

The Rural-Urban Intermarriage and Female Identity Formation in Contemporary China

Peini Li^{1,a,*}

¹Sichuan University, No.24 South Section 1, Yihuan Road, Chengdu, China

a. pennyyerin@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This article analyzes the marital experiences of rural-urban female migrants in contemporary China through qualitative semi-structured interviews. It argues that these women have gained more autonomy and higher status within their families through intermarriage. Despite these improvements, they continue to face significant prejudices and pressures from family members and society. The empirical research reveals that female migrants often struggle with managing relationships with their elders. Additionally, differences in economic income and the division of domestic labor lead to conflicts over household finances between female migrants and their partners. The study found that female migrants are under multiple pressures from their partners and parents-in-law, often choosing to compromise in domestic conflicts. Overall, the autonomy that female migrants exhibit in intermarriages highlights a significant transformation in their self-determination and self-identification.

Keywords: Intermarriage, rural-urban migration, female migrants.

1. Introduction

Since the implementation of China's opening-up and reform policy in the 1980s, there has been a notable increase in the interaction of people, trade, and information flow between urban and rural areas. Simultaneously, the migration of rural populations to urban regions has intensified, with rural-to-urban migrant workers actively engaging in urban employment. Compared to their male counterparts, female migrant workers have drawn significant attention from sociologists due to the unequal treatment they receive based on gender and their adaptive responses to new living environments. A growing body of academic research focuses on the experiences of female migrant workers and broader social transformations.

This research examines the gradual integration of female migrant workers into the urban workforce and the imbalanced status of rural women in intermarriage. Intermarriage refers to marriages between different social groups. In intra-group marriages between similar social groups, elements such as religious beliefs, ethnicity, and social strata are critical in mate selection. These factors are equally crucial in intermarriages. Intermarriage is not an index of assimilation but a continuous process of mate selection based on the aforementioned elements [1]. The intermarriage discussed in this paper focuses on the marital relationships between rural migrant workers in cities and urban residents.

Since the implementation of the opening-up and reform policy, an increasing number of female migrant workers have chosen to settle in cities. Over the past 30 years, the challenges faced by these

women have expanded from workplace employment to family relationships. Compared to intra-marriages between urban citizens, intermarital couples exhibit distinctive characteristics, including differences in social class, gender dynamics, and family relationships. In China's traditional patriarchal society, family-centric ideology emphasizes the supremacy of the husband. Within this cultural context, rural women may find it challenging to manage family conflicts with their urban husbands. Additionally, they face status differences with their children, as those born and raised in urban areas inherently identify more with urban life and culture. Therefore, it is imperative to study the family lives of married rural women currently living in urban areas. This research will facilitate a better understanding of the gender dynamics in intermarriage and the uneven development between rural and urban areas due to a series of institutional and social factors.

2. Literature Review

Existing research has illustrated that the household registration system (*hukou*) has played a crucial role in the regional disparities experienced by migrant workers in contemporary China. Liu [2] highlights the unequal hierarchy between rural and urban residents due to the *hukou* system, widely known as the rural-urban dual system. Established in the 1950s, the *hukou* system classifies people as either rural residents or urban citizens to control population mobility. Rural *hukou* often pose significant obstacles for migrant workers when applying for jobs [3]. Meanwhile, Zhan [4] argues that social exclusion and labor market limitations constrain migrant workers' career choices. He asserts that even if the *hukou* system were abolished, the well-being and living quality of migrant workers would not improve significantly. This is due to the transformations brought about by the opening-up and reform policies launched in the 1980s. Despite the waning influence of the *hukou* system, rural migrants continue to face discrimination in urban areas. To settle in urban areas, they must obtain urban citizenship and improve their income.

Gender and marriage-related issues have also emerged among rural-urban female migrants. These women have developed individual strategies to advance their social status through marital relationships with urban males. For rural women seeking to migrate, the economic aspect of marriage often takes precedence over affection [5]. The division in legal citizenship leads to cultural prejudice against rural migrants within urban areas, which further affects the intimate relationships of intermarital families. Even if people do not explicitly express their prejudice, *hukou* remains a critical element in mate selection. In the marriage market, individuals with rural *hukou* status are often perceived as having more pragmatic concerns. Specifically, within the marital hierarchy across rural counties and urban cities, individuals holding urban household status typically assume a dominant role in marriages. From their perspective, rural females are regarded as more "naïve" and sensible, making them more popular with urban males. Given the existence of the household registration system in contemporary China, marriage has become a channel for upward social mobility rather than merely a lived experience. Rural female migrants proactively choose male partners who can help improve their political and economic welfare in urban regions, even if these partners are not always attractive. Thus, marriage serves as a means for achieving upward social mobility [5]. This social phenomenon is similar to that of Indian society, where dowries compensate the bride's rural family with material benefits, reaffirming that marriage can be partially economic [6]. Upon marriage, rural females are often burdened with domestic work and remain invisible within social communities in urban areas. In Vietnam, migrant women face heavy marginalization and distrust from local inhabitants. These female "outsiders" are constrained within their homes, as they are not welcomed or allowed to frequent public spaces. This ambiguous position undermines migrant women in both family and social contexts [7].

3. Research Methods

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data for this research. In total, four in-person interviews were conducted, each lasting between 15 to 30 minutes and audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured question list, including queries about the respondents' motivations for getting married, potential disagreements with their partners, their assumptions about marriage, and their current marital experiences. The participants included a 27-year-old civil servant, Li, a 26-year-old civil servant, Chunyan, a 49-year-old teacher, Peng, and a 35-year-old home appliance salesperson, Liu. By collecting rich empirical data from these interviews, this method enables an in-depth understanding of the participants' viewpoints and life experiences. Additionally, this research draws on data from the Third Nationwide Survey on the status of Chinese women and the national census to support the analysis [8-9].

4. Female Migrants and Their Marital Relationships in Urban China

4.1. The Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Female Migrants in China

Since the 1950s, the Chinese government has implemented strict control over the floating population—those who do not live in their registered place of residence. According to the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Residence Registration, citizens migrating from rural to urban areas must provide various proofs to enter and settle in cities, such as labor contracts approved by the Human Resource and Social Security Bureau in the receiving city, admission certificates from schools, or approval for relocation from urban household registration authorities [10]. Until the 1970s, these restrictions on rural-to-urban migration were strictly enforced, strongly encouraging the floating population to leave cities and return to their hometowns [11-12]. The data report of the Third Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women shows that among women who are currently on the move, 87.9 percent are engaged in income-generating work, and 61.5 percent are satisfied with their work and life while away from home [8]. The main problems encountered by migrant women while working in urban areas are 'being looked down upon' and 'wages being owed or withheld,' accounting for 14.7 percent and 14.2 percent, respectively. Additionally, among married female migrants, 15.7 percent met their spouses outside rural areas, indicating that the scope of intermarriage among rural migrant women has expanded. However, the persistent issues of discrimination and wage withholding highlight the social and economic barriers these women face, despite their contributions to the urban workforce and their personal satisfaction with their employment situations.

Consequently, the lack of economic gains influences the labor division within the households of female migrants. During the interviews, three participants, Chunyan, Li, and Peng, who work as civil servants, stated that their employment contributed significantly to their families' income. In contrast, another participant, Liu, decided to quit her job when she got married and became pregnant. She had been completely relying on her husband for about four years. Liu said: "Before getting married, I worked at a jewelry store. The salary was not high, and the workplace was far from home. My husband and his parents wanted me to stay at home and take care of the children, so I decided to resign." This reflects traditional gender roles in the employment decisions of female migrants. The difference among the interviewees shows that when a female migrant has significantly lower economic income compared to her husband, her status within the family tends to be lower, and ultimately, it is the husband who holds decision-making power. Moreover, females often assume a traditional role, focusing on supporting their husbands and raising the children.

After marriage, all participants experienced a gradual reduction in their social circles and increasingly relied on their husbands' social networks, leading to a contraction of their personal living space. Notably, both interviewees Peng and Liu indicated that most of their post-marriage friendships originated from their husbands' pre-marriage social circles. They now have limited contact with friends from before marriage and primarily socialize with their husbands' friends when dining out. This social isolation restricts their access to new information and diminishes their independent support networks. Consequently, these female migrants may perceive themselves as extensions of their husbands, which can negatively impact their self-esteem.

Furthermore, it has been observed that the employment income of female migrants plays a pivotal role in their family dynamics. After marriage, female migrants often encounter social isolation and may experience constraints in their employment choices due to pressures from their husbands' families. Despite many achieving stable economic incomes in urban areas, these female migrants continue to face persistent challenges that warrant further attention and intervention to ensure their well-being and equitable treatment.

4.2. Female Migrants' Attitudes Toward Marriage

Regarding mate selection, female migrants show a strong inclination toward marrying urban men. Historical cases illustrate that even in the last century, migrant women were willing to engage in bigamy to marry city-dwelling men. According to survey data from the Fourth and Fifth National Census of China, motivations such as 'employment and business' and 'marriage migration' consistently outnumber other reasons for migration among women opting to change their residence and hukou [13-14]. This trend underscores several key motivations and attitudes among female migrants. Participant Peng expressed:

"I felt really excited at the thought of going into the city. I really dislike the hygienic conditions in the countryside. I couldn't stand the dirty and messy environment of the courtyard when I was a child." (Interviewee Peng, 49 years old)

Many rural women view marrying urban men as a means to improve their socio-economic status. The prospect of relocating to an urban area and gaining access to better living conditions serves as a significant incentive.

On the contrary, there are female migrants who no longer view marriage as a necessary path to urban life but as a means to pursue their own happiness. During the interviews, participants Peng and Liu mentioned that they met their husbands through social networks involving relatives or friends. Peng mentioned that she initially had no intention of marrying but agreed to the arranged date with her relatives so as not to disappoint them. Liu was introduced to her husband by friends. She expressed that she married him because she wanted to spend her life with someone and sought stability through marriage. Peng, on the other hand, views marriage as a natural progression, stating:

"It is my dream to have a family of myself." (Interviewee Peng, 49 years old)

Compared to older generations, these female migrants now prioritize their own happiness and no longer see marriage as the ultimate life goal.

4.3. Inter-marriage Between Rural Female Migrants and Urban Males

Apart from the aforementioned challenges, intermarital couples also encounter difficulties in parenting, particularly concerning the hukou system. In schools, children with urban hukou tend to be more popular than those without. In a child's perception, rural hukou signifies affluence and cultural capital. Conversely, children with urban hukou may face bullying as peers may perceive them to have less virtue. An anecdote from a newspaper report in the 1980s illustrates this disparity--a little girl wrote a letter to her mother, saying: "Mom, I'm sorry, I hope you and dad agree to divorce,

and when I can switch to urban hukou, you can remarry, because my classmates all make fun of me for being a ‘terrestrial repairer’.” Consequently, female migrants often face societal discrimination, both externally and within their own families [15].

Within families of female migrants, conflicts arise due to unequal gender roles and disparities in domestic labor division. Given the disparity in hukou status, marriages between rural female migrants and urban males often involve a “status exchange”, where each partner brings different social resources to the relationship [16]. This exchange typically entails one spouse having an advantage in background while the other holds a higher social status. Despite not being entirely equal in background or social status, they achieve balance within the family by mutually leveraging their respective advantages. For instance, the female migrant may face economic disadvantages compared to the urban male, and therefore gains economic stability and uplift through marriage. In return, her husband may expect her to assume primary responsibility for family care and domestic chores. During the interviews, it became evident that the most common conflicts between spouses revolved around childcare and financial matters. Participants Peng and Liu noted that women predominantly shoulder the responsibility for childcare. The lack of support from men contributes to physical and mental exhaustion and creates an imbalance in family roles. Additionally, women often manage household expenses such as grocery shopping and daily necessities. Over time, unresolved financial disputes accumulate, straining marital relationships and potentially leading to divorce in severe cases. Therefore, persistent inequality in gender roles can undermine marital harmony, leaving women feeling dissatisfied and resentful, while men may remain unaware of their wives’ sentiments.

It is common for women to gain economic stability and social status through marriage. However, if their contributions are not recognized by their husband’s parents, the balance of the “status exchange” is disrupted, eventually leading to family conflicts [16]. Notably, a female’s economic situation significantly impacts her marital experiences. Specifically, the husband’s parents often look down on female migrants because of their lower economic status compared to their sons. During the interview, participant Peng’s remarks exemplified this:

“There were a lot of disagreements between me and my parents in law. That becomes the main source of conflict in the early stages of our marriage. His parents felt that I didn’t fit the role of a good wife.” (Interviewee Peng, 49 years old)

Similarly, participant Liu encountered a similar issue in her marriage:

“My parents in law think that if I don’t have a job, I can’t take care of my child well, and they often undermine me behind my back.” (Interviewee Liu, 35 years old)

Compared to other married women, migrant females find it more challenging to manage relationships with their elders. Moreover, living with their husband’s family and being distant from their own families, migrant females face greater difficulties in receiving emotional support from their parents. In marital conflicts, female migrants typically experience pressure from two fronts: their husband and their parents-in-law. This places them at a disadvantage during disputes and often leads to greater likelihood of compromise. Consequently, female migrants struggle to attain equal rights and respect within marriage.

5. Conclusion

Over the past four decades, China’s rural revitalization strategy and urbanization development have narrowed the economic gap between urban and rural areas. Inter-marriage between individuals with rural and urban hukou has also become increasingly common. However, prejudices among urban residents against women with rural household registrations persist. This study finds that for female migrants, inter-marriage is no longer merely a means to access urban life as it was in the past, but rather a choice for autonomous living in cities, facilitated either through marriage or employment. Drawing on the theory of “status exchange”, this research reveals that differences in economic income

and domestic labor division often lead female migrants into conflicts with their partners over family finances [16]. Moreover, pressure from both husbands and parents-in-law frequently compels female migrants to conform or compromise when faced with family issues. As a result, while female migrants in intermarriages have achieved greater autonomy and higher status within their families, they continue to contend with prejudices and societal pressures from both family members and broader society.

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