Published in final edited form as:

J Contemp China. 2014 ; 23(86): 351–371. doi:10.1080/10670564.2013.832541.

Male marriage squeeze and inter-provincial marriage in central China: evidence from Anhui

Lige Liu, Xiaoyi Jin, Melissa J. Brown, and Marcus W. Feldman

Lige Liu is an assistant professor of School of Humanities at Northwest A&F University in China. Xiaoyi Jin is a professor of the Institute for Population and Development Studies, School of Public Policy and Administration at Xi'an Jiaotong University. Melissa J. Brown is a senior research associate at the Minnesota Population Center at University of Minnesota. Marcus W. Feldman is a professor of Biology at Stanford

Xiaoyi Jin: xiaoyijin@mail.xjtu.edu.cn

Abstract

Since the 1990s, inter-provincial female migration for marriage has become important in central and eastern rural China. Using survey data from X County in rural Anhui Province, we explore the arrangement of inter-provincial marriages, as well as the characteristics of husbands and wives, marital satisfaction, and marital stability for these marriages. We find that inter-provincial marriage is an important option for local men to respond to the marriage squeeze and the increasing expense of marriage. It helps to relieve the shortage of marriageable women in the local marriage market. Because this kind of marriage is based on economic exchange, but not affection, it is often subject to a higher risk of marriage instability, and can lead to such illegal behaviors as marriage fraud and mercenary marriage.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, China has experienced an abnormally high sex ratio at birth (SRB). By 2009, the SRB in China had increased to 119.45 from 108.5 in 1981.¹ At the end of 2010, the SRB was still high at 118.06,² while the normal range is between 105 and 107. The high SRB and female child mortality have led to a deviation of the overall sex ratio from normal, with a massive surplus of males in the marriage market. China's census data show that overall sex ratios were above 105 between 1982 and 2010,³ far higher than the normal range between 97.9–100.3.⁴ Because the cohorts of excess males born in the 1980s have just reached the appropriate ages to marry and to have children, China will face a male marriage squeeze for a long time. At present, the marriage squeeze appears more severe in rural China than in the urban areas. In a sample survey of 364 rural administrative villages in 28 provinces, there were on average at least nine involuntary bachelors aged 28 and older per village who were unable to marry; the marriage squeeze in China's western countryside was more serious than in central and eastern rural areas because of regional disparities in economic development and population migration.⁵ Poston and Glover estimated that there would be 23 million surplus marriageable males between 2000 and 2020.⁶

Correspondence to: Xiaoyi Jin, xiaoyijin@mail.xjtu.edu.cn.

Meanwhile, there is a strong universal marriage culture in China, especially in rural areas. In recent years, in contrast to the decline of the marriage rate in the United States and Europe⁷, the marriage rate in China has remained high. Our calculation based on 2010 census data shows that the marriage rates for rural men and women aged between 35 and 39 are 97.2% and 99.5, respectively. Our preliminary analysis of the data from X County found that 96% of never-married men above 28 reported that they had experienced various difficulties in marrying, and were forced to remain single.

Partner selection is a complex dynamic process. Under the marriage squeeze, a deficit of potential wives decreases men's marriage rates, just as a deficit of desirable marriageable men would reduce women's chance of marriage.⁸ Members of the surplus sex who have more resources and better living conditions are more attractive, so they need not lower their criteria for choosing a partner. Those of inferior status have fewer potential partners, and may be forced to enlarge the pool of marriageable partners by lowering their criteria in choosing a spouse, marrying at a later age, or remain unmarried.⁹ In China there is a strong universal marriage culture and with more men in the marriage market, women's marriage value is increased and surplus males have to compete for a limited number of women. Lowering partner preference is an important way for men of inferior status to marry, and choosing a woman from another province is one option to make a less than ideal marriage.

In traditional rural China, affinal are important labor and financial resources for rural families because they can provide support for important events such as contracting a marriage, building a new house, or labor and equipment at peak periods; close affinal links are also maintained through reciprocal visits and gift exchanges.¹⁰ Additionally, a marriage near a women's natal family is advantageous to her because she can retain contact with and receive social support from her family or her natal village.¹¹ Thus there is a strong tradition of local marriage in rural areas; even in the context of massive labor migration, most marriages are still within the same township or the same county. For example, in Li's study, among 353 marriages from before 1950 up to 2003, 84% of the wives came from the same village, township, or county; in Bossen's study of three villages, between 88% and 95% of wives came from nearby villages located within a distance of less than 20 kilometers.¹²

However, since the 1990s, because of the great regional differences in economic development and living standards in rural areas, the actual number of long-distance inter-provincial marriages, has gradually increased, and has become an important form of migration. The 1990 and 2000 census revealed that the number of inter-provincial marriage migrants was about 1.5 million. Owing to the obstacle of the *hukou* system (household registration) and the status gap between urban and rural people, marriage migration for rural people is usually from one rural village to another.

Under the norms of China's virilocal marriage, women are the overwhelming majority of inter-provincial marriage migrants. China's 2000 national census data revealed that there were eight times as many female marriage migrants as male ones. In 1990, marriage accounted for 35 percent of rural-to-rural female inter-provincial migration, and only three percent of rural-to-rural men's migration between provinces.¹³ Marriage migration is often regarded as an economic strategy for rural women, especially women from poor areas, to

improve their socioeconomic status.¹⁴ Although most women wish to marry near their natal home, they may prefer to marry out and escape poverty if their natal communities are hardscrabble.¹⁵ Marriage migration tends to be from poorer western to wealthier eastern rural China, and reflects regional disparity in economic levels. In fact, in Asia, there is increasing international marriage migration from less-developed countries or regions, such as Vietnam, Philippines, mainland China and parts of other southeast Asia, to more-developed countries or regions, such as Japan, South Korea, south China and Taiwan.¹⁶ Unlike labor migration, most marriage migration is rural-to-rural from poorer regions or countries to wealthier regions or countries.

Under the combined effects of the surplus of males and regional differences of economic development, some studies worry that because rural men in more developed eastern rural areas have strong motivation to marry nonlocal women to relieve the shortage of local marriageable women, while rural women in less developed areas have strong motivation to marry out to escape poverty, the marriage market in less developed western rural areas will become even more unbalanced.¹⁷ Yunnan, for example, which has a more even SRB, faces the most serious gender imbalance and shortage of females because of the net emigration of marriageable women.¹⁸ The 1990 Census showed that, of the total female out-migration for Yunnan, marriage could explain 72.7 percent of cases¹⁹. Between 1995 and 2000, the net female marriage migrants for Yunnan were 119,000, and it is estimated the fraction of never-married men aged 30 and above will be at 10.71 percent²⁰.

Recent studies indicate that both wives and husbands in inter-provincial marriages are socioeconomically disadvantaged. On the one hand, out-of-province women often marry men who are located in desired areas but of inferior status in their local marriage market because they are older, previously married, less educated, disabled or poor.²¹ These men find it harder to find a suitable wife in their own county, so they are more likely than other men to resort to imported brides.²² On the other hand, nonlocal wives are often young, poor and have little education; they have little chance to improve their economic situation except by marriage.²³ But Fan and Li found that in Gaozhou County of western Guangdong Province, migrant females from Guangxi Province had a higher education level than their husbands; men's lower education was offset by their desirable location.²⁴

Marriage migrants are vulnerable to deception, abuse, discrimination, and abduction, and their rights may not be well protected by law. Because they are far away from their natal families, they cannot provide an affinal network for their husband's family, or get support from their natal family, with the result that they often have lower status in their marital family or village.²⁵ They also suffer because of differences in language, culture and customs between their natal and marital villages.²⁶ Deception is more likely because these brides know little about their future marital community. A survey in rural Anhui in 1987 found that 75% of surveyed wives from other cities or provinces reported that they had been "sold" to their husbands in ways involving some form of deception.²⁷ Another form of marriage migration involving serious deception and crime is trafficking of women for long-distance marriage, of which gender imbalance is one important cause. Due to locally unbalanced sex ratios and female labor emigration, trafficking of women for marriage, or for the sex

industry, has revived and spread to almost all provinces, and Yunnan was one of the worst affected regions.²⁸

Compared with international marriage migration and domestic labor migration, inter-provincial marriage migration has often been ignored in research on migration. Only a few recent studies focus on female migration, migrant females' wellbeing, and their social integration, while studies from the perspective of males in receiving areas are necessary but not often done. Using data collected in X County of Anhui province in 2008, this study explores the arrangement of inter-provincial marriages, couples' characteristics, and some of the consequences of marriage migration from the perspective of receiving areas.

Data

Our data come from a sample survey of four towns (*Zhen*, which is an administrative unit below the county level and above the village level, not just one single small town/urban locale) in X County of Anhui Province in 2008, conducted by Xi'an Jiaotong University. X County is located in the east of Anhui Province and near Jiangsu Province, and includes plain and mountains. The county is at a medium economic level, and the rural per capita net income was 4,383 Yuan in 2007, slightly higher than the national average of 4,140 Yuan. The SRB in X County was very high. The 2000 and 2010 census data showed the SRB here was above 130.

Our objective was to explore the rural marriage market and the effect of the male marriage squeeze. The survey was conducted in 38 villages (19 plains villages and 19 mountain villages) of four towns. We sampled never-married men and women, married men and women, some men's and women's parents or parents-in-law, and village cadres. We also obtained community data about economy, population, migration, and marriage at the levels of village, town, and county, respectively, from questionnaires that were filled out by local officials. Altogether, 1,701 valid individual questionnaires and 57 in-depth interviews (Table 1 shows the number of the different samples in individual questionnaires and in-depth interviews), as well as 43 community questionnaires (38 for villages, four for towns, and one for X County), were collected. We also carried out seven group interviews.

In this study we mainly analyze quantitative data from never-married men, married men, village cadres and communities, as well as qualitative data from in-depth interviews. Quantitative data from women are partially used. Data from village cadres provide village-level evidence about inter-provincial marriage and marriage fraud in villages; community data provide information about economy, population, and marriage at the levels of village, town, and county, respectively; data from male respondents include individual characteristics, couples' matching characteristics, marriage costs and marriage satisfaction. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews provide evidence concerning the arrangement of inter-provincial marriage, as well as marriage satisfaction and stability.

In the survey, we asked each married male respondent where his wife's natal village is; responses were coded as: "his village", "out of his village but within the same town", "out of his town but within X County", "out of X County but within Anhui Province", and "other province". Respondents choosing "other province" were asked to report from which

province their wives came. In order to respect the privacy of respondents, they were permitted to write “Y” to express refusal to answer. We define local marriages as those within X County, while marriages out of the county are called nonlocal. Among nonlocal marriages, we focus only on those that are inter-provincial, and ten male respondents who married women out of X County but within the province are ignored. We found that 62% of men who married women from out of the province and 34% of men who married women from within their own county reported that they had experienced difficulties in getting married; the main reasons given were family and individual economy, number of brothers, health status, and age.

Men are divided into four classes based on their marital status, experience in the process of marrying, and marriage distance. Using the same data, Liu and Jin found that left-behind rural men’s average marriage age was 23, most rural men married between the ages of 22 and 27, and the probability of marrying decreased sharply after age 28; ninety six percent of never married men aged 28 and older reported that they had experienced various difficulties in the process of finding a wife²⁹. Thus, for never-married men, we only consider those aged 28 and older, and define them as involuntary bachelors because most have passed the appropriate marriageable age, and are forced to remain single.

Married men are divided into men marrying out-of-province women and men marrying local women based on marriage distance, and the latter are further divided into two classes based on the experience in the process of marrying: we refer to men marrying local women who reported they had suffered difficulties in the process of marrying as “men marrying local women with difficulty”, and those who married local women with no difficulty as “men marrying local women smoothly”. Thus in this study we identify four classes of men: men marrying out-of-province women, men marrying local women with difficulty, men marrying local women smoothly, and involuntary bachelors.

The sample size for men who married out-of-province women and who completed our questionnaire is small (only 27), including six who married women from Jiangsu Province, seven who married women from Yunnan Province, four who married women from Sichuan, one who married a woman from Hubei and one who married a woman from Guizhou. Eight respondent men refused to disclose their wives’ natal province. Because X County is located at the boundary of Anhui and Jiangsu provinces, brides from Jiangsu Province may not actually be long-distance inter-provincial marriage migrants, and we removed these six cases.

For the eight male respondents who had wives from another province and refused to report their partner’s natal provinces, we may ascertain whether the husband or the wife was the marriage migrant first; for those men whose wives were marriage migrants, we then deduce whether they came from Jiangsu. Among these eight men, parents or parents-in-law of six were survey respondents. By checking their date of birth, and education with the corresponding information provided by their parents or parents-in-law, we ascertained that all of them were local men who had married out-of-province women. For the other two males, we judged their natal province by the living arrangement when they got married. One lived with his parents as well as his wife, which means he was a local man. The other lived

only with his wife, so we could not ascertain whether his marriage was uxorilocal or virilocal, and this case was removed.

We deduced that most of the seven male respondents' wives actually came from provinces other than Jiangsu. According to our interviews in X County, local marriage (including wives coming from Jiangsu, which has a wealthier economy) is the first choice for most families, and inter-provincial marriages are mostly made by those men who are unable to find a suitable local wife. Since it may be regarded as a disgrace to marry an inter-provincial woman, and because inter-provincial marriages may be illegal or involve deception and trafficking, some families objected to questions about women from other provinces. The high proportion having difficulties in getting married also suggests that most of these seven males had married women from provinces other than Jiangsu. Among them, six reported they had experienced difficulties in getting married, a much higher rate than for other married men; of the six males who had married women from Jiangsu, only one reported difficulty.

Our study therefore includes 20 men who married inter-provincially, including thirteen who reported their respective wife's natal province and seven who refused to provide this information. Because all of these men were aged between 21 and 42, we only include the married aged between 21 and 42, and involuntary bachelors aged between 28 and 42 in this study (except Figure 1). Our sample includes 63 men marrying local women with difficulty, 121 men marrying local women smoothly, and 134 involuntary bachelors. Additionally, although the small sample of men marrying inter-provincially limits our study to a certain extent, they are a random sample, and our data may reflect the reality of marriage in X County.

In the context of rural-urban labor migration, it is inevitable that some men independently get to know and marry migrant women from other provinces when they work in urban areas. But the survey was carried out in rural villages, and the respondents were those who stayed in their rural villages. They were engaged in agricultural production, or were hired by local enterprises, or had been running their own businesses within the county for a long time, while migrant workers from the surveyed communities who had moved to urban areas could not be surveyed. Hence, most inter-provincial marriages in this study were contracted with the services of professional matchmakers or with the help of other out-of-province brides. Thus these couples probably knew each other little before marriage

Inter-provincial marriage

Local marriage is still much more common than inter-provincial marriage, but the latter is becoming important in rural X County. Of the 214 married men aged between 21 and 42, 86.0% married women from X County, while 9.3% married women from other provinces, which is higher than the proportion of men marrying women from other counties or cities in Anhui Province (4.7%) (see Table 2). Why is there such a high fraction of inter-provincial marriage in this county where local marriage is the norm? We explore the reasons from the perspective of stakeholders, namely husbands, out-of-province brides, and matchmakers.

Marrying out-of-province brides: a helpless choice

Anhui Province is located in central China, its population is mostly Han Chinese, and it has the nation's highest SRB. X County also faces the problem of gender imbalance, and the population sex ratios between 1997 and 2007 were in the range of 108 to 110. The excess of males has made it difficult for men to marry, and some have been unable to marry at appropriate ages. The total population of the four surveyed towns was 187,188 in 2007, which included 1,757 involuntary bachelors aged 28 and older.

Table 3 provides information about economy, population and involuntary bachelors in 2007 in the surveyed villages. The average per capita income was 3,652.9 yuan, and there was clearly higher income in plains villages than in the mountain villages. The average population and the number of households per village were 4,343.6 and 1,197.6, respectively, and the average population size was larger in plains villages. The average population sex ratio was 111.4, far higher than the national level. The average numbers of involuntary bachelors per village and per hundred households in a village were 41.9 and 3.7, respectively. Although the proportion of involuntary bachelors seems small, considering the universal marriage culture, and that not every household has a marriageable man or woman, the proportion among adult men is not so small.

The distributions of both the population sex ratio and numbers of involuntary bachelors are consistent with regional levels of economic development. Compared with plains villages, the sex ratios in poorer mountain villages deviate more from normal, and there are higher proportions of involuntary bachelors.

Figure 1 shows the age distribution of never-married rural people by sex. Being single is common to men at any age, and there are never-married men aged between 16 and 77; while almost all women get married before age 25. It indicates that marriage is universal, especially to women; the marriage market in X County is disadvantageous to men, and men are at a higher risk of being single.

With the shortage of marriageable women in the marriage market, local women's marriage value has increased and the resulting competition for local women has dramatically increased men's marriage expenses. Community data at the county level shows that between 2006 and 2008, it cost a man more than 100,000 yuan to marry locally, of which 70–100 thousand were spent on a new house, and 30–50 thousand yuan covered other expenses. The marriage cost for men is more than 20 times higher than the per capita income, and far beyond what local families can afford; it is socially acceptable for a bride's family to spend nothing on a marriage. Building a new house is necessary to contract a marriage; men without a new house are less likely to marry. Unlike “dowry marriage” in India, where a woman's parents are expected to provide a large dowry to her husband's family, bride price plays an important role in rural Chinese marriages,³⁰ and it is usually paid by the groom's family and transferred to bride's parents as compensation for raising their daughter and losing her labor, or transferred to new couples as financial support for the new family.³¹ As a result, for women marrying poor men, or men having brothers, a bride's parents will seek more money to maximize their own or their daughters' profit. Having a new house and affording the bride price indicate the economic status of a man's family. Many families have

to borrow money to support a son's marriage, while men who cannot raise these funds have little chance of marrying a local wife.

As shown in Table 4, the average marriage costs for a local wife are 33,848–45,847 yuan, of which more than half is used to build or decorate a house, while the marriage cost for an inter-provincial wife is about 26,770 yuan, which is only 58.4% of the cost for marrying a local wife smoothly, and 79.1% of the cost for marrying a local wife with difficulty. The lower marriage cost for marrying an out-of-province wife is mainly due to her reduced demand for a new house: the average cost of a house in an inter-provincial marriage is about 8,325 yuan, which is only 33.1–47.9% that in a local marriage. On the other hand, the bride price to marry a nonlocal woman is higher than that for marrying a local wife.

Although the lower marriage cost of an inter-provincial marriage provides a marriage option for those who cannot afford a local marriage, out-of-province women are not viewed as ideal wives and the overwhelming majority of villagers want a local marriage. First marriages for men with an inter-provincial wife occurred at about 25 years of age, which is older than for men who married locally. This difference in marriage age suggests a wife-selection strategy: men's first choice is usually a local woman, and those who are unable to find a suitable local wife then consider an inter-provincial marriage. Data from the in-depth interviews also reflect villagers' preference for local marriage.

Mr. Dai, 46 years old, married a Yunnan woman. He said that of course he expected to marry a local woman before marriage, but he had to marry non-locally because of the high costs for a local marriage (Coding: 14090905092). Mr. Yu's youngest son married a Yunnan woman too when he was 30 years old. When we asked Mr. Yu why he chose an inter-provincial marriage for his son, he reluctantly said: "we could not marry a local woman. Marrying an out-of-province woman is the only channel to contract a marriage for my family. There isn't any other way (Coding: 13070519366)."

Marrying in X County: an economic consideration

Most out-of-province wives come from the main net bride-exporting provinces, such as Yunnan and Sichuan. The in-depth interviews suggested that leaving poverty to seek better economic prospects were the main reasons for a woman to marry out of her home town and into X county.

Mrs. Li married into X County when she was only 17 and her husband was 30. Her natal family was in a poor mountain village in Yunnan Province where most families lived in simple and old adobe houses. Compared with the economic situation of her natal village, she was content with her life in her marital village (coding: 12090302015). Mrs. Yan, coming from Sichuan Province, married into a mountain village of X County following her sister. She said although her natal family was in a plains village, the economic status there was even worse than her marital village (coding: 12090312015).

The economic benefit to women's natal families is also an important reason for inter-provincial marriages. Although a new house is the most important expense in a local marriage, bride price in the form of cash is nearly always a prerequisite for marrying an out-

of-province woman. Sometimes, bride price is even the determinant. *As a village cadre put it, "I heard that in some villages of Yunnan province, after you paid a certain amount of money that the bride's family asked for, you are permitted to marry her and take her back. No one cares about your economic situation, personality, or whether you love each other (Coding: 13060103039)."*

As with local marriage, an inter-provincial marriage cannot be contracted if the man's family cannot afford what the woman's family asks for. *Mrs. Yang's youngest son was still single although he was over 30. When we mentioned that she could try to make an inter-provincial marriage for her son, she answered hopelessly, "I know it is a good way to marry a nonlocal bride, but it still costs about forty thousand yuan. We can do nothing without money (coding: 13040112296)."* It seems that financial considerations are the key factor in inter-provincial marriage. Compared with local marriage, economic exchange in marrying an out-of-province woman is more obvious and open. Not surprisingly villagers in X County call most inter-provincial marriages "buying wives".

Matchmakers: the bridge to an inter-provincial marriage

A matchmaking network provides the connections that facilitate an inter-provincial marriage, and it would be impossible for local men to know and marry women from other provinces without matchmakers. There are two kinds of matchmakers: out-of-province wives and professional brokers. When an out-of-province wife is satisfied with her life after marriage, she might introduce other unmarried women from her home town to unmarried men in her marital village. Generally, such introductions from out-of-province wives increase the likelihood of new inter-provincial marriages because the potential matchmaker often knows both parties, and is more likely to be trusted by both. Out-of-province brides have lost their premarital network by marrying far away and must build a new network in their marital village. By arranging for women from her natal family or village to marry in her new village, part of her premarital network is rebuilt, and she may win additional respect from both parties. Thus some out-of-province wives can serve as matchmakers and ask little or no compensation.

Mr. Lin's wife was introduced by her wife's sister, who had married into Mr. Lin's village from Yunnan Province (coding: 1010602036). Mrs. Li married her husband through the introduction by her close girl friend who had also married into the same village from Yunnan province; after marriage Mrs. Li also introduced another friend to marry into her marital village (Coding: 12090302015).

Professional marriage brokers also play an important role. With the guidance of professional brokers, some local unmarried men go to Yunnan, Sichuan, or other provinces, to look for a wife. When the matchmaker is a professional broker, he or she always asks a considerable sum of money as an introduction fee, generally, between 1,000–5,000 yuan, but possibly over 10,000 yuan (see Table 5).

Irrespective of who the matchmaker is, a man who wants to marry an out-of-province wife must visit the woman and her family. If they are satisfied with each other, the man must pay some cash to the woman's parents, after which he can return to his home with the woman.

To some extent, the process is just like selecting goods at the market, but it is also an important way for a man to get acquainted with his future wife, and build affinal relations with his parents-in-law.

Differences between plains and mountain villages

Although inter-provincial marriage is more common than marriages out of the county (city) but within Anhui, there are striking differences between plains and mountain villages. Village cadres indicate that costs both for matchmakers and contracting an inter-provincial marriage in mountain villages are higher than in plains villages (see Table 5). Payment to matchmakers is often between 1,000 and 5,000 yuan in plains villages, while it is commonly between 1,000 and 10,000 yuan in mountain villages. 72.3% of village cadres in plains villages state that bride price for an out-of-province wife are lower than for a local wife, while this proportion is lower (59%) in mountain villages. But a higher fraction of village cadres in mountain villages report that marriage expenses for an out-of-province wife are approximately the same as the costs of marrying a local wife.

The geographical disparity in the cost of inter-provincial marriage reflects the effect of a community's economy on the ability to retain and attract marriageable women. There is a tendency for women to move up socio-economically through marriage, which is strengthened by the marriage squeeze against men. Community economic status is an important factor in attracting marriageable women, and hence can have an important effect on a community's sex ratio. Compared with plains villages, mountain villages have less capacity to attract women because of their poorer economy. Thus the latter face a more serious deficit of marriageable women and a more serious marriage squeeze; men in these villages have stronger demand for unmarried women from other provinces, and are willing to pay more to brokers and the families of out-of-province wives.

Characteristics of couples in inter-provincial marriages

In this section we investigate men's socioeconomic characteristics before marriage and matching characteristics of couples in inter-provincial marriage by comparison with men who married local women, and involuntary bachelors.

Socioeconomic characteristics before marriage

From Table 6, fifty-five percent of men marrying out-of-province women have middle school education or higher, which is far lower than men who married local women, but higher than involuntary bachelors. In terms of health status, no man in an inter-provincial marriage was disabled, while about 5.0–6.3% of men marrying locally were disabled. The proportion of disabled involuntary bachelors is 27.6%, far higher than the national level³². Unlike most recent studies, which show that men who marry inter-provincial women are often physically or mentally disabled, in our sample men who married non-locally are the least disabled. This may reflect that out-of-province women and their parents pay more attention to their future husbands' health. Additionally, in order to contract an inter-provincial marriage, men often need to visit their potential wives and since this may involve long distance travel, those who are disabled are more likely to be excluded. The small

sample of inter-provincial marriages may also bias our findings. It is striking that disabled men face a higher risk of not marrying at all.

Men who married out-of-province women are often those who, when they were or are in their 20's, had parents who were better off than average, or had brothers, and few sisters. For men marrying out-of-province women, the proportion whose parents were poor before the marriage approximates that for men marrying local wives smoothly (25.0% and 30.6%, respectively), and is far lower than the proportions of those marrying local wives with difficulty or involuntary bachelors (55.6% and 58.2%, respectively). The average number of brothers for men marrying out-of-province women is 2.0, approximately equal to that of involuntary bachelors, and more than that of men marrying local wives. However, men marrying out-of-province women have fewer sisters, about the same number as involuntary bachelors. The high marriage costs for a local wife make it hard for families with more than one son, even families that are better off financially, to afford a local marriage for each son. Thus men in these families are more likely to choose a less costly inter-provincial marriage, or remain single. But families with daughters can expand their social networks and make money through their daughters' marriage, which in turn increases the opportunities for their sons to meet unmarried women, and for financial support for their sons' subsequent marriage. Thus slightly more sisters increase men's chance of getting married.

In sum, rural men's status in the marriage market is consistent with their individual and family characteristics before marriage. First, men who married local women smoothly had a distinct advantage, while involuntary bachelors are the most disadvantaged, and men who married inter-provincial women or local women with difficulty are in inferior positions. Second, for men marrying inter-provincial women, limited education, more brothers and fewer sisters decrease their opportunities to marry, but their parents' better financial status helps them obtain opportunities to marry nonlocal women; on the contrary, for men marrying local women with difficulty, better education, fewer brothers and more sisters increase their opportunities to marry locally, but parents' poverty makes this difficult.

Assortative matching or marrying up?

There is a trend for women to marry up and for men to marry down in terms of age, income and occupation (see Table 7); income was calculated in both cash and kind. Men's first marriage age is 0.5–2.9 years older than their wives', men's income is 2.3 to 3.4 times as much as their wives', and there are also a higher proportion of non-agricultural jobs for men than for women. These are consistent with the gender disparity in partner preference; men generally marry women who are younger and of lower socioeconomic status. This also reflects the income disparity between agricultural and non-agricultural jobs, and the gender division of labor. In rural areas, average wages are often far higher in non-agricultural than in agricultural work, which is also an important reason why increasing numbers of farmers leave their land for non-farm employment.³³ The traditional division that “men are breadwinners and women are home makers” is still dominant in X County; husbands are the main money earners, and most are in non-farm jobs with higher income, while wives spend more time on agricultural work and housework. What interests us is that for the never-married men and women, the income gap is not so large. Our computation shows that for the

never-married younger than 28, men's and women's incomes are 13,718 and 11,770 yuan, respectively, and the income gap is not as large as for the married. The different trends in gender disparity of income between the married and the never-married imply that after getting married, many women quit non-farm work, take agricultural jobs, and take care of their family.

There are also obvious differences in matching characteristics of couples among different types of marriages. As shown in Table 7, the first marriage age for men who married out-of-province wives is 25 years old, which is older than men who married locally; while their wives married at about 22 years old, which is younger than local wives. Thus the average age gap between husbands and wives in inter-provincial marriages is larger (2.9 years).

There exists a significant gender difference in occupation. 70% of men who married out-of-province women work in non-agricultural jobs, which is more than men who married local women. The proportion of out-of-province women working in non-agricultural jobs is only 10%, far lower than local married women. This may reflect that out-of-province women did not have an equal opportunity to work in non-agricultural jobs because of lower economic potential, being discriminated against, or supervised by her family-in-law. Thus the difference in occupations between members of a couple is largest in inter-provincial marriages.

This income gap between members of a couple is consistent with occupation: the higher the proportion that work in non-agriculture, the higher is the average income. Men marrying out-of-province women earn the most (17,050 yuan), while men marrying local women with difficulty earn the least. For women, the average income of out-of-province wives is the lowest (4,810 yuan). The income gap between husbands and wives in inter-provincial marriage is the largest, and for these couples the husband's average income is 3.5 times as much as his wife's.

In sum, the lower the marital status, the larger are the economic difference and age gap. The difference between couples in inter-provincial marriages is the largest: husbands have the highest proportion of non-agricultural occupations, the highest income, and were married at the oldest age, while their wives have the lowest proportion of non-agricultural occupations, the lowest income, and were married at the youngest age. This indicates that in the marriage market, lowering spouse criteria and expanding the pool of potential spouses are important marriage strategies for men of inferior social status.

Compared to men who marry local women smoothly, men who married inter-provincially are not economically disadvantaged. This may be due to the tradition of early marriage in rural China, where most men are not financially independent when they marry, and it is regarded as parents' responsibility to arrange a marriage for their son. Thus the ability of men's parents to afford a marriage is the center of attention, while the economic potential of the groom is often ignored by women choosing a future husband. Additionally, most out-of-province wives do agricultural work and housework, which allows husbands to have more time and energy to do non-agricultural work and earn more. The lower income of out-of-provincial wives may reflect two problems: first, they came from poor and remote areas, and

may have difficulty in adapting to local language and culture, which decreases their opportunities to get non-agricultural jobs. Second, their in-laws disapprove of their working outside because out-of-province wives more frequently disappear or run away. *Mrs. Yan, from Sichuan Province, wanted to work in the town, but her husband refused because he was worried that she would be deceived (Coding: 12090301015). Because Mr. Dai was worried about his wife from Yunnan Province, he dared not go out for work although his family was poor (Coding: 14090905104).*

Marriage satisfaction and stability

Marriage satisfaction

Table 8 presents data on married people's marriage satisfaction. For both men and women, most respondents are satisfied with their own marriage, and women's satisfaction is slightly lower than men's in both inter-provincial marriages and local marriages. The proportion reporting "satisfied" is lower for inter-provincial marriages than for local marriages, and there are a higher proportion of inter-provincial wives reporting "not satisfied". This indicates inter-provincial marriage is not conducive to improved marriage satisfaction.

It should be noted that marriage satisfaction for inter-provincial marriage may be overestimated because the respondents in inter-provincial marriages are those men whose wives had adapted to and accepted the local life. In fact, inter-provincial marriage faces a higher risk of instability, and some of these marriages failed because the bride disappeared or ran away. Since these failed marriages are not included in our sample of inter-provincial marriages, the level of satisfaction in inter-provincial marriages may be overestimated.

Evidence from in-depth interviews of out-of-province wives show that most couples in inter-provincial marriages get along well with each other. *Mrs. Yan, from Sichuan Province, said that because her husband was about ten years older than her, he treated her very well; in the daytime, he went to the township for work, and she was just responsible for the housework and their kid. So she had more free time to play cards and chat with neighbors (coding: 12090301015). Mrs. Li, from Yunnan province, had a close and harmonious relationship with her husband, and they worked together in a business for several years. But discrimination against out-of-province women still exists. According to Mr. Dai, although his wife could speak the local dialect, she communicated less with other local villagers; and even some kids were unwilling to play with their daughter just because her mother is nonlocal (Coding: 14090905104)*

Marriage stability

The basis of inter-provincial marriage is not usually affection, and there is not enough time or opportunity for the spouses to get to know each other well before marriage, so these marriages are very vulnerable. The financial exchange involved can also easily be used by criminals, resulting in marriage fraud and trafficking of women. Based on village cadres, the disappearance of inter-provincial wives is not rare. More than forty percent of village cadres report that it has happened in their villages, and there is a far higher percentage in mountain villages than in plains villages (57.1% and 34.9%, respectively).

The more frequent disappearance of inter-provincial wives can be explained by both marriage fraud and mercenary marriage. The strong demand for nonlocal wives is easily exploited by marriage cheaters; they claim that they want to marry in X county, and then run away after taking the bride price. Generally, inter-provincial marriages arranged by professional brokers are less reliable. Besides asking for little or no payment, nonlocal wives know both parties who want to contract an inter-provincial marriage, which reduces the risk of marriage fraud; while besides asking for more money, professional marriage brokers cannot guarantee that the nonlocal woman is not a marriage cheater. Sometimes the broker may be a collaborator in marriage fraud.

Involuntary bachelors are more likely to be deceived. In the questionnaire, we asked the respondents to report whether they were cheated by marriage cheaters before getting married, and how much they lost. The result shows that 34 men were the victims of marriage frauds; all of them reported they had experienced difficulties in getting married, and only five were married at the survey time. Most of them are still young. For the five married men, their ages were between 30 and 40; for the twenty-nine never married men, eight were older than 42, and the others were between 26 and 42 years old. The average money they lost was 10,421 yuan, and married men lost more (see Table 9).

Based on information from town questionnaires, 40 cases of marriage fraud had been reported from 2003 to 2007. Table 10 also shows that most village cadres report that some involuntary bachelors in their villages have suffered from marriage fraud; they are often cheated out of more than 5,000 yuan. Some in-depth interviews also provided evidence of this. *Mr. Zhang, an involuntary bachelor, went to Qiubai County of Yunnan Province to marry a wife. After paying more than 50,000 yuan for bride price, he took the bride home. But three days later, his wife furtively ran away (Coding: 13100301012). Mr. Que, 40 years old, had experienced marriage fraud twice. The first time, he paid 10,000 yuan to the broker, and married a wife from Yunnan Province. But his wife left with the excuse of going back to transfer household registration (hukou), and never came back. The second time, he married a wife from Sichuan Province after paying the broker 8,000 yuan; but the bride also ran away on the next day (coding: 12020402032).*

Mercenary marriage (*maimaihunyi*), which refers to a marriage arranged by a third party, including parents or a kidnapper, who, in order to obtain money or property, illegally force someone to marry) is another important reason for the frequent disappearance of inter-provincial wives. Because couples in inter-provincial marriages often did not know or communicate with each other before marriage, these marriages are more vulnerable. Some women are even forced into an arranged marriage or are trafficked. In such situations, when the bride is unable to endure or adapt to the strange family or community, she escapes when the opportunity arises. *Mr. Jiang, bought a wife from Sichuan Province for the price of 18,000 yuan. His wife escaped on the first New Year's Eve after marriage, but she was caught and brought back, and was closely monitored after that (coding: 13060103039).*

Some villagers in X County are suspicious of the stability of inter-provincial marriages and of professional brokers because of the frequent disappearance of out-of-province wives'.

Nonlocal wives are often supervised carefully by their husband's families for similar reasons.

Conclusion

We have explored a number of details concerning inter-provincial marriage in X County of central rural China in the context of the marriage squeeze in the bride-receiving communities. Male-biased sex ratio and male surplus have affected the local marriage market, and a high proportion of men experience difficulties in the process of marrying. Some become involuntary bachelors, and no one knows whether and when they might get married in the future. Some men resort to marrying women from less-developed rural areas because they cannot afford a local wife. Others experience difficulties, but eventually marry a local wife. Thus, in the surveyed villages, men are clearly divided into different classes based on the marriage process and their marital status: men who marry local wives smoothly belong to an "upper" class, men who marry out-of-province women or marry local women with difficulty are in a "lower" class, while men who cannot marry at an appropriate age are in the lowest class.

Inter-provincial marriage in X County involves the combined effects of local men's need for nonlocal marriageable women, the demand for a better life by nonlocal women from less developed rural areas, and matchmaking networks. In X County where there is a dominant tradition of local marriage, inter-provincial marriage provides an alternative marrying option for local men and partially alleviates the shortage of marriageable females. The essence of these marriage migrations is an exchange: geographic advantage and a better economy are the main drivers for women marrying in from a long distance away, while men's payment to nonlocal women or their families is the key factor in contracting an inter-provincial marriage. Thus, men get access to scarce marriageable resources by providing both the bride price and a better life for nonlocal women. But such marriages are very vulnerable, and marriage fraud and trafficking of women becomes more likely because of the essentially financial exchange in inter-provincial marriage. Thus regulating the local marriage market, preventing abnormal marriages such as fraud and trafficking, and protecting the rights of out-of-province brides, is becoming an important issue in maintaining local social order.

We also find that both local and nonlocal marriages reflect a tendency for women to move to wealthier families and communities; men in poorer families and communities often suffer the negative consequences of the marriage squeeze. Although marriage migration partly alleviates the deficit of marriageable women in bride-receiving areas, some men of lower socioeconomic status are still unable to marry, and become a vulnerable group in the marriage market. In the main bride-sending areas, such as Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, the less-developed economy stimulates large numbers of women to escape poverty through marrying out. Thus men remaining in these areas face the double stress of poverty and lack of opportunity to marry. As a result, these areas are at increased risk of trafficking, mercenary marriage and marriage fraud, as well as greater potential for rising crime rates and deteriorating social order.

China's 6th national census shows that both the SRB and overall sex ratio dropped slightly in 2010, but are still far higher than normal. Because of the accumulation of surplus men since the birth cohorts of the 1980s, China will face a long-lasting male marriage squeeze. Therefore, effective measures to alleviate the severity of the marriage squeeze, to restore normal order in the marriage market, and to maintain social stability, are essential. More attention to gender imbalance and normalization of the population's gender structure should be a high governmental priority. As Hesketh put it, although this might not reduce the current number of surplus males, it could improve the situation for the next generation.³⁴

Acknowledgments

This study is jointly supported by the 12th Five-Year National Science and Technology Support Project (2012BAI32B06, 2012BAI32B07), Fok Ying-Tong Education Foundation (121093), the 985 Project of Xi'an Jiaotong University, the Presidential Fund for Innovation in International Studies at Stanford University, and Research Starting Foundation for doctors of Northwest A&F University.

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Figure 1.
Age distribution of the never-married rural persons by sex.

Table 1

The number of the different samples

Type	Questionnaires	In-depth interviews
Never-married men	400	20
Married men	265	10
Never-married women	160	10
Married women	256	0
Parents or Parents in-law	518	13
Village cadres	102	4
Total	1701	57

Table 2

Wives' natal villages relative to their husbands'

	Percent
Wives' natal villages	(214)
Their husbands' villages	37.4
Out of their husbands' villages but within the same town	34.1
Out of their husbands' town but within X County	14.5
Out of X County but within Anhui Province	4.7
Out of Anhui Province	9.3

Note: Figures in parentheses are the sample size. Similarly hereafter.

Table 3

Village economic and population characteristics (in 2007)

	Total	Mountain villages	Plains villages
	(38)	(19)	(19)
<i>Average per capita income (yuan)</i>	3652.9	3347.4	3942.4
<i>Population</i>			
Total population per village	4343.6	4103.1	4571.4
Total households per village	1197.6	1047.1	1331.3
Population sex ratio per village	111.4	114.2	108.7
<i>Involuntary bachelors</i>			
Number of involuntary bachelors per village	41.9	42.7	41.3
Number of involuntary bachelors per hundred households in each village	3.7	4.4	3.3

Table 4

Men's marriage expenses

	Men marrying out-of-province wives	Men marrying local wives with difficulty	Men marrying local wives smoothly
	(20)	(63)	(121)
<i><u>Marriage expense</u></i>			
Total expense (yuan)	2,6770	33,848	45,847
New house (yuan)	8,325	17,394	25,185
Bride price (yuan)	7,010	6,066	6,844

Table 5

Inter-provincial marriage reported by village cadres

	Total	Cadres in mountain villages	Cadres in plains villages
<i><u>Are there some wives from poorer provinces in your village (%)</u></i>	(102)	(53)	(49)
Yes	92.2	94.3	89.8
<i><u>Costs for matchmakers (%)</u></i>	(94)	(50)	(44)
< 1000 yuan	14.8	14.0	15.9
1000–3000 yuan	34.0	36.0	31.8
3000–5000 yuan	30.9	22.0	40.9
5000–10000 yuan	14.9	24.0	4.5
> 10000 yuan	5.3	4.0	6.8
<i><u>Brides Price for inter-provincial wives (%)</u></i>	(92)	(49)	(43)
Less than local wives	66.3	59.2	72.3
Equal to local wives	17.9	26.5	9.3
More than local wives	15.8	14.3	18.6

Table 6

Men's individual and family characteristics before marriage

	Married men			Involuntary bachelors
	Men marrying out-of-province wives	Men marrying local wives with difficulty	Men marrying local wives smoothly	
	(20)	(63)	(121)	(134)
Middle school and higher (%)	55.0	73.0	81.8	50.0
Disabled (%)	0.0	6.3	5.0	27.6
Parents with poor economic condition (%)	25.0	55.6	30.6	58.2
Number of brothers (including himself)	2.0	1.8	1.7	2.0
Number of sisters	0.8	1.1	1.2	0.9
Difference between numbers of brothers and sisters	1.2	0.7	0.5	1.1

Table 7

Assortative matching for couples

	Men marrying out-of-province wives	Men marrying local wives with difficulty	Men marrying local wives smoothly
	(20)	(63)	(121)
<i>Age of first marriage (Years)</i>			
Husband	25.0	23.6	23.4
Wife	22.1	22.3	22.9
Age gap between couples	2.9	1.3	0.5
<i>Proportion in non-agriculture (%)</i>			
Husband	70.0	58.7	66.9
Wife	10.0	31.8	43.0
Percentage gap between couples	60	26.9	23.9
<i>Average Income in 2007 (yuan)</i>			
Husband	17,050	12,513	15,584
Wife	4,810	5,041	6,677
Ratio of income between couples	3.4	2.5	2.3

Table 8

Men's marriage satisfaction (%)

	Men marrying out-of-province wives	Men marrying local wives with difficulty	Men marrying local wives smoothly	Inter-provincial wives	Local wives	LR Test
Marriage satisfaction	(20)	(63)	(121)	(12)	(193)	NS
Satisfied	80.0	93.7	86.6	75.0	88.7	
Neutral	20.0	4.8	12.6	16.7	10.8	
Not satisfied	0.0	1.5	0.8	8.3	1.7	

***Notes: p<0.001;
**p<0.01;
*p<0.05;
+p< 0.1; NS,
P>=0.1.

Table 9

Evidence of marriage fraud from rural men

	Total	Married men	Never-married men
Cases	34	5	29
Average age	41.7	35.6	43.0
Money lost to marriage fraud (Yuan)	10,421	15,333	9,832

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Table 10

Evidence of marriage fraud from village cadres

	Total	Cadres in mountain villages	Cadres in plains villages
<u>Number of cadres</u>	(102)	(53)	(49)
Proportion of villages where marriage fraud occurred (%)	83.3	84.9	81.6
Number of cadres	(85)	(40)	(45)
Money lost to marriage fraud (%)			
3,000–5,000 yuan	29.4	24.4	35.0
5,000–10,000 yuan	41.2	48.9	32.5
Above 10,000 yuan	29.4	26.7	32.5