exchange theory states that the pressure coming from the new work environment increase the chance of marriage exchange among the floating population, and accelerates exchange between the socio-economic advantages and non-social economic advantages in the marriage market of the floating population, which will eventually contribute to more marriages.

According to the degree and direction of some of the couple's differences, the marriage relationship is often classified as homogeneous and heterogeneous. Most research on marriage patterns focuses on the economic match (such as education, occupation and income) and age match (Fu X, 2008). Studies of the couples' education match and age match are often based on the marriage exchange theory, which emphasizes the assumption of equal exchange. For female marriage migration in a county in Guangdong Province, Fan and Li (2002) found that the migrant

daughters-in-law had higher education levels than their husbands. The essence of Chinese rural female marriage migration is a resource exchange. The migrant women's husbands tend to be older, in poor economic condition, or with a physical or mental defect, and have limited opportunity to marry in the local marriage market. Lu Shuzhen (2010) found that personal factors make the greatest contribution to marriage migration. Apart from employment factors, the contributions of the other factors are similar. With increase in the degree of adaptation to city life, the possibility of marriage migration among the floating population will increase, and their re-socialization into urban life will lay the foundation for their social integration. A study of Taiwan's foreign daughters-in-law found that the Taiwanese men who married Southeast Asian brides are often those individuals who are old, in poor personal condition, and can not find local Taiwanese young women to marry (Tsay, 2004). Lin (2006) found that transnational marriage between Korean men and Chinese women of the Korean minority group in Yanbian city reflects that the Korean women use the advantage of their young age to obtain an excellent living environment through marriage.

The marriage matching pattern of traditional marriage migration from the macro-level has been investigated by many researchers. However, due to the difficulty of obtaining individual data, few studies have addressed marriage matching and factors influencing floating women using regression analysis.

### 2.3 The concept of marriage and mating preferences of the floating population

There are many studies of the traditional concept of marriage and mating preferences. A mate preference list including 18 items proposed by Hill in 1949 was widely cited for decades after its release. Based on Hill's mating preference list and using factor analysis of the data from different countries, Shackelford (1999) proposed universal indicators including love, resources, dependency, security, stability, looks and health, education, the desire for family, and religion. Greitemeyer (2007) suggested that women tend to choose men with high socioeconomic status, while men tend to choose women with socio-economic status somewhat lower than their own. Studies of these mating preferences have not paid attention to the marriage market structure and environmental factors such as migration and gender imbalance.

For floating women, the opportunity to meet non-*laoxiangs* increases during their work in cities, so it may become difficult for them to return home again and marry men from the same

counties because through integration of urban and rural culture, migrant women have broadened their horizons, improved their economic and personal position, and achieved self-reliance, all of which produce change in their concept of marriage (Huang, 2002). Especially for the new generation of migrant workers with more education than their parents, the rapid decline in farming opportunities changes their love and marriage concept from those of the farmers living in rural areas, but it is also different from those of the urban residents (Pan, 2007; Liu, 2008). Being subject to discrimination, differences in culture and economics, gender, city life, social interaction, and social distance have a significant impact on their marriage decisions (Xu, 2006; Ye, 2006). The mating preferences of the floating population emphasize emotional factors, personal qualities, physiological conditions, and family conditions, and at the same time free love is becoming an ideal pattern of love (Ye, 2005). The mating objectives of the rural migrants are usually *laoxiang* with free love. However, due to the restrictions imposed by the economic situation and their contact range, they have to cope with a narrow spouse-hunting network (Hu, 2008).

#### 2.4 Comments

The structure of the marriage market, environmental effects, and their change have rarely been taken into account in studies of marriage patterns and their determinants. The marriage market should not be ignored in marriage research. In addition, many investigations are developed at the macro-level while there is little micro-level research based on individual survey data. There is much work to do when Western marriage market theories are applied to the current open, floating, and unbalanced Chinese marriage market, especially for marriage migration in different regions. Our aim is to achieve greater understanding of the marriage market and marriage behavior in current floating China.

### 3. Data and Methods

The data used in our study come from the Third Survey of the Status of Chinese Women jointly carried out by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The time basis is December 1, 2010. The first and second surveys were carried out in 1990 and 2000. This is a continuous official program and the most authoritative, comprehensive, high-quality national survey of women's social living conditions. The survey used

a four-stage sampling program, including cities, towns, communities and villages. The probability systematic sampling technique, based on the random starting point method, was applied to families in communities and villages. The third survey investigated social stratification, family division of labor, roles of gender, family relations, family wellbeing, etc. Considering the rapid growth of the floating labor market, special questions for the floating women were proposed, i.e., the factors and decision-making of floating-or-not. There are a total of 29,000 household samples nationwide with equal numbers of males and females. There are 2,121 samples of floating persons who have been working in regions different from their hometowns for at least six months.

The marriage market exchange theories of marriage indicate that the effective factors of marital behaviors and mating preferences include individual level (e.g., personal financial, personal non-economic and family factors) and marriage market level factors. Based on the traditional marriage market framework, we propose the revised framework shown in Figure 1, where we emphasize the influence of the marriage market environment on floating women’s marriage. As shown in Figure 1, the influence of individual household level factors on marriage probability is related to the marriage market environment and its changes (i.e., floating, sex ratio, competition, etc.). In this paper, we emphasize the impact of floating factors in the marriage market. Our objective is to investigate which factors affect the floating women’s marriage migration probability, or their marriage probability with non-*laoxiangs*; therefore marriage migration is selected as a dependent variable. Six logistic regression models were constructed.

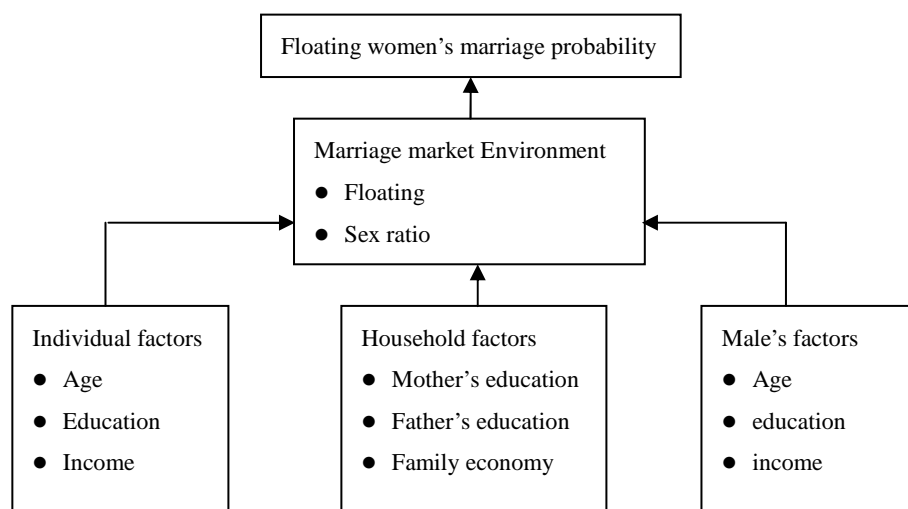


Fig.1 analytical framework for influential factors on floating women’s marriage

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Descriptive analysis

In the survey data, there are 1,119 floating females, of whom 135 met their husbands who are non-*laoxiangs* when they worked outside of their hometowns. The proportion of this marriage migration among the total survey floating females is 12.06%, and 21.7% of the married females. There are 1,032 floating males, and 10.07% of them (i.e., 104 males, 17.89% of the married males) married with non-*laoxiangs* during their floating experience. This indicates that current marriage migration is a large and ignored proportion of the floating people's marriages. It also implies that nearly one-fifth of the unmarried young floating women in the floating labor market are leaving the local marriage market where their *hukou* was originally registered. The outflow of young women's marriage migration in the floating labor market may increase the local marriage squeeze in the output places, which is bad news for the sending places where the marriage squeeze is serious. This may partly explain why a large number of young unmarried migrant women would lead to a fall in the men's marriage rate in sending places (female emigration rate in rural areas increasing by 10% may cause local rural men's marriage rate to drop by 5% (Lei, 2009)).

### 4.2 Marriage pattern and characteristics

Table 1 describes the marriage pattern and characteristics of floating females from the survey data. The samples are divided into two groups. One is the migration group in which the floating female married non-*laoxiangs*, which is the "new" type of marriage migration group. The other group is the *laoxiang* group, in which the floating females married their *laoxiang* whose hometown or *hukou*-registered counties are the same as theirs. It has been pointed out that traditional marriage is often achieved in the local marriage market. The marriage between *laoxiangs* in the floating labor market belongs to the traditional marriage pattern because the females don't leave the local marriage market. The comparison between the migration group and *laoxiang* group is helpful in investigating the factors contributing to marriage migration in the floating labor market.



Table 1 Description Analysis

	Migration group			Laoxiang group		
	Mean value	Std.err.	Middle number	Mean value	Std.err.	Middle number
Individual characteristics						
Education level	1.54	0.78	1	0.93	0.80	1
Spouse' education	1.731	0.814	2	1.21	1.74	1
Initial marriage age ( year)	23.65	3.12	23	22.42	2.48	22
Husband's initial marriage age	26.09	3.54	26	24.1	2.87	24
Annual income(Yuan)	22457	25437	18000	19718	15293	16600
Spouse' annual income(Yuan)	28059	23717	20000	22023	15544	20000
Floating time(year)	8.60	5.65	7	8.61	5.88	7
Family characteristics						
Couples 'Age difference(year)	2.45	3.25	2	1.69	2.44	1
Couples' education difference	0.192	0.694	0	0.277	0.749	1
Couples' income diff.(Yuan)	4313	15817	2000	2581	15849	1000
Mother' education	0.396	0.588	0	0.200	0.521	0
Father's education	0.535	0.731	1	0.449	0.697	0

The average education level of the females and their husbands in the migration group is clearly higher than those in the *laoxiang* group. The average annual income of females and their husbands in the migration group is also higher than those in the *laoxiang* group. The average education level of migration-marriage females is also higher than those in *laoxiang* group. It is not difficult to understand that the higher the educational level of parents, the easier for them to accept their daughter's marriage with a male from another place. These results imply that the individual conditions of the marriage migration females are better than those who married *laoxiangs*. It also suggests that floating females with relatively good individual and family conditions integrate more easily into the society at their workplace.

At the household level, in the migration group the initial marriage ages of couples are both higher than those in the *laoxiang* group, by nearly one year for women and two years for men. Much more time and hard work are required to improve one's education level and salary, so a higher initial marriage age in the migration group is expected. The results also show that floating may postpone the marriage age. The agreement between the empirical data and theory also validate the data quality of the third survey. The average difference in education level between the couples in the migration group is smaller than that in the *laoxiang* group.

### 4.3 Measures

Our objective is to investigate which factors affect floating women's marriage migration probability, or their marriage probability with non-*laoxiangs*; the dependent variable is selected as marriage migration. Its value is defined as 1 if the woman married with a non-*laoxiang*, and 0 if she married with a *laoxiang*, so that logistic regression model can be applied. According to the above analytical framework and the results of the descriptive analysis, independent variables include women's individual factors, family factors, and floating time, which is used to measure adaptation to city life. The detailed definitions of the measure variables are given in Table 2.

Table 2 measure variables

variables	Definitions
Dependent variable	
Marriage migration	1: married with non- <i>laoxiang</i> , 2: married with <i>laoxiang</i>
Independent variables	
Individual variables	
age	2010-birthday
Education level	Four types, 0: primary school and below 1: middle school 2: high school 3: college and above
Annual income	The annual income before the survey basis time
Spouse's annual income	Annual income before the survey basis time
Initial marriage age	Continuous variable
Spouse's ini. Marr. age	Continuous variable
Migrant time	Time since migrant
Family variables	
Family economics	1: male's better 2: female's better 3: nearly same
Father's education	Same to above individual's
Mother's education	Same as the above
Spouse's education	Same as the above

### 4.4 Logistic regression analysis

Six logistic regression models were constructed. Model 1 takes into account only a woman's individual characteristics. The spouse's individual variables are added in model 2, and family factors are added in model 3. Model 4 is a stepwise regression model. Although this study is from the point of view of the female, a regression model for males who married with non-*laoxiang* females was also constructed for comparison. These different regression models indicate the impacts of the independent variables on the marriage migration probability.

Model 1 shows that age and education level are obviously related to the marriage migration probability of floating women. The negative coefficient for age indicates that the older the floating woman, the smaller her marriage probability. Generally in marriage competition, a young woman has the advantage over an older woman. On the other hand, recent young floating women more readily accept marriage with non-*laoxiang* than older women. Education level is positively related to marriage probability with non-*laoxiang*. Furthermore, with increase in education level, the effect of education level also become larger, which implies that the higher the education level of the floating women, the higher their marriage probability.

Spouses' individual characters are added in model 2. It can be seen that spouses' characteristics, i.e., income and education level, are not significantly related to floating women's marriage migration. Age and education level remain clearly related to marriage probability with non-*laoxiang* after the spouses' parameters are controlled. The marriage migration probability is mainly dependent on the woman's own characteristics, which imply that the women in floating groups have relatively strong independence in marriage. However, in model 2, the negative coefficient for age increases, which indicate men's stronger preference for younger women. The very small decrease in the coefficient for the education level implies that men don't care much about women's education.

More independent variables for floating women and their mothers are accounted for in model 3. In the added independent variables, the income of women is not clearly related to the dependent variable. This shows that economic conditions are not important determinants of female marriage migration. The large coefficient for the floating time in model 3 indicates its clear positive relation to female marriage migration. This is understandable because women with long floating time would be better integrated into the local life and environment in the city where they work. They would have a much more open marriage concept and have more opportunities to meet males who are not *laoxiang*. Relative to primary school level, the marriage migration probability increases when the mother's education level is at middle school. Perhaps mothers with higher education find it easier to accept their daughter's marriage migration. However, when the mother's education level increases to high school, it becomes negatively related to marriage migration. This is not strange in China, because most of the floating females come from relatively poor families or poor rural areas. If the mothers have a higher education level, the families usually have good economic

conditions. They can provide more opportunities to their daughters than parents with below-middle-school education and prefer that their daughters eventually make their business in their hometown.

## 5. Conclusions

The results in Table 2 imply that there is a clearly different marriage pattern between the marriage migration and non-marriage migration of floating women in the Chinese floating labor market. The results from the logistic regression models include: (1) increase in education level increases the marriage migration probability; (2) the longer the floating time of unmarried young women in the floating labor market, the higher the probability that they marry non-*laoxiang*; (3) the openness of the female's family, especially the education level of her mother, has a strong impact on the daughter's marriage migration; (4) good family economy helps to increase a women's marriage migration probability.

The unequal marriage migration probabilities of floating females and males in the Chinese floating labor market will lead to geographical variation in the local marriage squeeze across the whole of China, and result in a tighter local marriage squeeze in many undeveloped rural areas. In the long term, China's economy is expected to grow rapidly and the unbalanced development among different districts is not easy to correct quickly, so that there will be a very large-scale floating labor market for a long time. The resulting patterns of marriage migration that will follow the rapid increase of the floating labor market are an important component of China's social development.

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Table 3 Logistic regression model of marriage migration impact factors

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Individual's characteristics			
Education level (reference group: primary school and below)			
Middle school	1.28004 <sup>***</sup> (0.397)	1.2249 <sup>***</sup> (0.4081)	1.0811 <sup>***</sup> (0.4012)
High school	1.9135 <sup>***</sup> (0.4078)	1.9029 <sup>***</sup> (0.4188)	1.5376 <sup>***</sup> (0.4301)
College and above	2.1537 <sup>***</sup> (0.5269)	2.1476 <sup>***</sup> (0.5382)	1.7213 <sup>***</sup> (0.5799)
Annual income	0.3156 (1.3571)	0.5326 (1.278)	1.4725 (1.4513)
Initial marriage age	-3.132 <sup>***</sup> (0.9335)	-3.8930 <sup>***</sup> (1.0976)	-3.7637 <sup>***</sup> (1.2155)
Family characteristics			
Spouse's ini. Marr. age		6.139 (1.4854)	5.3784 <sup>**</sup> (1.6492)
Spouse' annual income		1.1123 (1.2892)	1.5733 (1.6103)
Spouse's education level (reference group: primary school and below)			
Middle school		0.3976 (0.5424)	0.4381 (0.5487)
High school		0.7831 (0.5618)	0.6839 (0.5727)
College and above		0.8904 (0.6789)	0.8182 (0.6912)
Difference in Education		-0.3145 <sup>*</sup> (0.3521)	-0.4732 (0.2731)
Family economic condition before marriage(reference group: 3)			
Man's better			0.3217 (0.3127)
Woman's better			0.8582 <sup>***</sup> (0.2934)
Mother's education level (reference group: primary school and below)			
Middle school			0.7133 <sup>**</sup> (0.3244)
High school			-0.2131 (0.6204)
College and above			-
Father's education level (reference group: primary school and below)			
Middle school			0.3215 (0.1243)
High school			0.2743 (0.1305)
College and above			-
Floating variables			
Floating time	1.1357 <sup>**</sup> (0.6194)	1.2673 <sup>**</sup> (0.6587)	1.3833 <sup>**</sup> (0.6975)
Constant value	-0.741 <sup>*</sup> (0.6531)	-0.7187 <sup>*</sup> (0.6848)	-5.748 <sup>***</sup> (1.3793)
Percent Concordant	72.3	72.4	78.7