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Marriage and migration in transitional China: a field study of Gaozhou, western Guangdong

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Abstract. Marriage and marriage migration are often downplayed in the migration literature. The role of location in the decisionmaking underlying marriage migration, and the relations between marriage and labor migration, are little understood. Research that focuses on international marriages and on Western or capitalist economies has highlighted marriage as a strategy, but little attention is given to domestic marriage migration and to socialist and transitional economies. In this paper, through a field study of two villages in western Guangdong, China, and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from that study, we wish to advance two arguments. First, we argue that changes in the spatial economy have reinforced the importance of location in the matching and trade-off processes that lead to marriage migration. Evidence of spatial hypergamy across long distance supports the notion that marriage is a means for peasant women to move to more favorable locations. Second, we show that increased opportunities for labor migration—a product of economic transition—have enlarged peasants' marriage market and at the same time promoted division of labor within marriage. The findings underscore household and individual strategies in response to macrolevel constraints and opportunities, the centrality of marriage for understanding migration, and the relations between marriage and labor migration.

Marriage and the relations between marriage and labor migration are not popular themes in the migration literature. This is in part because of the general lack of attention on gender, the assumption that marriage is no more than a life event that triggers migration, and the notion that marriage is an end to migration rather than a means toward an end. That said, some studies, especially those on international marriages, have indeed emphasized the pragmatic considerations that underlie marriage migration. There is very little attention centered on domestic marriage migration, however, and even less on marriage migration in socialist and transitional economies. Transitional economies have peculiar institutional controls and are experiencing rapid changes that shape mobility, including marriage migration. In this paper, through a field study of two villages in western Guangdong, we examine the considerations and decisionmaking processes behind marriage and marriage migration and the relations between marriage and labor migration. We argue that changes in the spatial economy since transition have reinforced the importance of location in the matching and trade-off processes that lead to marriage, which in part accounts for long-distance marriage migration. Second, we want to show that increased opportunities for labor migration have contributed to expansion of the marriage market, on the one hand, and household division of labor within marriage, on the other. Both arguments underscore the agency of individuals and households as they respond to structural and macrolevel constraints and opportunities by pursuing strategies that advance their wellbeing.

In the following section, we briefly review the existing literature on marriage and migration. Then, we examine the context in rural China, emphasizing the rationale for marriage migration and the impacts of labor migration. This is followed by a description

of the field study, including analysis of the quantitative and qualitative information obtained from a questionnaire survey and interviews. In the conclusion, we summarize our findings and reiterate the centrality of marriage for understanding mobility.

The literature on marriage and migration

The vast majority of studies in the migration literature focuses on labor and work-related moves and relatively little attention has been given to marriage migration and the relations between marriage and migration. Marriage migration, defined as migration to join the spouse in another area usually at or soon after marriage, is often considered a special kind of migration for the goal of family formation (for example, Lievens, 1999) and is generally neglected in the literature (Watts, 1983). This is in part because gender is often not treated as a central organizing principle in migration and in part because of the skewed attention of the literature on men (Pedraza, 1991). The gender-specific nature of marriage migration—the vast majority of marriage migrants are women (UN Secretariat, 1993)—appears to have fostered the invisibility of marriage as a subject of inquiry in the migration literature. Most of the time, marriage is treated as merely one of the life events that triggers migration (Mulder and Wagner, 1993) and marital status is considered one of the demographic variables for predicting or explaining mobility (Speare and Goldscheider, 1987).

When researchers do study marriage migration, a dominant theme is that women are passive or tied movers who migrate as a result of marriage or within marriage (Bonney and Love, 1991; Fincher, 1993; Houstourn et al, 1984; Oberai and Singh, 1983; Thadani and Todaro, 1984; Watts, 1983). The bargaining power hypothesis, for example, postulates that it is more often the woman who bridges the distance than the man because the man's occupation is considered more important (Mulder and Wagner, 1993). Patriarchy within marriage and in the larger society—manifested as the power difference between men and women within marriage, the shorter term career perspectives of women because of their expected care-giving roles, and the persistent gender wage gap in the labor market—is central to explaining the greater likelihood for women to be passive or tied movers. As an institution, therefore, marriage is not only about the relations between men and women but is also shaped by larger social and economic structures.

Patriarchy, however, also underlies the notion that women may enter into marriage and marriage migration in order to pursue a better chance of economic security and wellbeing (Walby, 1990). Put in another way, given their marginalization in the labor market, women may find marriage, and specifically hypergamy (marrying up), an attractive and in some cases the only option for economic betterment. In this light, marriage can be regarded as not an end in itself but a means to attain certain goals (Willekens, 1987). When these goals involve moving to more desirable locations, marriage can be a means to migrate rather than an end to migration.

Most migration studies do not highlight marriage as an economic opportunity for migration or the role of location in marriage migration (Humbeck, 1996; Rosenzweig and Stark, 1989; Thadani and Todaro, 1984). However, Riley and Gardner (1993) have observed that in many societies marriage is a strategy for the natal family to improve its status and that the place of residence of prospective sons-in-law is important. Rosenzweig and Stark's (1989) study shows that households in rural India favor marriage of daughters to distinct and kinship-related households in order to mitigate income risks. Likewise, Watts (1983) examines the desire of rural women in Nigeria to marry men in cities. Studies of international marriage migration have focused on marriage as a strategy and on the destination's advantages. Humbeck (1996), for example, found that Thai women who migrated to marry German men did so in order to escape

poverty in rural Thailand, help their natal families, and seek better employment opportunities. Piper (1999) shows that getting secure and legal residence status, including status for work, in the host country is an important factor of international marriages between women from Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines and Japanese men.

The notion that marriage is a strategy stresses the agency of women. For example, focusing on Puerto Rican women, Ortiz (1996) argues that they are active agents in the migration process, using it as an economic option and to gain independence. Lievens's (1999) study of Turkish and Moroccan women in Belgium who marry men from their countries of origin suggests that they do so in order to secure more independence and to free themselves from the influence of in-laws.

The concept that marriage is a means toward an end, including migration, highlights the marriage decisionmaking process as one involving pragmatic considerations and weighing of options, complicating the conventional understanding of marriage as a matrimonial union based on affection. Pragmatism also underlies the decisionmaking of those who marry migrants. Humbeck (1996), for example, found that German men who married women from Thailand are older and less well educated, suggesting that their limited marriage market induced them to seek foreign wives. In rural Japan demographic changes have contributed to a 'wife shortage' and a marriage squeeze among men and have encouraged the import of wives from Southeast Asia (Jolivet, 1997, pages 152 – 161; Piper, 1999). Though the specific contexts vary, a common thread of these studies is that men that have difficulties finding mates locally are more likely than other men to marry migrant women.

The literature on marriage and migration, though growing, is small and have two major gaps. First, much of the attention is given to international marriages. There are few empirical studies on marriage migration within countries. As such, we know little about the role of marriage as a strategy and the role of geographic location in the decisionmaking processes underlying domestic marriage migration. Second, there is very little attention on socialist and transitional economies. Many of the observations made in Western and/or capitalist economies may very well be applicable in socialist and transitional countries, but the latter countries are distinguished by peculiar institutional history and rapid recent changes that have shaped the processes and patterns of migration, including marriage migration. First, free mobility is not a given (for example, Buckley, 1995; Mitchneck and Plane, 1995). As we shall discuss in the next section, rural – urban migration used to be strictly controlled in China, and even today it is not free. The institutional contexts of population movements must be addressed. Second, the transition that countries such as China and Russia are undertaking has fostered changes in the spatial economy and made some regions more attractive than others. How these changes affect marriage decisionmaking and marriage migration is not well understood. Third, economic transformations have unleashed new forms of migration, including labor migration, that have implications for marriage and marriage migration.

Findings from recent studies increasingly point to the importance of contextualizing and interpreting population movements in relation not only to long-standing sociocultural traditions and socialist legacies but also to structural, institutional, and political – economic changes that accompany transition and to the agency of individuals and households (Chan and Zhang, 1999; Fan, 1999; Solinger, 1999). By transition, we refer to the coexistence of the old and the new—the meshing of traditional sociocultural and socialist institutions with new market-economic mechanisms. Facing these macrolevel changes, households and individuals are motivated to pursue strategies that advance their wellbeing. In the following section, we shall elaborate the situation in China and outline our arguments.

Marriage and migration in China

The magnitude of marriage migration[1] in China alone is sufficient reason for researchers to take it seriously. According to the 1990 Census, marriage was the leading reason of female migration, accounting for 4.6 million (or 28%) of female migrants who moved across county or city boundaries between 1985 and 1990 (Fan, 2000). The rates of intracity and intracounty marriage migration, though not documented, are likely to be even higher.

Although the traditional short-distance village-to-village marriages may remain prevalent, long-distance marriage migration up the spatial hierarchy appears to be a prominent feature of the post-Mao period (Davin, 1999, page 145; Fan and Huang, 1998; Shen, 1996; Wang, 1992; Yang, 1991). Though spatial hypergamy—women moving to more prosperous areas through marriage—is not new in rural China (Lavely, 1991), we argue that circumstances during transition have reinforced the role of location in marriage decisionmaking. Through a field study, we wish to show that location is a prominent attribute in the matching and trade-off considerations underlying marriage migration. Second, we argue that the relatively recent opportunities for rural–urban labor migration complicate the relations between marriage and migration. Specifically, increased mobility through labor migration increases the size of the marriage market and is conducive to division of labor within marriage. The following two subsections articulate these arguments.

Matching, trade-off, and spatial hypergamy

Despite Maoist policies that increased women's labor-force participation, age-old traditions that undermine women's status remain strong in China, especially in the countryside. The persistence of large gender gaps in education, the constraints women face in the labor market, and the belief that marriage defines women's 'happiness' (*xingfu*) remain prevalent in post-Mao China (Bauer et al, 1992; Bossen, 1994; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Lavely, 1991; Wang, 2000; Wang and Hu, 1996, page 287). Whereas peasant men may improve their social and economic mobility by joining the military, pursuing education, and becoming cadres, most peasant women have few alternatives other than marriage for escaping poverty and achieving upward mobility (Bossen, 1994; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Wang, 2000; Wang and Hu, 1996, page 287). Indeed, historically, hypergamy has been common among Chinese women (Croll, 1981, page 97).

In Chinese traditional villages dominated by households sharing the same lineage, village exogamy is necessary for avoiding kin marriages and for natal families to diversify risks and enlarge networks (Davin, 1999, pages 141–142; Potter and Potter, 1990, page 205). For thousands of years, peasant women have been encouraged to marry men in nearby villages. This form of traditional marriage migration occurs over short distances and remains prevalent today (Wang and Hu, 1996, page 283; Yang, 1991; Zhang and Zhang, 1996). A survey in the late 1980s found that most rural marriages did not exceed a 25-km radius (*Renmin Ribao* 1989).

Not unlike other parts of the world, the mate-selection process in China has been, and still is, pragmatic. Specifically, it involves evaluation of a potential spouse's attributes (*tiaojian*), such as age, education, occupation, income and economic ability, physical characteristics (for example, height, appearance), health, class, personality,

[1] In China, moves following the migration of spouses are considered to be 'joining family' rather than marriage migration (SSB, 1993, pages 513–514 and 558). Though migrations to (re)join the spouse after prior geographical separation for job-related and other reasons are quite common in China they are mostly regarded as 'joining family' migration. In contrast, migration that occurs at the same time as the beginning of the marriage is usually a good indicator of marriage migration.

family background, and resources (Fan, 2000). Attributes can also be functions of specific political–economic contexts. During the Maoist collective period, for example, former landlords connoted bad class origins for marriage and Communist Party membership was considered a good attribute (Croll, 1981, pages 86–93). Attribute matching centers on the relative similarity in status between the prospective spouses, subject to the hypergamous principle that husbands should be somewhat 'superior' to wives in terms of age, height, education, and occupation (Ji et al, 1985; Lavely, 1991; Shen, 1996; Yang, 1994, page 220). It is strongly and widely believed that marriages involving households with similar socioeconomic statuses ('matching doors') would be stable and successful. Attribute trade-off refers to the ways in which a desirable attribute can compensate for or offset a less desirable attribute, and vice versa. For example, a prospective husband's older age may be offset by his wealth. Trade-off can also facilitate matching if a desirable (or less desirable) attribute of a prospective spouse is offset by another desirable (or less desirable) attribute of the other spouse. For example, a prospective husband's lack of education may be offset by the prospective wife's less desirable physical appearance. The emphasis on attribute matching and trade-off is also conducive to the popularity of 'introducers' (*jieshao ren*) or matchmakers (*meiren*) (Croll, 1981), whose roles are to bring together prospective spouses who are fitting (*dengdui*) to one another.

Location is one of the attributes for consideration in the mate-selection process. For a peasant woman who has few options other than marriage to improve her socioeconomic status, the condition of the prospective husband's village is an important factor in marriage decisionmaking (Li and Lavely, 1995). Hence, spatial hypergamy has always existed in China. Long-distance marriage migration, however, has not been common until recent decades. We argue that the process of socialist transition has further reinforced location as a marriage attribute. Decollectivization of the rural economy has removed the commune shelter and has increased household opportunities as well as risks, so that calculations of costs and benefits of decisions such as marriage are likely to be even more elaborate than previously (Han and Eades, 1995). The prospective husband's location, where the wife will be likely to spend the rest of her life, is an even more crucial consideration for her than in prereform years. Furthermore, spatial restructuring during transition has steepened the economic gradient between regions. The widening gap between coastal and inland regions is well documented (for example, Fan, 1995; Wei and Ma, 1996) and is likely to motivate rural women to seek spatial hypergamy across provinces and long distances (Fan and Huang, 1998; Shen, 1996; Wang, 1992; Yang, 1991). The 1990 Census documented 1.4 million female interprovincial marriage migrants, representing nearly one third of all female marriage migrants (across city or county boundaries) between 1985 and 1990. In rural Zhejiang, a major destination of interprovincial female marriage migrants, a popular saying is that "in the 1980s, [wives] come from afar" (*bashi niandai yuanfang lai*) (Xu and Ye, 1992).

Two additional features of the transitional economy—both dealing with the household registration (*hukou*) system—have played important roles in shaping spatial hypergamy. The hukou system is one of the most prominent socialist legacies in China (Chan, 1996; Chan and Zhang, 1999; Fan, 1999; 2001; Solinger, 1995; 1999). Peasants without urban hukou have little access to the benefits and subsidies urbanites enjoy and are blocked from prestigious jobs in the urban labor market. Accordingly, peasant women's lack of urban hukou renders them among the least desirable in the urban marriage market (Davin, 1998). For example, the rule that children are designated their mother's hukou discourages urban men from marrying rural women, because their children's survival and education in the city would be extremely difficult.

Though some large cities have recently relaxed this draconian rule, it is unclear how prevalent this policy change is and whether it can offset the inertia in the urban marriage market that disadvantages rural women. The options for peasant women desiring spatial hypergamy are therefore largely restricted to rural areas. Indeed, Fan and Huang's (1998) analysis of the 1990 Census shows that the vast majority of long-distance marriage migrants were rural-to-rural migrants.

In addition, new inventions of the hukou system, such as temporary residence permits, have enabled the temporary migration of peasants to work in urban areas (Chan and Zhang, 1999; Fan, 2001; Goldstein and Guo, 1992; Goldstein et al, 1991; Solinger, 1999). Increased labor mobility allows information about regional gaps in development and conditions of prosperous regions to travel more quickly and widely. As rural women now have greater access to information about more distant locations, the geographic size of their marriage market also expands. Consequently, spatial hypergamy may involve not only village-to-village or county-to-county moves but is also represented by significant proportions of interprovincial long-distance migration.

For long-distance marriage migration, an intermediary who provides information not only about the prospective spouses but also about the distinct origin and destination is especially crucial. For example, pioneer marriage migrants may inform their sisters, relatives, friends, and acquaintances from their place of origin (*tongxiang* or *laoxiang*) about their host communities and introduce them to prospective husbands (Wang and Hu, 1996; Xu and Ye, 1992; Yang, 1991; Yang, 1994). The resultant chain or 'snowballing' migration would be likely to result in focused migration streams, from specific origins to specific destinations (Han and Eades, 1995). In addition, attribute matching and trade-off are likely to be central to long-distance marriage migration. Some studies have found that men that marry migrant women are typically older, poorer, or mentally or physically handicapped (Han and Eades, 1995; Ma et al, 1995; Xu and Ye, 1992). Although their less desirable attributes impose constraints on finding mates locally, they may be considered 'matchable' with women from poorer regions. To women desiring spatial hypergamy, a prosperous region is an attribute that can offset the prospective husband's less desirable personal attributes. Also, their long distance from the natal families may be more than offset by the benefits of a prosperous destination. Migrant women from poor regions are known to expect a lower 'brideprice' and less costly weddings and are perceived to be diligent workers (Liu, 1990; Xu and Ye, 1992). To their husbands, these qualities may very well offset the migrant women's less desirable backgrounds.

Marriage and labor migration

We argue that labor migration, which has been boosted by transition, has important implications for marriage and marriage migration in rural China. The rapid development of an urban labor market, thanks to urban reforms and the infusion of foreign investment, has at the same time increased the demand for cheap labor in industrial and service sector jobs. To rural Chinese, out-migration to work in urban areas (*dagong*) is an attractive source of income (Woon, 1999). These opportunities have two specific implications for marriage. First, migrants enjoy enlarged social spaces and more opportunities to meet women and men outside their home villages. The marriages that ensue (dagong marriages) are less dependent on intermediaries and are more likely than traditional marriages to be built on affection. Nevertheless, as long as peasant migrants are not granted urban residence, the mates of dagong migrants would likely be other rural Chinese. These marriages would again result in migration, most likely by the wife to the husband's village.

Second, the opportunities for labor migration encourage household division of labor within marriage. Denied residence rights in urban areas, peasant households are encouraged to hold on to contract land (land contracted from village authorities) and maintain their roots and ties in the home village (Song, 1999; Woon, 1999). In order to maximize income and diversify risks, a popular strategy is division of labor, whereby one spouse, most likely the husband, works as a migrant while the other spouse stays in the village and assumes the responsibilities of farming, household chores, and raising children. This is, in essence, an extension of the traditional division of labor within Chinese families where men manage 'outside' business whereas women are in charge of the 'inside' (*nan zhu wai nu zhu nei*)—in this case, the village. Such gendered, occupational, and spatial divisions of labor are made popular, perhaps even necessary, by increased employment opportunities in urban areas as well as by peasants' need to cling on to farmland, both features reflecting the peculiar transitional economy in China. They have also reinforced women's subordinate statuses and accelerated feminization of agriculture (Bossen, 1994; Croll, 1984; Gao, 1994; Park, 1992; Zhang, 1999). As a household strategy, division of labor has likely boosted the utility of marriage, even if it may entail long-distance marriage migration. In the following section we will further illustrate our arguments by using field evidence.

Field study of two villages in Gaozhou

Background

Macrostatistics such as the census are instrumental for documenting broad patterns of migration but are less useful for examining household and individual level processes, considerations, and decisions. Instead, in this paper, we rely on fieldwork conducted in western Guangdong, a prominent destination of marriage migration (figure 1). Between 1985 and 1990, marriage accounted for more than 80% of all female migrants from another city, county, or province to six western Guangdong counties (GDPPCO, 1992)—Wuchuan, Gaozhou, Xinyi, Dianbai, Huazhou, and Luoding. All six counties depend heavily on agriculture and are some distance away from the province's most thriving economic centers such as Dongguan and Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta. We further narrowed down our fieldwork to Gaozhou county, which was ranked first in

Figure 1. Site of field study and the origins of marriage migrants.

the number of female marriage in-migrants (14 592 between 1985 and 1990 according to the 1990 Census) in western Guangdong, and which is characterized by a high proportion of labor out-migrants working mostly in the Pearl River Delta. Gaozhou county was upgraded to become a county-level city in 1995. But because it is primarily an agricultural county, with only a small number of industrial enterprises, in this paper we refer to it as a county. As of 1996, Gaozhou county comprised 27 townships and a total population of 1.4 million people (GDSB, 1997).

Our interest in process and decisionmaking calls for an analytical approach with use of quantitative and qualitative data from the field. We selected a township, Genzhi, whose population and economic conditions were near the average for Gaozhou. In 1996, Genzhi township's population was 61 703, compared with an average township population of 51 849 in Gaozhou. In that same year, Genzhi's per capita rural output was 4910 yuan, compared with 4368 yuan for Gaozhou county as a whole. Like many other townships in Gaozhou, Genzhi is heavily dependent on lychee trees, which are grown on three quarters of the township's hilly land. According to the township authority, female marriage migrants (from another city, county, or province) were represented in approximately one fifth of the households in Genzhi, and labor out-migration accounted for approximately 36% of the township's rural labor force. Within Genzhi township, we selected two adjacent villages, which for confidentiality purposes shall be referred to as village A and village B. Also, pseudonyms are used in this paper. In terms of overall economic conditions, the two villages are near the average for Genzhi township. In 1997 the per capita income of these two villages was 5003 yuan whereas the per capita income in Genzhi was 5018 yuan. According to Genzhi township's registration records, as of 1998 villages A and B consisted of a total of 128 households and 602 residents. Like most traditional villages, they exhibit strong family lineage. Two family names accounted for 59% and 24% of the households in village A, and one family name represented 83% of the households in village B.

Our fieldwork consisted of a questionnaire survey of the villages and taped interviews with selected village residents and informants and was conducted in January, February, and December 1999. Most of the informants are cadres at the Gaozhou Statistical Bureau, Gaozhou Family Planning Commission, and Genzhi Family Planning Commission. Though we aimed at including as many household heads and/or their spouses as possible in the questionnaire survey, we managed to survey only 60% of the households, comprising 76 households and 78 household heads or their spouses. The relatively low response rate is attributable to the prevalence of out-migration in the villages, such that household members and in some cases entire households could not be found. A limitation of the survey is that the sample is likely to be biased toward households whose members did not choose to out-migrate. However, as we shall describe below, a large proportion of our interviewees' spouses had indeed migrated elsewhere to work at the time of the survey. We asked the respondents to expand their answers to the questionnaire and comment on a variety of related issues. We also selected residents from a range of backgrounds for in-depth interviews on topics related to marriage, migration, and work.

Our sample does not lend itself to statistical tests because of its relatively small size and because it is not a random sample. Instead, the approach we take involves quantitative description of the sample supplemented by qualitative information. The data should not be considered representative in a statistical sense but should be regarded as evidence of household and individual level processes based on field observations.

Prominence of long-distance marriage migration

Among the 78 respondents surveyed, 50 are women and 28 are men, and 80% are between the ages of 19 and 49 years. Apart from one single man, one widow, and one widower, all were married at the time of the survey. Under the conventional definition of migration as moves across city or county boundaries, the wives in about one third (25) of the households we interviewed are marriage migrants. Six are from other counties in Guangdong, fourteen from Guangxi province, and five from other provinces—two from Hunan and one each from Yunnan, Henan, and Jiangsu (table 1). All but one (who moved to the village two years after the wedding) moved to Gaozhou the same year they got married.

Table 1. Intermediaries of marriage.

	Migrant wife, by origin				Nonmigrant wife [a]
	all	Guangdong	Guangxi	other	
Total number of respondents	25	6	14	5	17
How husbands and wives met (%):					
relatives and *tongxiang*	74	40	86	75	71
labor migration (*dagong*)	22	40	14	25	6
family members	4	20	0	0	6
other	0	0	0	0	18
Number of responses	23	5	14	4	17
Acquaintances that are marriage migrants in Gaozhou (average number):					
tongxiang	1.2	0.0	2.1	0.2	na
relatives	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.4	na
family members	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	na
Number of responses	25	6	14	5	na

[a] Only those married since 1983 are included.
na not available.

Our analysis focuses mainly on comparisons between migrant and nonmigrant wives and comparisons among migrant wives from different origins. These comparisons are made primarily for women married since 1983, because marriages before the economic reforms involved very different socioeconomic and political contexts from those since the reforms. Also, focusing on marriages since the early 1980s enables us to analyze similar cohorts and minimize the effect of generational differences. All the 25 marriage migrants and 17 nonmigrant wives (35% of all nonmigrant wives we surveyed), had married since 1983 (table 1). Their ages range from 19 to 40 years, and the mean age is 30.9 years for migrant wives and 32.7 years for nonmigrant wives.

The prominence of non-Guangdong origins underscores the importance of long-distance marriage migration. Relatives and tongxiang play especially important roles in these moves, accounting for 86% of the marriages with migrant women from Guangxi and 75% of the marriages with migrant women from other provinces (table 1). All the marriage migrants from Guangdong are from countries near Gaozhou—Dianbei, Yangchun, and Luoding—suggesting that their moves are variants of traditional short-distance marriage migration (figure 1). In contrast, all the marriage migrants from Guangxi are from counties more than 300 km away. Their origins are all relatively near to the provincial capital of Nanning city. Specifically, six Guangxi migrants are from Yongning county, three from Chongzuo county, one from Daxin county, one from Mashan county, one from Dahua county, and two from unspecified locations near Nanning city. These migrations are by Chinese rural standards long-distance moves.

The relative proximity of the origins to the provincial capital has probably facilitated contacts with visitors and access to information from other provinces. Cantonese (*baihua*), the most common dialect in Guangdong, is popular in Guangxi, which also enables frequent interactions between the two provinces. A marriage migrant from Chongzuo recalls:

"Many people from Guangdong did business in Chongzuo, for example, selling *longan*. That's how my cousin was introduced to her husband and moved to Gaozhou. Later my cousin brought me here and introduced me to my husband."

Moreover, all the three migrants from Chongzuo share the same family name and came to Gaozhou between 1989 and 1993. Similarly, four of the six migrants from Yongning who share a family name all moved to Gaozhou between 1986 and 1989. The sharing of family names and the timing of their migrations suggest that they are relatives or tongxiang that constituted chain marriage migration. The quote above is typical of the accounts from several other marriage migrants, who first learned of Gaozhou because of a relative or tongxiang who had migrated there, and after visiting Gaozhou themselves became attracted to the idea of meeting and marrying men there. The 14 migrants from Guangxi reported a total of 29 tongxiang, three sisters, and two other relatives who also married Gaozhou men. On average, each Guangxi migrant knows of 2.1 tongxiang who also migrated to Gaozhou through marriage (table 1). This contrasts with averages of 0 tongxiang for migrants within Guangdong and 0.2 tongxiang for migrants from other provinces. The larger number of acquaintances among Guangxi migrants is strong evidence of network and chain marriage migration and suggests that they shared similar information and considerations.

Matching, trade-off, and location

A popular perception among residents in the two villages is that the large economic gap between Gaozhou and the marriage migrants' home villages, especially during the late 1980s, was important in their mate-selection process. A woman from Guangxi comments, "When I got married [1988], I was told that Guangdong was much better than Guangxi". The majority of marriage migrants state that they came for 'marriage' (63%) and left their home villages for 'marriage' (60%) (table 2). Their answers reflect the synchronization of marriage and migration but do not specify the considerations behind marriage decisionmaking. At the same time, one third (5 out of 15) of Guangxi

Table 2. Reasons for migration (according to marriage migrants).

	All	Origin		
		Guangdong	Guangxi	other
Reasons for going to Gaozhou (%):				
marriage	63	100	53	100
higher income or better life	26	0	33	0
family or relatives in Gaozhou	5	0	7	0
other	5	0	7	0
Number of responses	19	3	15	1
Reasons for leaving home villages (%):				
marriage	60	100	50	67
low income or few job opportunities	20	0	29	0
to increase exposure	15	0	21	0
other	5	0	0	33
Number of responses[a]	20	3	14	3

[a] Including multiple responses.

migrants' responses indicate that they came because of 'higher income' or a 'better life' in Gaozhou, and 29% (4 out of 14) state that they left their home villages because of 'low income or few job opportunities' there. By contrast, no migrants from Guangdong or other provinces select these 'economic' responses. These differences suggest that location was an especially important consideration for migrants from Guangxi. Gaozhou's resources of fruit trees that proved quite profitable are a notable attraction, as one marriage migrant from Guangxi comments:

"Life is better here because we can make money from fruit trees. In Guangxi we [the natal family] have farmland but no fruit trees."

According to our informants, the increased productivity of fruit trees since the mid-1980s has improved significantly the wellbeing of village residents and made possible the building of new houses, sometimes referred to as 'lychee houses'. Indeed, both villages exhibit a mosaic of big and newly built residences along with older, rundown, houses.

Not only do marriage migrants emphasize the economic considerations behind their migration, but village residents as a whole also share the perception that the origin–destination economic gap is a critical determinant of marriage migration. When we asked all the village residents why they thought marriage migrants chose to come to Gaozhou, "poor home villages" accounted for 68% of the responses, and "Gaozhou's successful agricultural development" accounted for another 20% (table 3). One informant commented, "Local people realize that women from other provinces came because their lives back home are poor". A small proportion (10%) of responses focuses on the existence of "many marriage migrants in Gaozhou", which highlights the importance of network and chain marriage migration involving relatives and tongxiang, as discussed earlier.

Table 3. Reasons for marriage migration (according to all village respondents).

Reason	Percentage
Poor home villages	68
Gaozhou's successful agricultural development	20
Many marriage migrants in Gaozhou	10
Other	1
Number of responses [a]	88

[a] Including multiple responses.

Our field observations further suggest that good location can offset less desirable attributes. Table 4 (see over) summarizes the age and education levels of wives and husbands of the households we surveyed. Not surprisingly, across all groups, husbands are on average a few years older than their wives. The age gap ranges from −2 years (wife older by 2 years) to 19 years, and the mean age gap is larger in households with marriage migrants (4.8 years) than in households with nonmigrant wives (3.1 years). The husband–wife age gap varies with migrant origins—migrants from Guangdong have the lowest mean age gap (3.8 years), followed by those from Guangxi (4.5 years), and other provinces (6.8 years). At the time of marriage, the average age of husbands of marriage migrants and husbands of nonmigrants was 26.8 and 25.2 years, respectively, and the average age of migrant wives and nonmigrant wives was 21.6 and 22.1 years, respectively. Age at marriage ranged from 16 to 32 years for women, and 20 to 45 years for men. Though the 1980 Marriage Law stipulates that the minimum age of marriage for women is 20 years, the tradition for women to marry young is still quite prevalent in rural China (Yang, 1991).

Table 4. Age and education of wives and husbands.

	Migrant wife, by origin				Nonmigrant wife	
	all	Guangdong	Guangxi	other	all	married since 1983
Number of respondents	25	6	14	5	49	17
Mean age:						
wife	30.9	33.3	31.3	26.8	43.4	32.7
husband	35.7	35.2	35.8	33.6	46.5	35.8
Mean age at marriage:						
wife	21.6	21.8	21.6	21.5	20.3	22.1
husband	26.8	26.4	26.1	29.8	23.5	25.2
Husband–wife age gap (mean years)	4.8	3.8	4.5	6.8	na	3.1
Education (% junior high or above)						
wife	44	33	43	60	na	53
husband	60	50	50	100	na	71
Husband–wife education gap (%)						
same	54	67	46	60	na	71
husband had higher education	33	33	31	40	na	24
wife had higher education	13	0	23	0	na	6

na not available.

Four couples have age differences of 10 years or more. At the time of marriage, the wives' ages ranged from 17 to 23 years, and the husbands' ages ranged from 29 to 34 years. All four wives are migrants—two are from Guangxi, one from an adjacent county (Dianbai), and the fourth is from Hunan (figure 1)—and all four couples got married between 1986 and 1988. These observations are consistent with many respondents' perception about marriage migration and age differences. Specifically, older men who have difficulties finding mates locally will resort to marrying migrant women, and women from poorer areas are more willing than local women to accept larger age differences, in light of the wives' poorer backgrounds and the husbands' more favorable locations.

The male–female education gap that is prevalent throughout China, especially in rural areas, is clearly observable in our survey. Table 4 shows that in every group the proportion of husbands with junior high or above education is higher than that of the wives. The majority of women surveyed married men with similar or higher levels of education, and the typical combination is junior high for the husband and primary for the wife. However, a significant proportion of women from Guangxi—23% (three cases)—have higher education levels than their husbands, which is not common in Chinese society. All three husbands have primary level education whereas the wives' education levels range from junior high to senior high. This anomaly suggests that the husbands' lower education is offset by their favorable location, especially to marriage migrants from poor locations. This trade-off is similar to the age-gap trade-off described earlier. In fact, all three Guangxi migrants that have higher education levels than their husbands are also considerably younger than their husbands, with age gaps of 4, 6, and 10 years, further supporting the argument that location is an important consideration in the trade-off exercise.

As most of the husbands of marriage migrants were not present during our survey, we were unable to obtain direct information about their considerations in mate selection. But when we asked all village respondents the question "Why do you think local men chose to marry women from other places?", 45% of the responses pointed to "men's

Table 5. Reasons for local men to marry migrants (according to all village respondents).

Reason	Percentage
Men's attributes (*tiaojian*)	45
Labor migration	27
Migrants are more hardworking	12
High sex ratio	10
Less expensive	7
Number of responses[a]	83

[a] Including multiple responses.

attributes", 27% to the "labor migration" of men that increased their opportunities to meet nonlocal women, 12% to the perception that "migrants are more hardworking", 10% to the "high sex ratio" in Gaozhou because of the labor out-migration of young women, and 7% to "less expensive" weddings (table 5). When asked to specify the types of attributes important for marriage migration, most respondents immediately referred to age and economic ability. Our earlier analysis of the husband–wife age gap suggests that older men are more likely to marry migrants, but we do not have sufficient information about the husbands' income at the time of marriage to examine their economic attributes. This is because of the large number of male household heads not present during the survey and the difficulties for respondents to recall their incomes at the time of marriage, which could be as long as 16 years ago. Nevertheless, the "migrants are more hardworking" and "less expensive" responses depict the expectations that marriage migrants would substantially contribute to household production and that they do not anticipate costly weddings or lucrative brideprice—both practical and economic considerations on the part of the husbands' families. Indeed, the average wedding cost (including brideprice and adjusted for inflation to 1997) was significantly different for marriages with local women (7141 yuan) compared with those with migrants (4619 yuan). In particular, weddings with migrants from Guangxi were the least expensive, averaging only 3932 yuan. Among marriages with migrant women, 86% of the husbands' families were solely responsible for the wedding expenses, compared with 56% among marriages with local women. These differences may be related to the lower wedding cost among marriages with migrant women and to their relatively poorer backgrounds. By contrast, in 44% of the marriages with local women the wives' families contributed jointly or solely to the wedding expenses.

The above observations underscore the importance of economic ability in the matching and trade-off process. Specifically, men with low economic ability have difficulties finding mates locally and are motivated to marry women from poorer provinces; at the same time, these women are willing to accept their husbands' low economic status (relative to other men in the destination) because of their favorable location. A man 45 years old who is poor by the villages' standards and who married a migrant women more than 10 years younger told us:

> "I was introduced to my wife through friends ... . We didn't have a wedding banquet. No local women would marry me. I have been introduced to many women ... but none worked out because they asked for too much money."

The account of Zhao Xiujuan—a 32-year-old marriage migrant from Guangxi—further illustrates the workings of attribute matching and trade-off. Xiujuan was born in a village in Guangxi in the Nanning district, and came to learn about village A and her husband through her cousin, who had married a man in village A three years before Xiujuan came. Xiujuan got married in 1988 at the age of 21 years and thought at that time that Gaozhou was a desirable place:

"My tongxiang told me that this was a good place, that this was a much better place than my home village. They said that life here would not be as bitter."

When asked about marriage decisionmaking, Xiujuan comments:

"My husband looked like a reliable man.... In this village, my husband was rather poor. No one wanted to marry him [laughing]. Before me he was introduced to other women, including one from Hainan [also a poorer province], but they came and noticed that he didn't have much [in the house].... I thought we matched quite well—he had junior high education and I had not even finished primary school. He was five years older than I."

In our survey, the majority (55%) of the village respondents indicate that "solving men's mate-finding problems" is the most significant contribution of marriage migrants. As aptly summarized by one informant:

"Men don't usually care much about the family backgrounds of their wives, and are not as concerned if their wives are from poor families. They are more concerned with their wives' appearance. That's why there is an old saying that 'it's easier to pick a wife than to pick a husband'. Women look not only at men's appearance but also their family and where they live (*difang*)."

All in all, the field observations summarized above highlight the importance of location as a marriage attribute and are evidence for the trade-off between location, on the one hand, and age, education, and economic ability, on the other. They support the notion that uneven regional development and increased mobility have reinforced the prominence of location as a factor in marriage decisionmaking and that the trade-off between location and other attributes motivates spatial hypergamous migration.

Marriage and labor migration

Our field site, which is characterized by a high degree of labor out-migration, is uniquely suitable for studying the relations between labor migration, on the one hand, and marriage and marriage migration, on the other. Evidence from our fieldwork highlights two types of relations—dagong marriage migration and household division of labor.

Dagong marriage migration

Labor migration increases the opportunities for single men and women to meet prospective mates from other places. In our survey, 22% of migrant women met their husbands during dagong (table 1). Even if prospective spouses meet outside their home villages, however, the practice of intermediaries is still important. A woman who met her husband while working in a Shenzhen factory described her parents' reactions:

"At first my parents did not approve our marriage. When my husband arranged to have a *meiren* to come to our home, they agreed."

However, the role of attribute trade-off seems less prominent in dagong marriage migration, as one informant describes:

"They [dagong marriage migrants] have a different kind of marriage... they met their husbands during labor migration, and their marriages are built on affection... ."

The account of Lin Xiaoying suggests that location is less important in dagong marriage migration. Xiaoying is 27 years old, and got married in 1994 at the age of 22 years. She was born in Chenzhou, Hunan, near the northern border of Guangdong. She has the same level of education as her husband (junior high) and is one year younger than her husband. They met when they were working as migrants in Shenzhen:

"After finishing junior high, I did not get into senior high. There wasn't much to do at home, so a few of us decided to find work as migrants. We were introduced by our acquaintances to work in factories."

She describes how she met her husband:

"I met my husband after three or four years of labor migration. We got along very well. I was very young. My parents were a bit concerned that I would be too far away from home... it's not convenient [if they needed me]."

When comparing Gaozhou with her home village, Xiaoying comments:

"They [her acquaintances] all said that Guangdong was better. But back in Hunan there was less farm work—we grew two rice crops a year and could rest in the winter. Here, farm work is busy; in the winter we grow vegetables as well."

Also, she expects her younger sister to be close to the natal family:

"My younger sister should marry someone near home so she can take care of my parents."

As will be shown in the next subsection, spatial hypergamous and dagong marriage migrations appear to differ also in terms of household division of labor.

Marriage, migration, and household division of labor

Our survey indicates that more than half (52%) of the husbands of marriage migrants (13 out of 25), and 41% (7 out of 17) of the husbands of nonmigrant wives have migrated elsewhere to work (table 6). All but one are working in the Pearl River Delta, primarily in Shenzhen, Dongguan, Zhuhai, and Guangzhou. The only person who did not go to the Pearl River Delta area went to the special economic zone of Shantou. The majority (12 of the 17 who responded to this question) migrated to work in manufacturing and construction, with the others engaging in business. All out-migrant husbands send home remittances, ranging from 900 yuan to 40 000 yuan, with an average of 6713 yuan per year. Given a mean household income of 9861 yuan in these two villages, the remittances from out-migrant husbands are indeed a major source of household income.

Table 6. Mobility of husbands.

	Migrant wife, by origin				Nonmigrant wife [a]
	all	Guangdong	Guangxi	other	
Number of respondents	25	6	14	5	17
Husbands have outmigrated (%)	52	67	43	60	41

[a] Only those married since 1983 are included.

As discussed earlier, peasant households are not encouraged to give up contract land. In our study, all but one household we surveyed continue to contract farmland and fruit trees from village authorities. Therefore, the possibility for one (or more) household member(s) to pursue migrant work hinges largely on the availability of other household members to stay in the village. In cases where the entire household has migrated out, which is not as common, the typical strategy is to subcontract farmland and/or fruit trees to others. Many respondents told us that out-migrants would eventually return and use their savings to help build new houses.

While the husband works as a labor migrant, the wife assumes all village responsibilities. In our study, 19 of the 20 households where husbands have migrated to work have children younger than 10 years old. The vast majority (80%, or 16 out of 20) are two-generation households, where grandparents are not available to help.[2]

[2] Multigeneration households are no longer the norm in rural China. Rather, sons are expected to move out and establish new households upon marriage. Among the 76 households we surveyed, there were 6 one-generation, 57 two-generation, and only 13 three-generation households.

The wives have therefore become the primary persons responsible not only for agricultural work but also for household chores and raising young children at home. A woman who used to be a labor migrant with her husband in Shenzhen and who had recently returned to the village told us:

"I cannot go out to dagong anymore. My children are going to school. Schools in Shenzhen are very expensive ... you need a hukou to go to school there ... it's better that the children return to the village to go to school. When my husband and I were in Shenzhen, we subcontracted our fruit trees to other people. But we had to return every now and then to apply fertilizers ... we could not rely on my husbands' parents because they are getting old. The money my husband makes in Shenzhen helped us build this new house."

Her example shows that marriage enables not only the transfer of women's labor to the husband's household but also household division of labor. Specifically, the designation of wives for farming, household chores, and raising children makes it possible for husbands to pursue labor migration. Though such division of labor boosts household income, it presents a dilemma, especially to wives, as one of our informants describes:

"They want their husbands to stay in the village, but they'll remain poor if the husbands return. The wives have to stay in the village because of the children. Some men don't want to return. Most women's mentality is, 'so long as the husband takes care of the home and the children [by sending money] I am contented'."

Zhao Xiujuan, whom we briefly introduced earlier, was able to build a new house recently with remittances from her husband, who works in the Pearl River Delta. Her comment illustrates this dilemma:

"My husband rarely returns home—maybe two or three times a year. Because he is away, no one is helping me. I have to work all day long. I am always busy, taking care of household chores, the children, and the fruit trees. I contact my husband by phone about once a month, but he lives in a factory dorm and is hard to reach. It would be nice if he stays home more. I've asked him to return home for good, but then his work is bringing home money."

Among the five dagong marriage migrants in our study, however, only one husband continued labor migration after he got married. Though our sample is too small for assessing if household division of labor involving the migration of the husband is less prevalent among dagong marriages, one informant highlights the role of affection:

"Their [women who met their husbands during labor migration] marriages are built on affection, and so the husbands and wives want to stay together."

For example, Liu Xiaoying, whom we introduced earlier, and her husband returned to Gaozhou after they got married. Both are now engaged in farm work, growing fruit trees and raising domestic animals.

Summary and conclusions

Most migration studies have focused on work-related migration and have downplayed the relations between marriage and migration. The literature is especially thin on domestic marriage migration and on marriage migration in socialist and transitional economies. In this paper, we have argued that marriage is not only a life event that triggers migration but also can be an important means for women to move to more favorable locations, and that marriage and labor migration are intricately related to one another. Through a study of two villages in Gaozhou, western Guangdong, and using quantitative and qualitative field data from that study, we have examined the processes and considerations behind marriage and marriage migration in rural China.

Field observations show that traditional marriages that involve the migration of the bride to the groom's family in a nearby village remain the dominant and perhaps the preferred mode, but new processes introduced or reinforced by socialist transition have further complicated marriage migration. The transitional economy is one where old sociocultural and socialist institutions operate side by side with new market–economic mechanisms. As marketization widens the regional gap of development, and as increased mobility facilitates the travel of information about regional inequalities, location has emerged as an important factor in marriage decisionmaking. Poor peasant women who are marginalized by patriarchy in the family and in the larger society have few alternatives other than marriage to escape poverty and improve their socioeconomic status, but socialist hukou legacies limit their marriage market to rural areas. Through the help of intermediaries and chain migration, however, they can achieve spatial hypergamous marriages that may involve long-distance migration from their home villages to more prosperous rural areas. At the same time, men with less competitive attributes are being 'matched' with migrant women from poorer regions, illustrating the trade-off between location, on the one hand, and age, education, and income, on the other. Through these spatial hypergamous marriages, women are able to move to more prosperous locations and men succeed to get married despite their poor socioeconomic statuses or being 'above marriageable ages'.

We have also argued that marriage migration should be understood in relation to increased opportunities for labor migration, also a product of economic transition. First, labor migration has widened peasants' social spaces, expanding their marriage market and facilitating marriages with individuals from outside the place of birth. In our field study, the number of dagong marriages is relatively small, but qualitative and quantitative data suggest that these marriages are more solidly grounded than spatial hypergamous marriages in affection. Second, our study has highlighted household division of labor as a popular strategy of married couples for maximizing household-level economic and social returns. Peasants are subject to constraints—the lack of urban permanent residence and the need to hold on to farmland—but at the same time have opportunities to work as temporary migrants in urban areas. The arrival of the wife, whether from nearby villages or from distant regions, permits the household to advance its wellbeing through division of labor. The typical model is one where the husband works in prosperous urban areas to provide the income necessary for a relatively comfortable lifestyle, including projects such as building a big house, and where the wife stays in the home village to take care of contract land, agricultural work, household chores, and young children.

Our findings—the important role of location in marriage migration decisionmaking; the interrelatedness between marriage and labor migration; and the gendered, spatial, and occupational divisions of labor within marriage—all highlight household and individual strategies in response to macrolevel constraints and opportunities. These strategies are especially needed in a transitional environment such as China, where socialist legacies coexist with new market opportunities and spatial economic changes. They underscore the importance of agency, the centrality of marriage for understanding migration, as well as the relations between marriage and labor migration.

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