

Rural Women, Marriage Migrations, and Gender Equality In Contemporary China

Statement Prepared for the Roundtable “Holding Up Half the Sky: Women’s Rights in China’s Changing Economy,” of the Congressional Executive Commission on China on Monday, February 24, 2003 at 2:00pm by **Christina Gilmartin**, Association Professor of History, Northeastern University

The Economic Reforms that were instituted in China in the late 1970s have brought tremendous changes, both positive and negative for women. An explosion of internal migration streams of extraordinary proportions in China have drawn not only men, but also women. It is noteworthy that these women have come from a wide variety of social groups and from both urban and rural localities. In addition, these migration patterns have been characterized by a shift from a traditional family migration to the migration of unmarried women. Migration can be seen as a form of human agency by women who are aiming to make use of global social and economic transformations to improve their survival odds and achieve personal empowerment. However, a large segment of these Chinese migrant women have also faced an increasing vulnerability that has heightened public awareness and policy concerns.

Much scholarly and journalistic attention has been devoted to Chinese labor migrations, including the experiences of women labor migrants (i.e., Chow, 1998 and 2002; Salaff, 2002; Tan Shen, 1994 and 2001). This statement concerns one aspect of Chinese female migrations that has thus far not received much western attention: voluntary marriage migrations. Intertwined with both illegal marriage migration streams and economic migrations, this phenomenon has provided rural women with an important opportunity to improve their economic well-being. However, these women also faced unusual risks, as they moved beyond the security network of their kinship lines, and thus had few resources to rely upon if subjected to difficult circumstances in their new communities. Indeed these marriages have been very prone to conflict and dissolution.

Origins

Women have almost always moved at the time of marriage in China. Village exogamy was held up as a norm and was widely followed. The great majority of rural women who observed the strong taboos against same-village marriages during the Mao period (1949-1976), however, married with a radius of ten kilometers, and usually in the same county (Gu 1991). William Lavelly (1991) found that the distances a women moved at the time of marriage varied depending on economic factors. Wealthy villages were able to lure women from farther way than less well off localities. Moreover, those women who came from afar generally ended up with husbands from the poor strata of the community, indicating that these men were less able to attract women from surrounding villages. This pattern clearly revealed the existence of a marriage market even at a time when economic forces were weak and marriage decisions were greatly influenced by political factors.

The marriage market of the Mao era was radically expanded with the introduction of the Economic Reforms in 1978. Women began to travel much larger distances, crossing county and provincial borders. Within a few years, some women began to venture hundreds and even thousands of miles in order to marry. By 1990, the numbers had reached 4,325,747, and these female marriage migrants comprised 28% of the overall female migration in China. Although the data for the 2000 census has not yet been published, preliminary indications are that these figures have continued to climb. In contrast to the millions of women who have migrated to marry, few men have been involved in this process. The main reason for such low male participation in this type of migration is due to the tenacity of patrilocal marriage patterns. Even after the establishment of a commune system in China, government initiatives were unable to motivate men to undertake virilocal marriages. Those few men who moved to another

village and took up residence in the homes of their wives were not accorded full rights and social status in their new communities.

What kind of women migrated to marry in the first decade of the Economic Reform era? The great bulk of marriage migrants came from agricultural backgrounds. In one Jiangsu case study, 97.2 percent of female marriage migrants originally farmed for a living. In this respect they differed from female labor migrants, who according to the 1990 census, came only somewhat disproportionately from farming and factory backgrounds. Marriage migrants have not, for the most part, been able to switch their rural residences for urban ones through the migration process. Their destinations have primarily been rural, in large part because of the limitations imposed by the *hukou* system of residence registrations. Those who have managed to enter the boundaries of the large metropolitan areas of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, or Chongqing have not ended up in the urban areas, but in the outlying rural districts.

These marriage migrations owe their existence to the sex ratio imbalances that exist in rural China. To be sure, the imbalances of the 1980s and 1990s were of a different magnitude than those what have been produced as a result of the one-child family policy after it was implemented in 1979. Indeed, the 1990 census data show that the gender ratio of the total rural population in the 15-39 year-old group was relatively normal. But local women leaving the countryside to work in urban areas or in the special economic zones led to a sizable shortage of women of marriageable age in many rural communities. As a result, the gender ratios for the unmarried rural population were adversely affected. In 1990, for instance, the gender ratio of Chinese rural unmarried people between the ages of 15 and 19 was 108.91, that is almost 109 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women. In the 20-24 age group, it was 161.97 and in the 25-29 age group, it was a whopping 508.91. In the older age groups, there were essentially no unmarried women in the rural areas. IN such circumstances, the prevailing bias against the acquisition of an “outsider” as a bride dissolved among those families who were unable to secure a local woman.

Connections with Labor Migrations and Marriage Trafficking

The demographic data show that marriage migrations began in a gradual manner in the first years of the Economic Reform era. Certain case studies in the prosperous province of Zhejiang indicate it was only after 1985 that this type of migration began to develop. It appears that in the early years rural women were not able to overcome family constraints and participate in these types of voluntary marriage migrations. It may well be that female labor migrations helped to stimulate marriage migrations. As factories showed an increasing interest in young women migrant workers, certain social practices changed. We find that by 1995 all the factory girls who had migrated from rural areas to the urban areas of Guangdong province (near Hong Kong) were unmarried. This is also true for many of the export processing factories in the special economic zones of Shenzhen and Tanggu. As small companies run by local rural governments, joint ventures and foreign companies increasingly preferred to hire young unmarried female workers, the customary constraints against any type of unmarried female migrant began to weaken in the rural areas. This changed attitude may well have provided a more conducive atmosphere for unmarried female migration, both for the purposes of work and marriage.

Labor migrations were intertwined with marriage migrations in other ways as well. Ten Mile Inn, a village in Henan, for instance, began to recruit Sichuan men to work in its mines because of the unwillingness of local people to continue such dangerous work. These Sichuan men soon began to arrange for their female relatives to be married into the families of Ten Mile Inn. By the end of 1996 there were 20 Sichuan brides in the community, and by 1999 the number had doubled.

There is some evidence to indicate that illegal marriage trafficking may also have spurred the emergence of a legal, voluntary marriage migration. In the first years of China’s Economic Reform era, alarming

stories appeared in Chinese and Western newspapers about women falling prey to kidnappers and being sold as wives to poor farmers. Traffickers usually targeted women from poor rural areas who were quite young, unsophisticated, and easily duped. Transported hundreds of miles from their homes, these women found themselves imprisoned in villages where everyone in the community sympathized with the men who had spent much of their life savings to acquire these wives. Some of these women managed to escape, but the majority gave birth to children. At this time, they were deemed trustworthy and released from surveillance on the assumption that they would not abandon their children. Allowed to communicate with their distraught natal families, they slowly became resigned to their circumstances and no longer sought to return to their natal communities. In order to reduce their isolation in their new localities and create a more supportive network in an unfriendly environment, they began to encourage other women from their natal villages to migrate to their new communities. Such an enclave of Yunnan women started in Huiyang county, Henan in 1990. In this way, illegal and legal marriage migrations became intertwined. Indeed, in the minds of some scholars, women who had been kidnapped and forced into a marriage against their will were also considered to be marriage migrants. One study that was conducted in 1994, for instance, found that involuntary marriage migrants constituted 14.21% of the almost 18,000 female marriage migrants in his survey.

Destinations

Marriage migrations in the Economic Reform era have tended to follow certain distinct geographical patterns. In general, they originate in the poorer areas of the southwest and travel to the rural areas of the richer sections of the eastern coast, especially Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. As early as 1989, for instance, in certain areas of Zhejiang, in every 51 households there was one female marriage migrant. Another study found that one county in Zhejiang accepted 71% of its female marriage migrants from the four provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Anhui, and Yunnan. By the early 1990s, it was clear that the most common destinations for interprovincial marriage migrants were Jiangsu, Hebei, Guangdong, Shandong, Anhui, and Zhejiang. These geographical trends reflect specific economic realities. Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong and Hebei are among the richest provinces in China, while the southeastern provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou are among some of China's poorest. Even as early as 1989, the per capital net income in rural Zhejiang was more than 400 yuan above the national average, approximately 450 *yuan* above Hunan's level, and more than double that of the rural areas in Guizhou, Guangxi and Sichuan. This economic gap has continued to grow in the last decade.

Economic factors are critical in the decisions of those men who marry female migrants. The bride price paid for immigrant women is usually significantly less than what is required for local brides. In Zhejiang, for instance, the bride price for local women has gone up precipitously since 1982. From the engagement of the couple to the wedding party, the bride price might be as high as 100,000 *yuan*. *For a sizable percentage of the men's families, this type of marriage might be the only possibility, as no woman in the local community would be willing to marry into a poor family.*

Concerns

Marriage migrants are using a traditional method of social mobility for women: marriage. Many end up in much more affluent areas, and may well be satisfied. Many are never registered, which means that they are not official. In such cases, women are not able to rely on the legal protections if their marriages fail. And it does appear that these marriages are more problematic. Some case studies report that these women experience a higher level of dissatisfaction with their marriages than women who marry locally. One study in Shandong, for instance, found that only half of the marriages between local men and female immigrants were stable. The countless reports of wife battering and female suicides in the rural areas may well be disproportionately occurring in this types of marriages. It has also been found that these women

report that their lives are more difficult than they had been in their home localities. It also appears that these women face a great deal of discrimination and hostility in the community, with the result that they cling to their newfound families and lead fairly solitary existences, refusing to assume jobs in the public domain. The relatively hostile environment couples with the lack of nearby relatives means that the main course of emotional and economic support for these women is their husband's families. But when these marriage are ridden with conflict, as is often the case, these women can find themselves without many resources. If the marriages fail, these women rarely seek a legal divorce.

While it has been argued that women's participation in these marriage migrations constitutes a type of female agency, it seems unlikely that these marriages are contributing to the creation of more egalitarian marriages. By relying on their roles as wives and mothers to effect this shift from the poorer to the richer regions of China, they are in fact reinforcing male power within marriage relationships.

Conclusion

Traditional method of using marriage as a means of social upward mobility. Numerous accounts of urban women pressing their legal rights in courts. Boston Globe on Sunday, February 23rd ran a very interesting example.