
Migration and split households: a comparison of sole, couple, and family migrants in Beijing, China

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Abstract. The practice of split households among rural–urban migrants in China has persisted for more than twenty years. In this paper we compare three forms of split households, differentiated by whether the migrant's spouse and children are left behind or have joined the migrant: sole migration, couple migration, and family migration. Our survey of fifty *chengzhongcun* (urban villages) in Beijing conducted in 2008 shows that couple migration and family migration are outcomes of rural Chinese actively rearranging their household division of labor in order to maximize earnings from urban work opportunities. Migrants' decision to leave the children behind or to bring them along depends on the children's age and whether migrants' parents are available to help. Contrary to expectation, more household members in the city signals neither stronger intention to stay nor greater trust in the host society. These findings highlight the importance of thinking about migrants as circulators and thinking about migration, including family migration, as not necessarily a prelude to permanent settlement. They also underscore the need to address the experiences of long-term split households, a discourse that has received much less attention than one that assumes that a family lives together most of the time.

Migration, settlement, and split households

Migration is increasingly seen as not just a one-way move from the origin to the destination but as an activity that engages both origin and destination societies. Studies on international and transnational migration in particular have highlighted the multiple identities and ties that are stretched across nations and facilitated by increased ease in travel and communication (Hugo, 2003; 2006; Mitchell, 1997; Ong, 1999; Saxenian, 2005; Willis et al, 2004). Likewise, research on internal migration, especially rural–urban migration in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has noted the prevalence of temporary, circular migration between home and the place of migrant work (Chant, 1991; Deshingkar and Start, 2003; Nelson, 1976; Wilkinson, 1987). Migrants involved in circular migration vary greatly in terms of human capital, skills, settlement intention, and other attributes, but they share the common experience of a household split between two or more places.

Two sets of debate are especially relevant for problematizing the phenomena of circular migration and split households. The first is concerned with whether circulation is but one phase of a transition toward permanent migration. Thirty years ago Zelinsky (1971, page 226) defined circulation as “a great variety of movements, usually short-term, repetitive, or cyclical in nature, but all having in common the lack of any declared intention of a permanent or long-lasting change in residence.” This definition is still useful today. In Zelinsky's original mobility transition model, rural–urban migration and, by extension, circulation is expected to decline as population growth subsides. Known for modifying Zelinsky's model by linking migration change to economic change, Skeldon (1990) argues that, as urbanization increases, rural–urban

circulation as a means to support village life will give way to long-term and permanent migration to cities. But researchers who note the persistence of circular migration tend to question the inevitability of permanent migration. Hugo's (1978; 1982) work in general and his research in Indonesia in particular finds that migrants do not necessarily perceive their mobility as a preliminary stage before an ultimate permanent relocation of themselves and their families. Rather, they "exhibit a strong and apparently long-term commitment to bilocality, opting for the combination of activities in both rural and urban areas that a nonpermanent migration strategy allows them" (Hugo, 1982, pages 73–74). In a similar vein, Chapman and Prothero (1983, page 619) argue that circulation, "rather than being transitional or ephemeral, is a time-honored and enduring mode of behavior, deeply rooted in a great variety of cultures and found at all stages of socioeconomic change."

From a theoretical perspective, a focus on permanent settlement downplays migrants as circulators; the possibly long period of time during which they do not have the intention, means, or plan for permanent migration; and migrants' agency. Circulation, on the other hand, can be seen as a strategy. Hugo (2003; 2006) argues that circular migrants can obtain the best of both worlds by earning in high-income places and spending in low-cost origins. Mexican immigrants to the US, for example, may continue to use the farmland in rural Mexico as an economic asset and a basis of household activities (Roberts, 2007). Focusing on the more highly skilled, Wang (2007) highlights the concepts of 'experimental migration' and 'migranthood', referring to the migrant-like experience but without a commitment to return or stay. The idea of 'migration intensity' is also useful because it focuses on the migrant's attachment to and engagement with the origin and destination, rather than conceptualizing migration behavior as a dichotomous 'go–no-go' choice (Kaufmann, 2007). Similarly, arguing against a binary interpretation of migrants as either rural or urban, Wang and Wu (2010) instead highlight migrants' accumulation of social and human capital that increases their competitiveness in the urban labor market. Increasingly, scholars and policy makers are expected to consider the bipolar and multipolar nature of migration and the need to include both origin and destination communities in their research (Skeldon, 2010).

The second debate concerns families. Public discourse, perhaps more than academic research, has a tendency to encourage an 'ideal' type of family organization. The 'modern family' has a breadwinner with a stable, postindustrial, high-wage job, a housewife, and two children (Stacey, 1990). Even if that model is updated to include dual wage earners, single parents, stepchildren, and adopted children (Walsh, 2003), it is still one that assumes that members of the same family live together most of the time. If migration does take place, it is expected to take one or more of the following forms: sojourners will return; individual migrants will motivate the entire family to follow; or the family will simply migrate as one unit (Mincer, 1978). Whichever is the case, splitting of the family is temporary rather than long term.

But the modern family discourse emphasizes certain segments of society—such as middle-class families in America—more than others. Bustamante and Aleman (2007) argue that another discourse, one that centers on the split household and takes into account the spatial and temporal disruption of migration, is necessary. A focus on the split household also informs, in a different light from that of the modern family discourse, research on parenting, family relations, family organization, children's education, and the emotional cost of family separation (Silvey, 2006; Skeldon, 1997; Waters, 2002).

It is not always easy to distinguish between the terms 'family' and 'household', and they are often used interchangeably. 'Family' is usually thought of as comprising

individuals related by blood or marriage, and ‘household’ as comprising individuals living in the same residence.⁽¹⁾ A split-household family, therefore, refers to a situation where family members who under ‘normal’ circumstances would be living in the same place are in actuality living in separate places. The split-household form is not new and has been pursued by migrants all over the world, such as goldmine workers in South Africa, Mexican braceros in the American Southwest, and Chinese laborers in the US between the 1850s and the early 20th century (Glenn, 1983). In China, since the 1980s, millions of rural Chinese who left home for migrant work in cities and towns have popularized the split-household practice. The remittances they send are a major source of rural income (eg, Davin, 1999; Fan, 2008, pages 72 and 119; Murphy, 2002, page 91; Scharping, 1999). Against this backdrop, our main objective in this paper is to examine the differences between the most common forms of split households—involving sole or singular migrants, couple migrants, and family migrants—and the possible reasons for migrants to choose one form over another. By doing so, we seek also to contribute to the literature by underscoring migrants’ relationships with both the rural origin and the urban destination, and by highlighting the family perspective for understanding migration.

Migration and split households in China

In just three decades China has transformed itself from a relatively immobile society into one where rural migrants can be found everywhere in cities. The size of the ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*)—a stock measure that enumerates the number of people not living in their place of registration—has been increasing rapidly. The 2000 Census documented 144 million floating population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2002). According to a recent report by the National Population and Family Planning Commission, the floating population stood at 211 million in 2010 and is projected to increase to 350 million by 2050 (*People’s Daily* 2010).

The term ‘floating population’ is unique to China and is tied to the *hukou*, or household-registration, system (Goodkind and West, 2002). There are numerous articles and books addressing the *hukou* system (eg, Alexander and Chan, 2004; Chan, 2009; Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Davin, 1999; Mallee, 2003; Solinger, 1999; Wang, 2005; Wu and Treiman, 2004) and we shall not repeat the details here. Suffice it to say that individuals who are not living in the place where they are registered (usually their place of birth) constitute the floating population. Some of these migrants may have left their place of origin years ago and have lived in their current location for a long time. Most return home infrequently, typically once a year—during the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival—or less.

Why do rural migrants remain as ‘floaters’ and circulate between home and migrant work, rather than moving their *hukou* and family to the city and settle down there? The most popular explanation is that the *hukou* system prohibits migrants from settling in cities, thus forcing them to split the family into two places. To be more exact, rural migrants are allowed to live and work in cities as long as they want, but it is difficult for them to obtain urban *hukou*, without which their access to jobs, health care, housing, education, and other social and economic benefits is constrained. But a second explanation, one that centers on household strategies and migrants’ agency, is gaining momentum in the literature. In this view, migrants benefit from maintaining and investing in their social security (immediate and extended family, fellow villagers)

⁽¹⁾The concept of ‘household’ and its relationship with migration is not static. For example, feminist researchers have suggested that “[H]ouseholds may be structured supralocally, incorporating multiple members in diverse places who remain part of the income-pooling unit directly, or who continue to exercise influence over household dynamics” (Lawson, 1998, page 43).

and economic security (farmland, house) in the countryside because their social and economic futures in the city are uncertain (Fan, 2009; Fan and Wang, 2008; Tan, 2007; Xu, 2010; Zhu, 2007). The global financial crisis that began in 2007, for example, has led to the closing of manufacturers, especially in southern China. And the cost of living in Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai is increasingly prohibitive, not only to rural migrants but also to middle-income and low-income urban citizens.⁽²⁾ By straddling the city and the home village, migrants can earn urban wages as long as they have jobs, support the rest of the family at a rural and lower cost of living, and return to the countryside if migrant jobs dwindle.

Long-term circulation contributes to a continued and rapid increase of the floating population. A large number of veteran rural–urban migrants who began migrant work years, and even decades, ago remain as part of the floating population and circulate between the city and the countryside. At the same time, young people in the countryside are growing up fully immersed in the idea that migrant work is the only way to make a living (Lee, 2007; Zhao, 1998). This new generation of migrants, unlike earlier ones in the 1980s and 1990s, has little or no farming experience but much more information about and wider networks relating to migrant work.⁽³⁾ In short, seasoned migrants remain in the migration circuit for a long period of time and they are continuously joined by new and younger migrants.

Pursuing a floater and circulation strategy entails splitting the household into two or more places for the purpose of economic betterment—even at the expense of family members' emotional and social needs. Zhu's (2007; Zhu and Chen, 2010) research in Fujian is revealing. In his 2006 survey 47% of the migrants surveyed preferred a split-household arrangement. Even among those who said they wished to move the whole family to the place of migrant work, more than half intended eventually to return to the countryside. What these findings suggest is that rural migrants and their families are very cautious about permanent settlement in the city and that what the countryside offers continues to be important to them—so much so that they would leave some family members behind and will not easily give up the idea of returning. Other, earlier studies have also found that rural migrants' intention to stay in the city is not as strong as expected and that the majority wish to return home eventually (Cai, 2000; Hare, 1999; Solinger, 1995). A recent study on Shenzhen shows that, even among the new generation of migrants, the most prominent trajectory is one of returning home (to seek nonagricultural work) (Yue et al, 2010).

In China, family (*jia*) may refer to the nuclear family and immediate family but also to the extended family including those not living under the same roof (eg, siblings). Household (*hu*) refers to people living in the same dwelling, but it is common, especially in the countryside, for several nuclear families—for example, married children with their spouse and children—to share a house. Clearly, the terms overlap to a large extent. For the purpose of this research and in order to focus on the most popular types of split households, we adopt the following definitions. We define the 'family' as consisting of the spouses and their children. In the context of rural–urban migration in China, this 'nuclear family' definition enables us to examine the most prevalent, and troubling, forms of split—between spouses and between them and their children. We define the

⁽²⁾The manyfold increase in real estate prices in recent years has dramatically reduced housing affordability in Chinese cities. Instead of settling down in cities, rural migrants may prefer to consider small towns near their home village—where housing is more affordable—as places to retire to (Zheng et al, 2009a).

⁽³⁾Worker strikes in Foxconn, Honda, and other plants in 2010 which resulted in management raising wages and improving work conditions suggest that the new generation of migrant workers are more savvy about their leverage and job options compared with earlier migrants.

'household' as consisting of the migrant, his/her spouse, their children, and the migrant's parents who live with them or live in the same village. This definition is designed to highlight the extended-family dimension of Chinese rural families as well as the role of migrants' parents in taking care of left-behind children and farmland. In other words, it is the continued ties and interdependence between the nuclear family and the migrants' parents that justify that migrants' parents be considered part of the household. Migrants' siblings and other relatives could be included as household members as well, but our survey did not provide such information and therefore we decided to include only migrants' parents. In short, we define 'family' as the nuclear family and 'household' as the nuclear family plus the migrants' parents.

The dominant form of split households in the 1980s and 1990s involved one member of the family, usually the husband or an adult unmarried child, leaving home for migrant work while other family members stayed behind. This sole-migrant model reflects three sets of norms. First, the traditional gender norms are manifested as an inside–outside arrangement—husbands are responsible for activities outside the home, and wives activities inside the home (Entwisle and Henderson, 2000, page 298; Hershatler, 2000; Mann, 2000). Therefore, although single women do participate actively in migrant work, upon marriage most are under pressure to stay in the village. This is a repackaging of the traditional inside–outside practice because not only the physical home but all village activities, including agriculture, are defined as the 'inside' sphere for women whereas migrant work is considered the 'outside' sphere—for men (Jacka, 2006).

The second and third norms for the 1980s and 1990s sole migrants are migrant work being a short-term, not a long-term, strategy and the intention for permanent resettlement is weak (Fan and Wang, 2008). Migrants' goal is to improve the family's economic situation—to pay off debt, to (re)build a house, to buy furniture, to buy fertilizer, to finance a wedding, and to send children to school. Once that goal has been achieved, they are expected to return home and the split-household arrangement would end. As a result, migrants are not likely to have a strong intention to stay permanently in the place of migrant work.

But since the 1990s migrants have been increasingly bringing their spouse along, leaving their children behind—which we refer to as 'couple migration'. Also increasingly common is couple migrants bringing their children with them, which we refer to in this paper as 'family migration'. These newer forms of migration have contributed to large numbers of children and elderly being left behind (Xiang, 2007; Zhou, 2004).

The prevalence of couple migration and family migration suggests that the three norms associated with the sole-migrant model, described above, may have shifted. First, more married women are participating in migrant work. This is an outside–outside arrangement, as both the husband and wife are away from the home village, which might signal that the traditional gender norms are changing. Second, migrant work is no longer thought of as a short-term solution but has become a way of life such that long-term 'floating' is not only a reality but a practice. Third, the spouse, or both the spouse and children, joining the migrant at the place of migrant work may reflect a growing desire to leave the countryside for good.

Despite the prevalence of split households among rural Chinese, we know relatively little about why this strategy is pursued and why one form is preferred over another. Answers to these questions would shed light on the future of migration and migrants in China: for example, will more children join their migrant parents rather than being left behind; how likely are rural migrants to settle permanently in the city; what are the impacts of split households on the Chinese family; etc. But a dearth of research and data on migrants' household organization means that there is little to draw from to

inform hypotheses about split households. A main objective of this study, therefore, is to draw attention to the different forms of split households and the differences among them, and to contribute to the empirical bases for future research. Having said that, existing research has indeed helped us highlight the following relationships which inform our empirical analysis.

Increased numbers of married women participating in migration suggests that gender norms have relaxed, or that participants in couple migration and family migration are not as invested as are sole migrants in traditional gendered inside–outside ideology. In this regard, younger and newer migrants, and migrants with higher levels of educational attainment, are expected to be more highly represented among couple migrants and family migrants.

On the other hand, married women's participation in migrant work may simply be a matter of economic necessity or desire for economic betterment. That is, once the notion that migrant work is a necessary and desirable source of income is widely accepted, peasants are motivated to increase the number of migrant wage earners—including the wife joining the migrant husband. At the same time, the urban demand for service jobs such as domestic workers (*baomu*)—which recruit not only young, single women but also older women—has increased, boosting job opportunities for rural, married women. Unlike the inside–outside model where one spouse stays home to care for children, the outside–outside model reduces long-time separation between spouses but demands alternative care-giving arrangements, which may depend on the number of children, the age of the children, and whether migrants' parents are available to help (Fan and Wang, 2008). In general, couple migration is feasible when the children are young, when their schooling does not require close supervision, and when migrants' parents are able to help (Fan, 2009; Ye and Pan, 2008, page 301). Otherwise, couples may be under pressure, or may prefer, to take the children with them to the place of migrant work.

Data

Our empirical analysis is based on a questionnaire survey of migrants who live in *chengzhongcun* in Beijing. The Chinese term *chengzhongcun* literally means 'village in the city', but it has also been translated as 'village amid the city', 'village encircled by the city', and 'urban village' (eg, Tian, 2008; Wu, 2007; Zhang et al, 2003). For the sake of simplicity, in this research we chose the term 'urban village'.⁽⁴⁾ Urban villages used to be farming villages but have over time been encroached upon by urban activities. Institutionally, they are rural entities that are administered by village collectives rather than by city governments (Hsing, 2009). Geographically, they tend to be found on the fringes of cities—spaces marked by a mix of urban and rural activities and rapid urban growth—referred to variously as 'urban outskirts', 'periurban areas', and 'suburban areas' (Lin, 2009; McGee et al, 2007; Zhou and Logan, 2008).

We chose urban villages for our study for two reasons. First, typically, migrants are attracted to the low rents in urban villages and are highly represented there. Because *zhaijidi* (rural land for housing purpose) is controlled by village collectives and not by the urban government, native residents who have lost farmland to urban expansion are motivated to expand their houses or even build higher structures in order to lease them out to migrants as a source of income, despite the fact that these activities may be illegal (Tang and Chung, 2002; Zheng et al, 2009b). Hundreds of urban villages exist

⁽⁴⁾Our usage of the term is different from the post-1960s planning concept of 'urban village' in Western cities that highlights self-containment, community interaction, and reduced reliance on automobiles as an alternative to urban sprawl (Jacobs, 1961).

in large cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. According to Hsing (2009), there were 139 urban villages in Guangzhou in 2006, and urban villages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen made up more than 20% and 60%, respectively, of their planned areas, providing homes to 80% of migrants in those cities.

The second reason for choosing urban villages for our study is that they are popular places to stay for couple and family migrants. Many rental units in urban villages are self-contained and thus can accommodate migrants together with their family members. In contrast, migrants in factory dorms and those who live in their employer's home (eg, domestic workers) do not typically live with family members. In other words, a survey of urban villages is more likely than surveys done elsewhere to reach migrants who have brought their spouse, and even children, along.

We conducted a survey of Beijing's urban villages (hereafter referred to as the Beijing Urban Village Survey)⁽⁵⁾ in September 2008,⁽⁶⁾ via a two-stage sampling method. In the first stage we sampled 50 urban villages selected randomly from the total of 867 in Beijing Metropolitan Area. As shown in figure 1, in most of the sampled

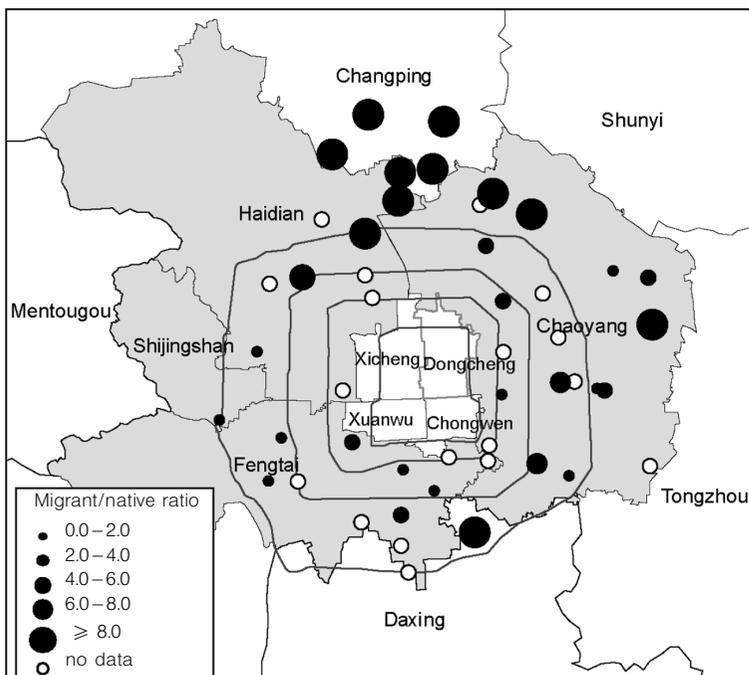


Figure 1. The 50 sampled sites in the Beijing Urban Village Survey. Gray shaded areas refer to the four suburban districts surrounding Beijing's four urban districts. Open (white) circles refer to urban villages in which numbers for migrant and native population are not available.

⁽⁵⁾ The survey was administered by Beijing Municipal Institute of Urban Planning and Design and Tsinghua University's Institute of Real Estate Studies (Zheng et al, 2009b).

⁽⁶⁾ Because urban villages are not formally considered part of the urban economy—and thus are excluded from regularly collected urban statistics—information about their number and spatial distribution is not publicly available. Working with Beijing Municipal Land Authority, we obtained a detailed list of urban villages in the city. As of 2008 there were 867 urban villages in Beijing Metropolitan Area (BMA), mostly located on the city's fringes. As defined by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning, BMA is 1086 km² in size and consists of four urban districts (Dongcheng, Xicheng, Chongwen, and Xuanwu) and parts of five suburban districts (Chaoyang, Haidian, Fengtai, Shijingshan, and Changping).

urban villages migrants outnumber natives, which lends further support to our selection of urban villages for the study. In the second stage, in each of the 50 urban villages, we selected 15–20 migrants. To increase representativeness, we selected migrants from different parts of the village so that they were approximately evenly distributed spatially. To facilitate the survey, and given that most migrants have low levels of education attainment, we trained research assistants to interview the selected migrants, explain the questions to them, and help them fill out the questionnaire.

A total of 988 migrants were interviewed. Of those 100 cases were dropped because of errors, inconsistencies, and confusing information in the answers.⁽⁷⁾ Of the remaining 888 migrants, we selected a subset of 521, via the following four steps, for the analysis.

In step 1 (table 1) we retained only migrants who were married and have children—because we are interested in whether migrants are separated from or living with their spouse and children—and dropped the rest (single, married without children, etc). Among the 888 migrants, 653 (73.5%) are married and have children. Their educational attainment is slightly lower than that of all migrants in the survey, but both groups are considerably less highly educated than Beijing's population as a whole (respectively 22.1%, 26.6%, and 51.6% at senior-high and above level) (table 2). In terms of age, both migrant groups peak at 30–34 years of age and are much younger than Beijing's population (figure 2). As expected, married migrants with children are slightly older than migrants as a whole.

Table 1. Marital status of migrants (source: Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Frequency	Percentage
Married with children (step 1)	653	73.5
Married without children	64	7.2
Single	163	18.4
Divorced	7	0.8
Missing data	1	0.1
Total	888	100.0

Table 2. Educational attainment of migrants and Beijing's population (sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2009; Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Migrants married with children in the survey (%)	All migrants in the survey (%)	Population in Beijing (6+) (%)
No schooling	8.6	7.0	3.3
Elementary	20.1	18.3	13.3
Junior high	49.2	48.1	31.7
Senior high	18.2	20.7	23.4
College and above	3.9	5.9	28.2
Total numbers	653	888	16.2 million

⁽⁷⁾ For example, we dropped cases where answers concerning marital status or household composition were inconsistent. We also dropped migrants who reported missing or zero income or rent, because we could not determine whether they were reluctant to reveal personal information or if their income or rent was actually zero.

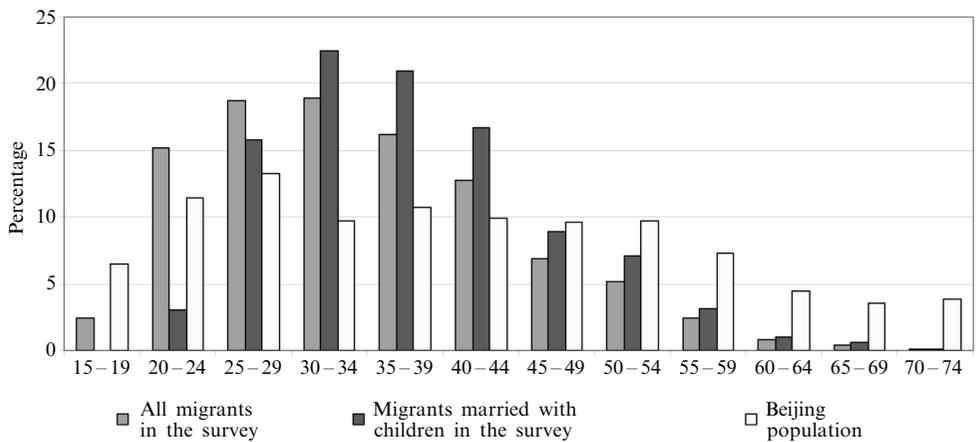


Figure 2. Age distribution of migrants and Beijing's population (sources: National Bureau of Statistics (2009); Beijing Urban Village Survey).

In step 2 we eliminated 75 migrants whose spouse and/or some of their children were neither in Beijing nor in their home village, because our focus was on the two-way split between Beijing and the home village rather than on multiple splits involving other locations (table 3). As a result, we lost about 11.5% of married migrants with children, but the loss is well justified by the clarity and simplicity gained for the analysis.

In step 3 we eliminated another 51 cases where some children in the family are in Beijing and some are in the home village. This was done because for these cases the data do not allow us to determine which children are in Beijing and which children are in the home village. For all the remaining 527 cases the children are either all in Beijing or all in the home village. Finally, in step 4, we eliminated 6 more cases where all the children in the family are in Beijing but the spouse is in the home village.

In summary, we have eliminated a total of 132 cases from the 653 married migrants with children in the survey, and our analysis focuses on the remaining 79.8%, or 521 cases. All the 521 individuals are married migrants with children, whose spouse and children are in Beijing or in the home village (and not elsewhere), whose children are either all in Beijing or all in the home village, and whose spouse is in Beijing if all the children are in Beijing. Among the 521 cases, 104 are sole migrants, 112 are couple migrants, and 305 are family migrants (table 3).

Table 3. Forms of split households (source: Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Frequency	Percentage
Spouse and/or some children neither in Beijing nor in the home village (step 2)	75	11.5
Some children in Beijing and some in the home village (step 3)	51	7.8
Spouse in the home village, all children in Beijing (step 4)	6	0.9
Spouse and all children in the home village (sole migrants)	104	15.9
Spouse in Beijing, all children in the home village (couple migrants)	112	17.2
Spouse and all children in Beijing (family migrants)	305	46.7
Total	653	100.0

Comparison of sole, couple, and family migrants

In this research, 'sole migrants' are defined in terms of their separation from the rest of their nuclear family—that is, spouse and all children—regardless of whether other household members (eg, migrants' parents) are in Beijing. But, as table 4 shows, none of the parents of the sole migrants were in Beijing. In other words, all the 104 sole migrants are separated from their spouse, children, and their parents. The vast majority of sole migrants—85.6%—have left behind four or more household members in the home village; and 79.8% (75.0% + 4.8%) of them have two or more left-behind parents.⁽⁸⁾

'Couple migrants' are migrants whose spouse is in Beijing but all the children are in the home village. Half of these migrants have one child and the other half have two or more children (table 4). Some 88.4% (44.6% + 43.8%) of couple migrants have left behind three or more household members in the home village, and 83.9% (83.0% + 0.9%; compared with 79.8% among sole migrants) have left behind two or more parents. By definition, these migrants have at least one household member—the spouse—in Beijing, but only 2.7% (1.8% + 0.9%) of them report a second or third family member (their parents) in Beijing. Like sole migrants, therefore, the vast majority of couple migrants have left their parents behind in the home village.

Table 4. Household members in the home village and in Beijing (source: Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Home village (left-behind)			Beijing		
	sole migrants (%)	couple migrants (%)	family migrants (%)	sole migrants (%)	couple migrants (%)	family migrants (%)
<i>Number of household members (other than the migrant)</i>						
Mean	4.3	3.4	1.5	0.0	1.0	2.6
0	0.0	0.0	21.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
1	0.0	3.6	10.2	0.0	97.3	0.0
2	3.8	8.0	68.2	0.0	1.8	54.8
3	10.6	44.6	0.0	0.0	0.9	31.1
4 or more	85.6	43.8	0.7	0.0	0.0	14.1
<i>Number of children</i>						
Mean	1.6	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5
0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0
1	52.9	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	61.3
2	39.4	42.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	32.8
3 or more	7.7	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9
<i>Number of parents</i>						
Mean	1.8	1.8	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.2
0	10.6	9.8	21.0	100.0	97.3	89.5
1	9.6	6.3	10.2	0.0	1.8	3.0
2	75.0	83.0	68.2	0.0	0.9	7.5
3 or more	4.8	0.9	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	104	112	305	104	112	305

⁽⁸⁾ In the survey we asked respondents to tell us about their parents (*fumu*) who stayed in the home village. Because of the patrilineal tradition of the wife moving to the husband's village, the 'parents' reported by a married woman could be her in-laws. Also, a small number of migrants report more than two parents, which describes situations where both the husband and the wife's parents live in the same village.

'Family migrants' refers to migrants whose spouse and all their children are in Beijing. Family migrants have fewer children than the first two groups: 61.3% have one child, compared with 52.9% for sole migrants and 50.0% for couple migrants. Not surprisingly, for family migrants, the number of household members living in Beijing is considerably larger—54.8% with two members and 45.2% with three or more members. But this hardly means that the entire household has left the home village: only 21.0% report that the number of household members (parents) in the home village is zero; and 68.9% report having two or more household members (parents) in the home village.

Table 5. Summary statistics of split households (source: Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Migrants married with children	Sole migrants	Couple migrants	Family migrants
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>				
Age (mean years)	37.4	37.0	37.5	35.8
Gender (male) (%)	62.5	84.6	52.7	58.0
Educational attainment				
junior high and below	78.0	72.1	82.0	76.2
senior high and above	22.0	27.9	18.0	23.8
<i>Children</i>				
Number of children (mean)	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.4
Age of children (mean years)	11.4	11.4	12.3	9.6
<i>Village resources</i>				
Number of parents (mean)	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.5
House size (mean m ²)	130.7	147.6	151.3	122.6
Farmland (mean mu)	5.2	4.9	5.7	5.1
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics (in Beijing)</i>				
Rent (mean yuan)	520.1	356.0	543.8	543.2
Housing (per capita usable area, mean m ²)	7.9	10.1	7.8	6.7
Income (monthly household, mean yuan)	3220.1	2484.1	3315.3	3471.1
Remittance (monthly, mean yuan)	345.9	542.9	537.1	201.5
<i>Migration characteristics</i>				
Migration history (mean years)	9.7	9.9	9.9	9.6
Most important migration reason (%)				
make more money	60.5	72.3	66.7	56.4
family reunification	11.4	1.0	9.5	12.8
other	28.1	26.7	23.8	30.8
Intention to stay (%)				
will leave	47.4	43.7	55.3	44.9
stay permanently	37.4	39.8	30.4	38.7
haven't decided	15.2	16.5	14.3	16.4
<i>Trust in host society</i>				
Trust in coworkers (%)				
do not trust	12.3	5.8	10.5	13.3
trust	87.7	94.2	89.5	86.7
Trust in government (%)				
do not trust	11.6	8.6	11.1	12.0
trust	88.4	91.4	88.9	88.0
Trust in residents' or villagers' committee (%)				
do not trust	16.8	9.0	11.3	18.7
trust	83.2	91.0	88.7	81.3
Number	653	104	112	305

Only 10.5% (3.0% + 7.5%) of them report that one or more of their parents live in Beijing. In other words, the vast majority of migrants whose spouse and children have left the home village have not been joined by their parents.

It is important to note that the breakdowns in our sample should not be taken as quantitative measures of the prevalence of each type of split household. As mentioned above, couple and family migrants are attracted to urban villages because of the type (and low cost) of housing there. And, by design, our analysis includes only migrants who are married and have children. Having said that, the fact that 305 out of the 888 migrants in the survey are family migrants lends support to the observation that family migration is not an uncommon phenomenon.

Table 5 gives the summary statistics of the three types of migrants. On average, family migrants are younger than sole migrants and couple migrants by 1.2 and 1.7 years, respectively. The age differences are small but are consistent with the expectation that younger migrants are more likely than older migrants to engage in family migration. Migration history (under 'migration characteristics') refers to the number of years since the first migration from the home village. Averages of close to 10 years indicate that most migrants are long-term migrants, reinforcing the view of Hugo and Chapman, described above, that circulation often lasts a long time. Once again, the difference is in the direction expected—9.9 years for sole migrants and couple migrants and 9.6 years for family migrants—but it is very small. Put together, there is no clear indication that generational differences—as represented by age and migration history—explain the form of split households.

More than 62% of the migrants in our survey were men, but the percentage of men among sole migrants is much higher at 84.6%. That is, most left-behind spouses are women, whereas the more balanced gender compositions among couple and family migrants are primarily the result of wives joining their migrant husbands.

Couple migrants have the lowest level of educational attainment, and sole migrants have the highest level of educational attainment. This is contrary to expectation, as we anticipated that more highly educated individuals would be more receptive to the outside-outside arrangement, where the wife participates in the outside sphere along with the husband.

There is little difference in the average number of children among the three groups. But the children of family migrants were on average the youngest (9.6 years) and those of couple migrants the oldest (12.3 years). The former may be related to family migrants' younger age, but the results as a whole suggest that migrants with older children are more likely to leave them behind than are those with younger children.

The term 'village resources' refers to the social and economic support in the home village. The number of left-behind parents is a function of whether migrants' parents are alive, living elsewhere, or living with the migrants in Beijing. The summary statistics show that family migrants have the least number of left-behind parents. But, as our earlier analysis reveals, only about 10% of the family migrants are joined in Beijing by their parents (table 4). Put together, the data suggest that migrants with fewer parents in the home village are more likely to bring their children to Beijing, whereas availability of parental support may motivate sole migrants and couple migrants to leave their children behind.⁽⁹⁾

⁽⁹⁾ The age of migrants' parents and the availability of other relatives in the home village may also be factors in family migration. However, our data does not contain sufficiently detailed information to assess those factors.

The relationship between house size and split-household arrangement may be bidirectional: a smaller house encourages more household members to leave the village, and more household members leaving the village discourages investment in expanding the house.⁽¹⁰⁾ Not surprisingly, family migrants' houses in the home villages are, on average, the smallest. But in terms of farmland, it is the sole migrants that have the least.

The term 'socioeconomic characteristics' in table 5 refers to migrants' housing and economic situations in Beijing. Not surprisingly, couple migrants and family migrants pay higher rent but have smaller per capita housing size than sole migrants. Both rent and per capita housing size likely reflect the impact of household size (in Beijing) on housing demand. For example, the average number of household members (other than the migrant) in Beijing for family migrants is 2.6, compared with 0 for sole migrants (table 4).

Couple migrants and family migrants have higher household incomes than do sole migrants, which is probably a result of family migrants having more income-earning members in Beijing than sole migrants. But sole migrants and couple migrants send home considerably more in remittances—by a factor of almost 2.7—than do family migrants. Such differences suggest that remittance is a function of (1) whether migrants' children are in the home village and (2) the number of left-behind household members. Not only have sole and couple migrants left behind their children, but the number of their left-behind household members is on average more than twice that of family migrants (4.3 and 3.4 compared with 1.5; see table 4). At the same time, the amount of remittances may be an indicator of the extent to which migrants desire or plan to return—an observation consistent with the new economics of migration (NEM) theory, which considers remittances as part of an implicit agreement between the migrant and the household that is grounded on a plan for eventual return (Lucas and Stark, 1985; Stark and Lucas, 1988).

The majority of the migrants in our survey went to Beijing to 'make more money'. Not surprisingly, couple migrants and family migrants are more likely than sole migrants to select 'family reunification' as their migration reason.

In terms of intention to stay, 47.4% of married migrants with children indicated that they plan to leave eventually and only 37.4% stated that they plan to stay permanently. One would expect that sole migrants have the weakest intention to stay and that family migrants have the strongest intention to stay. However, in our survey sole migrants were the most likely to stay (39.8%) and couple migrants the least likely to stay (30.4%). It is important to note that intention may or may not be translated into action (Zhu and Chen, 2010). Also, information on intention alone does not reveal the reasons for wanting to stay or return. We suspect that children play an important role—for example, a weak intention to stay may be related to the desire to return to be near children and/or bring children back for education. Because schooling in rural areas is less expensive and because all children who wish to take the university entrance exam must return to their home provinces to do so, parents are motivated to return when their children reach high-school age.

'Trust' is an indicator of migrants' integration into the host society. We selected three aspects of migrants' possible interactions—coworkers, government, and residents' or villagers' committees. 'Coworkers' are the people with whom migrants work and may include both migrants and urban natives. Government and residents' or villagers'

⁽¹⁰⁾ It is customary for rural Chinese to build a village house as big as possible or to expand the size of their current house, which is one of the expenses that remittances are used for. One of the incentives of having a big house, especially for single men, is that it is considered an asset which attracts prospective spouses.

committees refer to institutional and governance structures that are associated with Beijing rather than with the home village. In general, migrants' trust levels are high: those choosing 'trust' rather than 'do not trust' range between 83.2% and 88.4%. These high levels suggest that migrants are in general comfortable with their relationships with the urban society. But in all cases couple migrants have the highest levels of trust and family migrants have the lowest levels of trust. This is yet another surprising finding, since one would have expected that a household arrangement where the spouse and all the children are living in the city with the migrant is associated with a higher level of trust in the host society than that in split households where all the children (and the spouse) are left behind.

Modeling split households

Informed by the summary statistics described above, we tested the statistical significance of the differences among sole migrants, couple migrants, and family migrants via a multinomial logistic regression. We included six groups of independent variables: demographic, children, village resources, socioeconomic characteristics (in Beijing), migration characteristics, and trust in the host society (table 6). When interpreting the model and its results, we consider causations in both directions: the independent variables may represent outcomes of and/or reasons for the split-household arrangement. For example, as mentioned above, a smaller village house may encourage more household members to leave, but more household members leaving may, in turn, discourage efforts to rebuild or expand the village house.

We define sole migrants as the reference group. Therefore, the coefficients and associated statistics for couple migrants and family migrants reported in table 6 are interpreted with respect to sole migrants, when all other variables are held constant. Overall, the model is successful, as indicated by the large χ^2 -statistic, a reasonably high pseudo- R^2 (0.2259), and its correct classification of 68.2% of the observations. As a whole, therefore, the variables are reasonably strong in predicting and differentiating the three types of migrants. We tested multicollinearity by running an ordinary least square regression using the same dependent and independent variables, which yielded variance inflation factors that are satisfactory and that suggest that correlations among independent variables have not unduly biased the estimates for the model.

The three types of migrants are not significantly different in terms of AGE: contrary to expectation, younger migrants are not more likely than older migrants to pursue couple and family migration. GENDER is significant and has negative coefficients both for couple migrants and for family migrants. The odds of women being couple migrants and family migrants, relative to sole migrants, are 5.24 times and 3.94 times those of men, respectively.⁽¹¹⁾ These results are consistent with the summary statistics: namely, women are much more likely than men to be couple migrants or family migrants rather than sole migrants.

EDUCATION is not significant either for couple migrants or for family migrants. That is, higher educational attainment does not increase the probability of the outside-outside arrangement or migrants' taking children to the city—net of all other variables. This is, as discussed above, an unexpected finding as one would have expected that people with higher education levels would be more receptive to the outside-outside arrangement.

⁽¹¹⁾The odds of women being couple migrants and family migrants were computed as follows: $5.24 = 1/0.1910$ (odds ratio when using women as reference, for couple migrants); $3.94 = 1/0.2538$ (odds ratio when using women as reference, for family migrants).

Table 6. Multinomial logistic regression (source: Beijing Urban Village Survey).

	Coefficient	Standardized coefficient	Z	Odds ratio
<i>Couple migrants</i>				
<i>Demographic</i>				
AGE	-0.0131	-0.0460	-0.25	0.9870
GENDER (reference: female): MALE	-1.6556	-0.3451	-4.12***	0.1910
EDUCATION (reference: junior high and below) SENIOR HIGH AND ABOVE	-0.4369	-0.0794	-1.04	0.6461
<i>Children</i>				
CHILDREN NUMBER	0.0520	0.0141	0.18	1.0534
CHILDREN AGE	0.0378	0.1289	0.73	1.0385
<i>Village resources</i>				
PARENTS	-0.1159	-0.0411	-0.50	0.8906
HOUSE	-0.0040	-0.1888	-2.38**	0.9960
FARMLAND	0.0138	0.0452	0.52	1.0139
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics (in Beijing)</i>				
RENT	0.0021	0.4655	3.66***	1.0021
USABLE	-0.1177	-0.2836	-3.22***	0.8889
INCOME	0.0004	0.6092	3.26***	1.0004
REMITTANCE	-0.0002	-0.0412	-0.63	0.9998
<i>Migration characteristics</i>				
MIGRATION HISTORY	0.0314	0.0827	1.06	1.0319
REASON (reference: others)				
MAKE MONEY	0.1582	0.0336	0.41	1.1714
FAMILY REUNIFICATION	2.0364	0.2508	1.64	7.6628
INTENTION (reference: have not decided)				
WILL LEAVE	0.5560	0.1208	1.11	1.7437
STAY PERMANENTLY	0.0784	0.0163	0.15	1.0816
<i>Trust in host society</i>				
TRUST IN COWORKERS (reference: do not trust)	0.2141	0.0295	0.34	1.2388
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT (reference: do not trust)	-0.1509	-0.0212	-0.26	0.8600
TRUST IN COMMITTEE (reference: do not trust)	-0.4809	-0.0756	-0.85	0.6182
<i>Family migrants</i>				
<i>Demographic</i>				
AGE	0.0524	0.1845	1.13	1.0538
GENDER (reference: female); MALE	-1.3710	-0.2858	-3.69***	0.2538
EDUCATION (reference: junior high and below) SENIOR HIGH AND ABOVE	-0.1882	-0.0342	-0.52	0.8285
<i>Children</i>				
CHILDREN NUMBER	-0.0363	-0.0099	-0.14	0.9644
CHILDREN AGE	-0.0763	-0.2600	-1.66*	0.9266
<i>Village resources</i>				
PARENTS	-0.6324	-0.2246	-3.01***	0.5313
HOUSE	-0.0040	-0.1867	-2.75***	0.9961
FARMLAND	0.0316	0.1034	1.24	1.0321
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics (in Beijing)</i>				
RENT	0.0023	0.5150	4.16***	1.0023
USABLE	-0.1699	-0.4093	-4.89***	0.8437
INCOME	0.0004	0.6990	3.92***	1.0004
REMITTANCE	-0.0015	-0.3896	-4.73***	0.9985

(continued)

Table 6 (continued).

	Coefficient	Standardized coefficient	Z	Odds
<i>Migration characteristics</i>				
MIGRATION HISTORY	0.0174	0.0458	0.66	1.0175
REASON (reference: others)				
MAKE MONEY	-0.2666	-0.0566	-0.80	0.7659
FAMILY REUNIFICATION	2.2638	0.2788	1.91*	9.6199
INTENTION (reference: have not decided)				
WILL LEAVE	-0.0072	-0.0016	-0.02	0.9928
STAY PERMANENTLY	0.1222	0.0255	0.27	1.1300
<i>Trust in host society</i>				
TRUST IN COWORKERS (reference: do not trust)	-0.5534	-0.0764	-0.98	0.5750
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT (reference: do not trust)	0.0480	0.0067	0.09	1.0492
TRUST IN COMMITTEE (reference: do not trust)	-1.1050	-0.1737	-2.24**	0.3312
Model χ^2	202.81			
Pseudo R^2	0.2259			
Percentage correctly classified	68.2			

Significance levels: * 0.10; ** 0.05; *** 0.01

Children variables include CHILDREN NUMBER and CHILDREN AGE, referring to the total number of children a migrant has and the average age of the children, respectively. CHILDREN NUMBER is not significant; CHILDREN AGE is not significant for couple migrants but is significant and negative for family migrants. A one-year increase in the children's average age decreases the odds of being family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 7%. In other words, children of family migrants are younger than are those of sole migrants.

Village-resources variables include PARENTS, HOUSE, and FARMLAND. PARENTS refers to the number of parents a migrant has in the home village; HOUSE is the size of the house in the home village; and FARMLAND refers to the size of farmland allocated to the migrant's household. PARENTS was not significant for couple migrants but was negative and significant for family migrants. Having one or more parent in the home village decreases the odds of being family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 47%. That is, migrants with fewer parents in the home village are more likely to bring their children to Beijing. Thinking of this in reverse, migrants might have chosen to leave the children behind if there were sufficient grandparent support in the home village.

FARMLAND was not significant for either couple migrants or family migrants. HOUSE was not significant for couple migrants but was significant and negative for family migrants. A 10 m² increase in the size of house decreases the odds of being family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 4% [$1 - \exp(-0.0040 \times 10)$]. Migrants having a larger house in the home village were less likely to bring their children to Beijing. As mentioned above, the relationship may also be in the other direction: family migrants may be less motivated than sole migrants to fix up, rebuild, or expand their village house. As a whole, and as expected, family migrants have less village resources than do sole migrants.

The four socioeconomic characteristics in the model are RENT, USABLE, INCOME, and REMITTANCE. RENT, and USABLE are concerned with migrants' housing in Beijing, referring to their monthly rent and the per capita usable area of their housing, respectively. INCOME refers to the monthly household income earned in Beijing and REMITTANCE the average monthly remittance migrants send to their rural home.

RENT was positive and significant both for couple migrants and for family migrants. A 100 yuan increase in rent increases the odds of being couple migrants and family migrants, relative to being sole migrants, by about 23% and 26%, respectively. USABLE was negative and significant both for couple migrants and for family migrants. A 1 m² increase in per capita usable area of housing in Beijing decreased the odds of being couple migrants by about 11% and the odds of being family migrants by 16%, relative to sole migrants. In short, couple migrants and family migrants pay higher rent but have lower per capita usable area of housing than do sole migrants. As discussed earlier, these differences reflect the demand on housing space due to couple and family migrants' larger household size (in Beijing).

INCOME was positive and significant both for couple migrants and for family migrants. A 100 yuan increase in monthly household income increased the odds of being couple migrants or family migrants by 4%, relative to being sole migrants. Thus, couple migrants and family migrants have higher household income than do sole migrants, which may again be related to the larger household size (in Beijing)—more wage earners but also more people to support.

REMITTANCE was not significant for couple migrants but was negative and significant for family migrants. On average, a monthly increase of 100 yuan of remittance decreases the odds of being family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 14%. In short, having both the spouse and the children in the city reduces the migrant's need to support the home village financially, but having only the spouse and not the children in the city has no significant effect on remittance. The key, therefore, is children: the amount of remittance is related to the cost of raising and educating children and is a form of compensation to those left behind who care for the children.

Migration characteristics include MIGRATION HISTORY, REASON, and INTENTION. MIGRATION HISTORY refers to the number of years since the first migration, and REASON is the most important reason for going to Beijing. REASON is represented by two dummy variables: MAKE MONEY and FAMILY REUNIFICATION; other reasons are coded as the reference group. INTENTION refers to migrants' intention to stay in Beijing and is represented by two dummy variables: WILL LEAVE and STAY PERMANENTLY. 'Have not decided' was used as the reference group.

MIGRATION HISTORY was not significant. A longer duration of migration experience did not increase the odds of being couple migrants or family migrants, relative to sole migrants. Overall, migration reasons are not highly significant. Only FAMILY REUNIFICATION was significant at the level of 0.1 for family migrants. The odds of migrants moving for family reunification being family migrants, relative to sole migrants, are 9.62 times the odds of migrants moving for other reasons. Obviously, to join the family is a more important objective for family migrants than for sole migrants.

WILL LEAVE and STAY PERMANENTLY were not significant either for couple migrants or family migrants, relative to sole migrants. In other words, neither couple migrants nor family migrants show stronger intention to settle permanently in the city than do sole migrants.

Variables reflecting migrants' trust in the host society include TRUST IN COWORKERS, TRUST IN GOVERNMENT, and TRUST IN COMMITTEE. For all three variables, 'do not trust' was used as the reference group. Neither TRUST IN COWORKERS nor TRUST IN GOVERNMENT were significant. TRUST IN COMMITTEE was not significant for couple migrants but was negative and significant for family migrants. That is, family migrants are less likely to trust the residents' or villagers' committees, compared with sole migrants. Like the intention to stay variables, therefore, the trust variables show unexpected results: couple migrants do not exhibit more trust in the host society than sole migrants; and family migrants' level of trust in the residents' or villagers' committees is in fact lower than that of sole migrants.

Summary and discussion

In this paper we have sought to foreground two conceptual perspectives on migration and families. First, by focusing on split households, we wanted to emphasize the importance of thinking about migration in terms of circulation, in addition to being an activity aimed toward permanent settlement. Rural migrants in China join many migrants elsewhere in their *not* settling down, thus giving rise to split households. The prevailing explanation for why migrants remain as floaters is their inability to become permanent urban residents due to the hukou system, but the (re)positioning of rural Chinese to obtain the best of both the rural and the urban worlds is also a factor. Second, our findings underscore the need to problematize the notion of a family. Despite the dominant discourse that assumes that a family always stays together, the facts that split households are common and that they persist—not only among rural Chinese but also among migrants in other parts of the world—suggest that an additional discourse on split households is necessary in order to address the experiences of long-term (circular) migrants and their families.

Empirically, our findings highlight the different forms of split households and show that new forms are pursued as more and different household members join the migration stream. In the case of China, the sole-migrant model—where men are more highly represented than women as migrants—used to be the norm, but couple-migrant and family-migrant models are now common as wives and children increasingly participate in migration.

Our survey of Beijing's urban villages examines the differences among those three forms of split households. The pursuit of couple and family migration hints at a change in gender ideology among the younger and newer generation of migrants: women's roles are no longer confined to the inside (and village) sphere. But the fact that the three types of migrants do not differ significantly in age and educational attainment suggests that something else explains couple and family migration. What seems clear is that rural Chinese are actively rearranging their household division of labor to take full advantage of migrant work opportunities. Sending both spouses to the city, therefore, is perhaps simply a strategy to maximize the household labor power devoted to earnings from the city.

If maximizing income from migrant work is the goal, why do migrants bring their children to the city? Our survey suggests that village resources—in particular migrants' parents—as well as children's age are factors in that decision. It seems that migrants prefer to leave school-age children behind—probably because they have easier access to education in the countryside—if migrants' parents are available to help. Bringing children to the city, therefore, does not appear to be migrants' first choice. The fact that couple migrants send considerably more remittances than do family migrants also underscores couple migrants' reliance on left-behind parents for caregiving to children. Our data do not contain information on emotional attachment between children and their parents, but if they did then the emotional dimension should be considered.

Migrants' income, rent, and housing situations in the city were, as expected, functions of the number of household members living there. But, contrary to expectation, our findings suggest that having more household members in the city signals neither stronger intention to stay nor greater trust in the host society.

On the whole, our findings underscore the active involvement and strategizing of rural Chinese to make the best of their options, by splitting their households in different forms so as to maximize income from migrant work and take advantage of village resources. The results suggest that the newer forms of split families are an outcome of a rearrangement of household division of labor, rather than a transition from temporary

migration to permanent migration. In this light, it is entirely conceivable that the phenomenon of split households will persist, as migrants and their household members continue to straddle the city and the countryside. A generation of left-behind children, and a parallel generation of ‘migrant’ children born and raised in the city, have come into being. Whether those children will have different plans and opportunities from their parents may hold the key to the future of rural Chinese.

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