

Title: Household Spatial Arrangements of Rural-Urban Migrants in China

Extended Abstract:

In the late 1970s, China began a series of social-economic reforms which raised demand for cheap labor in urban areas, prompting the first waves of self-motivated rural-urban migrants since the 1950s. Today, thirty years has passed since this wave of rural-urban migration started. The size of rural-urban migrants continues to grow and has reached 230 million in 2010, while most of migrants are still not able to settle down in the cities themselves and with their families. During the early waves of rural-urban migration, most *married women, children and elders* were “left behind” (remaining at the migrant’s point of origin) by male migrants. However, as married women have joined the rural-urban migration process in increasing numbers, in many villages, only *children and elders*--the most vulnerable members of the family--are left behind. The time when members of a household are separating in different places also gets longer. When this wave of rural-urban migration was in its early stages, most migrants returned to the countryside during the busy farm seasons. Nowadays, however, many migrant households only have family reunion once a year during Spring Festival for less than one month. Some migrant workers even stay away from family members for several years. As argued by some scholars like Lee (2007) and Fan (2008), split household is becoming a way of life to a great number of rural residents in China.

Many studies aim at explaining the persistence of split household in China highlights the impact of the household registration (*hukou*) policy: migrant workers want to bring their family members to the cities and ultimately settle down there. However, because they cannot obtain a destination city’s *hukou*, rural-urban migrants have very limited access to public benefits such as

housing, education and health care, and are therefore compelled to return to the point of origin in the countryside sooner or later. Hence, Xiang Biao (2007) argues that it is not that migrant workers who leave behind their household members, but the rural communities as a whole is left-behind economically and socially by the policy design. This interpretation about split household tends to depict migrants as passive or merely reactive respondents to external economic structures and social policies, and the agency of migrants and their household members usually does not receive enough attention. In the transnational migration context, Hugo observes that migrant workers do not always desire to settle in destination countries, because by keeping the family at the place of origin, migrants can obtain the “best of both worlds”--earning in high-income destinations and spending in low-cost origins (Hugo 2006), an explanation that depicts migrants as strategic agents. In my paper, I assess the extent to which Hugo’s argument is applicable in understanding the split household arrangement in China’s rural-urban situation. I argue that the split household is a specific form of *household spatial arrangement* (which involves the decision of which household member should pursue migrant work and which member should stay behind to assume village responsibilities), hence a *household strategy* of China’s rural residents during the process of rural-urban migration. By actively arranging and rearranging the location of different household members, migrant households change the household division of labor to take full advantage of migrant work opportunities in the cities as well as to preserve the social-economic bases in the countryside.

In my paper, I define “*household*” as a group of family members who are expected to live in the same dwelling and have the same budget, which includes two generations: a married couple and the couple’s unmarried children. Then I divide the household spatial arrangements into four forms:

sole-migration, couple-migration, family-migration, and non- migration. The meanings of these forms are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Forms of household spatial arrangement

Forms of household spatial arrangement	Meaning
Sole-migration	One of a married couple migrates to the urban areas; all the other household members stay behind in the countryside.
Couple-migration	The married couple migrates together to the urban areas; the children stay behind in the countryside.
Family-migration	All the household members migrate to urban areas.
Non-migration	All the household members stay in the countryside

Based on a longitudinal record of 300 households in Sichuan and Anhui from the 1990s to as recent as 2011, I examine how the form of household spatial arrangement has changed and why certain form of household spatial arrangement is preferred. My finding shows that, couple-migration and family- migration are now more common than before. However, couple migration and family migration do not signal a growing desire and ability of migrants to settle down permanently in cities. By doing event history analysis, I also find that the form of spatial arrangement a household has is closely related to the number of children the household have, the age and education level of the children, and availability of help migrants can get from the rural community. In general, “for my children” is an important reason for migrants to both start migration and return to the countryside. By using family biographies and interview narrative records, I also find that maximizing household income and strengthen the household security are the two criteria migrant households use to decide the form of spatial arrangement. In the case when maximizing household income and strengthening socio-economic security conflict with each other, security is preferred. More specifically, I find that:

(1) Sole-migration is likely to happen when migrants' parents are not available to help, and when the children are in the years of preparing for the higher education entrance exam.

(2) Couple-migration is likely to occur when a migrant household is in serious economic difficulty.

Migrants' parents' availability to help also is conducive to couple-migration.

(3) Family-migration closely relates to the success of the migrant worker in the cities. The better a migrant worker's income is, the more likely he/she will bring the whole household to the cities.

Family-migration may also happen when children have finished schooling or chosen to quit school.

Those children could decide to move to the destination of their migrant parents and start doing migrant work there.

(4) Non-migration usually happens when migrant workers are not able to continue their migrant work in the cities for various reasons (for example, being laid off, being injured, or being too sick to work), or when they need to build a house or take care of the farmland in the countryside. Migrant workers may also return because they have certain business plan in the countryside. This latter situation is not common in rural China, and the non-migration form is usually a temporary arrangement in rural China.