

Marriage squeeze and inter-provincial marriage in central China: evidence from X County

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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 also relieves 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 instability, and can lead to such illegal behaviors as marriage fraud and mercenary marriage.

Key words: inter-provincial marriage; marriage squeeze; bride price; involuntary bachelors

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 1981.² At the end of 2010, although the SRB had decreased slightly, it was still high at 118.06,³ 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 106 between 1982 and 2000;⁴ it had decreased slightly to 105.2 by the end of 2010, but is still far higher than the normal range, which is between 97.9 -100.3.⁵ 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. Even if the SRB were to return rapidly to normal, the marriage squeeze against men in China would exist until the surplus males already born pass through the marriage market.⁶ At present, the marriage squeeze appears more severe in rural

² National Bureau of Statistics, '2009 National Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin', (February 25, 2010), (in Chinese).

³ National Bureau of Statistics, 'Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China on Major Figures of the 2010 Population Census (No. 1)', (April 28, 2011), (in Chinese).

⁴ Banister, J., 'Shortage of girls in China today', *Journal of Population Research* 21(1), (2003), pp. 19-45.

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics, (2011); Coale, A.J., 'Excess female mortality and the balance of the sexes in the population: an estimate of the number of 'missing females'', *Population and Development Review* 17(3), (1991), pp. 517-523.

⁶ Das Gupta, M., Ebenstein, A., & Sharygin, E., 'China's marriage market and upcoming challenges for elderly men',

China than in the urban areas. A sample survey in 28 provinces showed that in 364 rural villages, there were on average at least 9 involuntary bachelors aged 28 and older 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.⁷ Poston and Glover estimated that there would be 23 million surplus marriageable males between 2000 and 2020.⁸

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.⁹ Members of the surplus sex with 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 and marrying at a later age, or remain unmarried.¹⁰ 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 optimal marriage.

In traditional rural China, affines 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.¹¹ Additionally, a marriage near a women's natal family is

World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series, (2010), (Working paper).

⁷ Jin, Xiaoyi, Qiuju Guo, Lige Liu, and Shuzhuo Li, 'Gender imbalance and public security in China: findings from survey in hundreds of villages', *Youth Research* (5), 2010, pp. 21-30. (In Chinese)

⁸ Poston, D., and Glover, K, 'Marriage market implications for the twenty-first century', in Poston, D., et. al., Eds., *Fertility, family planning, and population policy in China* (London: Routledge), pp. 175.

⁹ Lichter, D.T., Diane K. McLaughlin, George Kephart, and David J. Landry, 'Race and the retreat from marriage: A shortage of marriageable men', *American Sociological Review* 57(6), (1992), pp. 781-799; Lloyd, Kim M. and Scott J. South, 'Contextual Influences on Young Men's Transition to First Marriage', *Social Forces* 74(3), (1996), 1097-1119; South, Scott J., and Kim M. Lloyd, 'Marriage Opportunities and Family Formation: Further Implications of Imbalanced Sex Ratios', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54(2), (1992), pp. 440-451.

¹⁰ South, S. J., 'Socio-demographic differentials in mate selection preferences', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, (53), (1991), pp. 928-940; Pollet, T. and D. Nettle, 'Driving a hard bargain: sex ratio and male marriage success in a historical US population', *Biology Letters* 4(1), (2008), pp. 31-33; Dykstra P. A., 'Who remains unmarried', *Paper prepared for the symposium 'The never-marrieds in later life: Potentials, problems, and paradoxes' at the meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington DC*, pp. 19-23.

¹¹ Davin, D., 'Marriage migration in China,' *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12(2-3), (2005), pp. 173-188; Min, H., and Eades, J. S., 'Brides, bachelors and brokers: The marriage market in rural Anhui in an era of economic reform',

advantageous to her because she can retain contact with and receive social support from her family or her natal village.¹² 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.¹³ However, since the 1990s, inter-provincial marriage has gradually increased, and has become an important form of migration. The 2000 census reported that the number of inter-provincial marriage migrants, including males and females, was about 1.5 million, and marriage migration accounted for 20.5% of women's inter-provincial migration.¹⁴

Marriage migration is often regarded as an economic strategy for rural women, especially women from poor areas, to improve their socioeconomic status.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Unlike labor migration, most marriage migration is rural-to-rural from poorer regions or countries to wealthier regions or countries.¹⁸

In the culture of virilocal marriage, women are the overwhelming majority of inter-provincial marriage migrants. Based on China's 2000 national census data, male marriage migrants were only an eighth as many as females; The main sending provinces of labor migrants, such as Sichuan, Yunnan,

Modern Asian Studies (29), (1995), pp. 841-869.

¹² Bossen, 'Village to distant village'.

¹³ Li, X., 'Intra-family gender relations, women's well-being, and access to resources: the case of a northern Chinese village', Ph.D. thesis, University of Western Ontario, Canada, (2006); Bossen, 'Village to distant village'.

¹⁴ Davin, D., 'Marriage migration in China and East Asia', *Journal of Contemporary China* 16(50), (2007), pp. 83-95.

¹⁵ Fan, C. C., & Huang, Y. 'Waves of rural brides: female marriage migration in China', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 (2), (1998), pp. 227-251; Fan, C. C., & Li L., 'Marriage and migration in transitional China: a field study of Gaozhou, western Guangdong', *Environment and Planning A* 34(4), (2002), pp. 619-638; Davin, 'Marriage migration in China'.

¹⁶ Bossen, 'village to distant village'.

¹⁷ Davin, 'Marriage migration in China and East Asia'; Tsay, Ching-lung, 'Marriage migration of women from China and Southeast Asia to Taiwan,' in Gavin W. Jones and Kamalini Ramdas, eds, *(Un)tying the Knot: Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage*. (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2004); Wang, H., and S. Chang, 'The commodification of international marriages: cross-border marriage business in Taiwan and Viet Nam', *International Migration* 40(6), (2002), pp. 93-116; Yutani, Jeanine Emiko, 'International brides: Cross-border marriage migration in China and Japan through a feminist lens', A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School University of Southern California, (2007).

¹⁸ Davin, 'Marriage migration in China and East Asia'.

Guizhou and Guangxi, are also the main sending provinces of brides and the provinces with the most serious shortage of marriageable women.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ The main receiving provinces of brides are more-developed eastern provinces such as Jiangsu, Guangzhou, Zhejiang and Beijing.²¹ In some central provinces, such as Anhui and Henan, female inter-provincial marriage in rural areas has also been reported.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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; that men's lower education was offset by their desirable location.²⁶ Out-of-province wives often marry at a much younger age than both their husbands and local wives. Being younger and having had little social experience may be an important reason behind long-distance trafficking of women.²⁷

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,

¹⁹ Davin, 'Marriage migration in China and East Asia'.

²⁰ Bossen, 'village to distant village'.

²¹ Das Gupta, et. al. 'China's marriage market'.

²² Davin, 'Marriage migration in China'; Bossen, 'village to distant village'.

²³ Davin, 'Marriage migration in China'; Bossen, 'village to distant village'; Fan & Huang, 'Waves of rural brides'.

²⁴ Zhao, G.M., 'Trafficking of women for marriage in China', *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 3 (1), (2003) pp. 83-102.

²⁵ Fan & Huang, 'Waves of rural brides'.

²⁶ Fan & Li, 'marriage and migration'.

²⁷ Zhao, 'Trafficking of women for marriage'.

with the result that they often have lower status in their marital family or village.²⁸ They also suffer because of differences in language, culture and customs between their natal and marital villages.²⁹ 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.³⁰ Another marriage migration involving serious deception and crime is trafficking of women for long-distance marriage. Since the 1980s, 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.³¹

Additionally, the prospects of marriage for men in the net bride-exporting areas raise concerns. The increase in female marriage migrants exacerbates the difficulty of marrying for men in the brides’ sending areas, and the consequences are mostly felt by men in poorer areas.³² Because of regional disparities in economic level and marriage migration, the population sex ratio is not always consistent with the SRB. Eastern areas with a higher SRB often have a lower population sex ratio and few involuntary bachelors, while western areas with a lower SRB may have a higher population sex ratio and a more serious marriage squeeze.³³

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. 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.

²⁸ Min & Eades, ‘Brides, bachelors and brokers’.

²⁹ Davin, ‘Marriage migration in China’; Bossen, ‘village to distant village’.

³⁰ Min & Eades, ‘Brides, bachelors and brokers’.

³¹ Zhao, ‘Trafficking of women for marriage’.

³² Das Gupta, et. al., ‘China’s marriage market’; Ebenstein, A., & Sharygin, E. ‘The consequences of the ‘missing girls’ of China’, *The World Bank Economic Review* 23(3), (2009), pp. 399-425.

³³ Das Gupta, et. al., ‘China’s marriage market’.

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 ×× University. Our objective was to explore the rural marriage market and the effect of the marriage squeeze on communities and individuals. The survey includes questionnaires and interviews. 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.

X County is located in the east of Anhui Province, near Jiangsu Province. There are towns and villages in plains and mountains, which allows us to explore the effect of topography on rural men's marriage. Owing to intense son preference, the SRB in this area is higher than normal: it was over 130 between 1999 and 2000, and over 120 between 2001 and 2004; it then decreased rapidly to 114 in 2007 because of the policies and activities of the local government³⁴.

The survey was conducted in 38 villages of 4 towns (two plains towns and two mountain towns). Altogether, 1701 valid individual questionnaires and 43 community questionnaires were collected. Among the individual questionnaires, the numbers of never-married men, married men, never-married women, married women, parents or parents-in-law, and village cadres were 400, 265, 160, 256, 518 and 102, respectively. Of the community questionnaires, the numbers from villages and towns were 38 and 4, respectively, as well as a questionnaire for X County. We also carried out 58 in-depth interviews and 7 group interviews.

We analyze quantitative data from men, village cadres and communities, as well as qualitative data from in-depth interviews in this study. Data from village cadres provide 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

³⁴ The SRB data come from the community questionnaire at the county level.

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, 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 which province their wives came from. 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 male respondents who married women out of X County but within the province are ignored. The statistical results show that 62% of men who married women from out of the province, and 34% of men who married women in the same county reported that they had experienced or were experiencing difficulties in getting married; the main reasons given were family and individual economy, number of brothers, health status, and age.

Using data from rural Anhui, Liu and Jin found that 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 years and older reported that they had experienced various difficulties in the process of finding a wife.³⁵ Thus, in this study, we define never-married men aged 28 years and older as involuntary bachelors because most have passed the appropriate marriageable age, and are forced to remain single.

In the marriage market, men who can marry local women with no difficulty have a superior status (we refer to them as "men marrying local women smoothly"), while most others have suffered difficulties due to the marriage squeeze. Thus in this study we identify four classes of men: men marrying nonlocal women (only men marrying out-of-province women are considered), men marrying local women with difficulty, men marrying local women smoothly, and involuntary bachelors.

³⁵ Liu, Lige, and Xiaoyi, Jin, 'Determinants of the rural men's possibility of first marriage in China: A perspective of social network.' *Population Journal* (2), (2011), pp. 21-30. (In Chinese)

Because inter-provincial marriage was not originally the main objective in this survey, the sample size for men who married out-of-province women is only 27, including 6 who married women from Jiangsu Province, 5 who married women from Yunnan Province, 3 who married women from Sichuan, 1 who married a woman from Hubei and 1 who married a woman from Guizhou. Eleven 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 6 cases.

For the 11 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 11 men, parents or parents-in-law of nine 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. Thus there were 10 cases of men refusing to report their partner's natal province.

We further deduced that most of these 10 male respondents' wives came from other provinces 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 object to questions about women from other provinces. The differences of the proportion of men having difficulties in getting married also suggest that most of these 10 males had married women from provinces other than Jiangsu. Among these 10 males, eight reported they had experienced difficulties in getting married, a much

higher rate than for other married men; while for the 6 males who had married women from Jiangsu, this number is only 1, a much lower rate than for other married men. Thus most of these 10 men had difficulties in making a local marriage and had to marry nonlocal women; it is less likely that their wives came from Jiangsu.

Our study therefore includes 20 men who married inter-provincially, including 10 who reported their respective wife's natal province and 10 who refused to provide this information. Because all of these men were aged between 21 and 42, we only include married men who are aged between 21 and 42, and involuntary bachelors aged between 28 and 42 in this study. We analyze 63 men marrying local women with difficulty, 121 men marrying local women smoothly, and 134 involuntary bachelors in our study. 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 in this survey, the male respondents were those who remained in the rural areas, 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. Couples in inter-provincial marriages 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 (10 men who married women out of X County but within Anhui Province are also included), 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 1). 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.

Table 1 here

Marrying out-of-province brides: a helpless choice

Anhui Province is located in central China, the population is mostly Han Chinese, and it has the nation's highest SRB because of strong son preference. 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 years and older.

Table 2 provides information about economy, population and involuntary bachelors in 2007 in the surveyed villages. The average per capita income was 3652.9 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 4343.6 and 1197.6, 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. 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.

Table 2 here

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 if a bride's family spends 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,³⁶ 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.³⁷As a result, bride price becomes very important, and 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.

Table 3 here

As shown in Table 3, 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 (not including the house) to marry a nonlocal woman is higher than that of marrying a local wife.

Although the lower marriage cost of an inter-provincial marriage provides a marriage option for

³⁶ Anderson, Siwan, ‘The economics of dowry and brideprice’, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(4), (2007), pp. 151-174.

³⁷ Fan & Huang, ‘Waves of rural brides’; Zhao, ‘Trafficking of women for marriage’; Yan Yunxiang., ‘The flow of gifts: Reciprocity and social networks in a Chinese village’, (Stanford university press, 1996).

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. This (i.e., 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 contented 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 would be 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 concluded 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. The 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 of 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 of her close 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. In some situations, it could be over 10,000 Yuan (see Table 4).

Table 4 here

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 common in X County, 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 4). 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 marriage expenses 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 community's economy on the ability to retain and attract marriageable women. There is a tendency for women to move up 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 these villages 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 5, 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 level³⁸. Unlike most recent studies, which show that men who marry inter-provincial women are often physically or mentally disabled, we find that 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 being forced to be involuntary bachelors.

Table 5 here

³⁸According to the Second China National Sample Survey on Disability in 2006, 6.34% of the Chinese population are disabled.

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.

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 6). 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 is 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.³⁹ However, 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.

Table 6 here

There are also obvious differences in matching characteristics of couples among different types of marriages. As shown in Table 6, 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. 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 is, the higher is the average income. Men marrying out-of-

³⁹ Knight, J., and L. Song, 'Chinese peasant choices: migration, rural industry or farming', *Oxford Development Studies* 31(2), (2003), pp. 123-148.

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 class, 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 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 strategies for men of inferior social status to marry.

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 his parents' responsibility to arrange a marriage for a man. 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 opportunity to get a non-agricultural job. 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

In Table 7, a majority of village cadres report that most wives from other provinces can become part of labor force in their village. But because of language and cultural barriers, their communication with local villagers is restricted. They have difficulty keeping in close touch with their natal family because of the long distance, which suggests that they should be able to spend more time in adapting to and integrating into the local society. Additionally, 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).*

Table 7 here

Evidence from both village cadres (see Table 7) and 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.*

Table 8 presents data on married men's marriage satisfaction. Most men are satisfied with their own marriage, but the proportion reporting "neutral" is higher for inter-provincial marriages than for local marriages. 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 such marriages failed because the bride disappeared or ran away (see Table 7). Since these failed marriages are not included in our sample of inter-provincial marriages, the level of

satisfaction of inter-provincial marriage may be overestimated.

Table 8 here

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. Table 7 shows that 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. As shown in Table 9, 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).

Table 9 here

Mercenary marriage (*Maimaihunyin*, which refers to a marriage arranged by a third party, including parents or a kidnapper, who, in order to obtain money or property, illegally forces someone to marry) is another important reason for the frequent disappearance of inter-provincial wives. Because couples in inter-provincial marriages didn't 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 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-skewed 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 concluding 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, and protecting the rights of women, 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; and men in poorer families and communities often bear 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. Increased numbers of single men, including rural-urban migrants,

can partly account for the rising crime rate.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

⁴⁰ den Boer, Andrea and Valerie M. Hudson, 'Missing women and circles of violence in China and India', (Unpublished); Edlund, Lena, Junjian Yi, Hongbin Li, and Junsen Zhang, 'Sex ratios and crime: Evidence from China', *IZA Discussion Paper 3214*, (2007).

⁴¹ Hesketh, T., 'Too many males in China: the causes and the consequences', *Significance* 6(1), (2009), pp. 9-13.

Table 1. 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 here after.

Table 2. 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 3. 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>Marriage expense</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 4. Inter-provincial marriage reported by village cadres

	Total	Cadres in mountain villages	Cadres in plains villages
<u>Are there some wives from poorer provinces in your village (%)</u>	(102)	(53)	(49)
Yes	92.2	94.3	89.8
<u>Costs for matchmakers (%)</u>	(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
<u>Marriage expense for inter-provincial wives (%)</u>	(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 5. 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 6. 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 7. Characteristics of out-of-province wives reported by village cadres (%)

	Total	Cadres in mountain villages	Cadres in plains villages
	(92)	(49)	(43)
Active laboring	70.7	71.4	69.8
Less communication with local villagers	67.4	67.3	67.4
Visiting natal parents frequently	10.9	12.2	9.3
Most get along well with their husbands	82.6	77.6	88.4
Runaway or disappeared	46.7	57.1	34.9

Table 8. Men's marriage satisfaction (%)

	Men marrying out-of-province wives	Men marrying local wives with difficulty	Men marrying local wives smoothly
	(20)	(63)	(121)
Marriage satisfaction			
Satisfied	80.0	93.7	86.6
Neutral	20.0	4.8	12.6
Not satisfied	0.0	1.5	0.8

Table 9. Evidence of marriage fraud from village cadres

	Total	Cadres in mountain villages	Cadres in plains villages
	(102)	(53)	(49)
Proportion of villages where marriage fraud occurred (%)	83.3	84.9	81.6
Money lost to marriage fraud (%)	(85)	(40)	(45)
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