

Household-Splitting of Rural Migrants in Beijing, China

Cindy Fan

Haushaltsteilung bei Migrant*innen vom Land in Beijing, China

*Unter dem Einfluss von geographischer Literatur zu Translokalität und multilokalen Haushalten richtet die Forschung zu interner als auch internationaler Migration das Augenmerk zunehmend auf multiple Standorte und berücksichtigt sowohl die Migrant*innen als auch die Nicht-Migrant*innen. In China ist Haushaltsteilung, die den Landbewohnern erst Zugang zu städtischer Arbeit ermöglicht, zur typischen Lebensform im ländlichen Raum geworden. Auf Grundlage einer 2007 in Beijing durchgeführten Befragung beleuchtet der vorliegende Artikel Formen multipler Haushaltsführung und versucht zu erklären, warum sich Migrant*innen für eine bestimmte Form von Haushaltsteilung entscheiden. Die Befunde zeigen, dass Zahl und Alter der Kinder entscheidende Determinanten sind, von denen abhängt, wer innerhalb des Haushalts Wanderarbeit annimmt und wer im Dorf zurückbleibt. Außerdem zeigen die Forschungsergebnisse, dass ländliche Familien ihren Haushalt so organisieren, dass sie möglichst gut an den Vorteilen von Wanderarbeit teilhaben können, während sie gleichzeitig die Ressourcen des ländlichen Standortes nutzen. Anstatt eines linearen Übergangs vom Land in die Stadt ist ein Leben zwischen den Standorten charakteristisch. Solche Strategien sind typisch für ein sich wandelndes Umfeld. Die translokale Perspektive zeigt, dass Familienzusammenhalt auch über weite Distanzen gedehnt werden kann.*

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Migration and household arrangement

Migration increasingly is understood as an interactive and iterative activity involving multiple sites and communities rather than simply a one-way move from an origin to a destination. In and from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, circulation of internal and international migrants who bring back remittances is a common household strategy (e.g., Hoang and Yeoh 2015). In that light, migration can be seen as a social process that sustains and reinvents the household in a changing environment. In this paper, I focus on rural-urban migrants in China who straddle and circulate between the city and countryside and maintain a household split between two or more places.

Three strands of literature offer theoretical insights for studying migration and the household jointly. First, translocal geographies emphasize both mobility and place, and both the mobile and the less mobile. For example, Brickell and Datta (2011) show that the migrant home can be considered as translocal because it is shaped by not only remittances and consumption but also new and strengthened connections with other localities via migrants. Oakes and Schein (2006) define translocality as being identified with more than one location, as when migrants maintain a dual sense of identity between their homes and their migrant work locations.

Second, research on the left-behind highlights their role in enabling others to migrate and in the social changes brought about by migrants' absence (e.g., Toyota et al. 2007). In other words, those who don't leave are also translocal. For example, Nguyen et al. (2006) highlight the impact of migration on children who grow up in spatially and even globally extended family networks.

Third, research on household-splitting, though not voluminous, draws attention to the long-term separation of family members, rather than assuming that they always stay together in one place as is the case of the "modern family" (e.g., Stacey 1990; Waters 2002). By documenting and understanding how the household is split – who are the migrant workers and who are left behind – and why a certain form of household arrangement is preferred, this paper seeks to foreground the household perspective for explaining migration and social change.

Rural-urban migration and split households in China

Since the 1980s, a large number of rural Chinese have left the *countryside* for urban work. The "floating population" – people not living in their *hukou* location (place of registration) – amounted to 230 million in 2012 or 17% of the nation's population (National Population and Family Planning Commission 2012).¹ Millions of rural-urban migrants in China have lived separately from their spouse, children and parents for extended periods of time. Except the very few who have left the countryside for good, migrants tend to split their household between the city and countryside.

A common explanation for split households is that without urban *hukou* and accompanied benefits, it is very difficult for rural migrants to stay in the city permanently. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that not all rural Chinese desire urban *hukou* (e.g., Bai and Li 2008). To more fully elucidate the view from below, an approach that centers on migrants' agency would highlight split households as a strategy to maintain and invest in the rural social infrastructure (extended family, fellow villagers) and economic security (farmland, house)

1 China's *hukou* (household registration) system is the subject of many books and articles (e.g., Wang 2005). In brief, it is extremely difficult for rural Chinese to exchange their rural *hukou* for an urban *hukou*, without which their access to urban benefits in housing, education, healthcare and jobs is severely constrained. Recent *hukou* reforms have relaxed such restrictions in selected cities.

(e.g., Fan and Wang 2008). Through household-splitting, migrants can earn urban wages, support the rest of the family at a rural and lower cost of living, build and renovate their house, and start saving for their eventual return. Plenty of studies have shown that the majority of rural-urban migrants, including young migrants, intend to eventually return to the countryside (e.g., Zhu and Chen 2010).

In this research, I focus on the migrant's nuclear family, namely, migrants and their children. During the 1980s and 1990s, it was common for the husband to leave home for migrant work, leaving behind the wife and children. This "sole migration" arrangement reflects traditional inside-outside gender roles – husbands are responsible for activities outside the home; and wives are delegated activities inside the home, and by extension also other village activities including agriculture (Jacka 2006). Since the 1990s, couple migration – both spouses pursuing migrant work and leaving their children behind – has become increasingly common (e.g., Xiang 2007). Typically, the left-behind children are taken care of by grandparents or other relatives (Figure 1). Alternatively, migrants may bring some of their children (partial family migrants) or all their children (family migrants) to the city. And, second-generation migrants are increasingly contributing to the migrant work force (e.g., Fan and Chen 2013). We know little about why migrants' family arrangements are increasingly diverse and why one form is preferred to another. In what follows, based on a survey in Beijing, I seek to illustrate the diverse forms of migrants' split households and highlight the factors that explain those different forms.

Beijing survey

In China, the "population" from which a migrant sample can be drawn is often difficult to determine because many migrants do not register at local authorities and because they are highly mobile. In this research, I use the adaptive sampling method, designed to sample from populations that are difficult to establish and yield samples that are not biased toward certain types of settlement. In collaboration with Renmin University, we conducted a migrant survey in Beijing, a major magnet of migrants from all over China, in 2007. We employed a two-stage sampling frame, first randomly selecting 30 neighborhoods from the total 2,025 neighborhoods in Beijing, then expanding outward

to another 22 neighborhoods that satisfied predetermined thresholds of migrant estimates. This process yielded 804 valid respondents from randomly selected residential units within the 52 neighborhoods.²

Of the 804 migrants, 231 are single and 573 are married. I have identified seven forms of household arrangement (#1 for singles; #2-#7 for married), described in Table 1. The analysis below focuses on #1-#6, which account for 94.5% of the sample.

Migrants' household arrangements

Table 1 shows that among married migrants with children, the most popular household arrangement is "family," followed by "sole," "couple," and "partial family." This distribution suggests that migrants' household arrangements are increasingly diversified, beyond the sole-migration model, thanks to spouses and children's participation in migration.

In aggregate terms, there are more male migrants than female migrants. The most extreme case is sole migrants, of whom 90% are male, which underscores the persistence of the inside-outside tradition. The only household arrangement where more women than men are represented is childless couple. But when children are involved (sole, partial family, family), the majority of migrants are men; that is, children are more a deterrent to women than men's joining the migration stream.

Partial family migrants have more children and older children than sole migrants, couple migrants and family migrants (Figure 2), suggesting that the former are spreading the burden of childcare between the city and the home village. Couple and family migrants, whose children are either all in Beijing or all in the home village, have the least number of children. Family migrants' children are the youngest; that is, migrant children tend to be younger than left-behind children. This may be related to the rigid educational system in China – migrant children at the high-school level must return to their home provinces if they wish to prepare for the university entrance examination.

Figure 3 shows that a larger family size in Beijing – hence more wage-earners – is associated with higher household income. Single, sole and couple migrants earn the least but they send the most remittances. Childless couple, partial family and family migrants earn the most but they send back the least. Two factors may be at play here. First, sole and couple migrants are expected to send large remittances for child support and to compensate the left-behind adults for childcare. Having no children, or having some or all children in Beijing, on the other hand, lessens the expectation and obligation to send remittance. Second, remittance may be part of an implicit agreement between the migrant and the left-behind on a plan for the migrant's eventual return. In this view, single, sole and couple migrants are more likely to return than other groups.

The average number of years since the first migration from the home village varies from more than 7 years for sole migrants to about 9 years for partial family migrants.

▼
Figure 1: Grandmothers and children in a Chinese village. Photo: Cindy Fan



In other words, most migrants are long-term migrants. The vast majority of migrants chose “stay as long as possible” as the answer to the question “how long do you intend to stay in Beijing,” and relatively small proportions chose “settle down if possible” or “will leave” (Figure 4).

This finding supports the notion that rural-urban migrants are in a state of migranhood, straddling the city and the countryside, and not determined about a permanent place to stay. More than 90% of sole migrants want to stay as long as possible but almost none want to settle down.

The large proportions of partial family and family migrants wanting to stay as long as possible, rather than settling down, suggest that having the spouse and children in the city does not necessarily signal a strong intention to stay. Children seem to play an important role – almost no sole migrants want to settle down in Beijing, and couple migrants have weaker intention to settle down than childless couple migrants.

Among migrants who chose “will leave,” sole and couple migrants’ average intended years to stay are less than 2, while childless couple migrants intend to stay on average more than 3 years. That is, having left-behind children shortens migrants’ intended years to stay in the city.

Modeling household arrangements

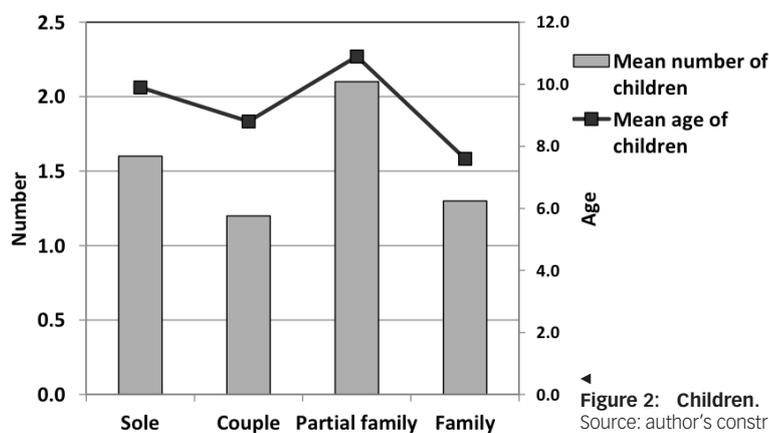
Informed by the descriptive statistics including those outlined above, I test the statistical significance of the differences among sole migrants, couple migrants, partial family migrants and family migrants via a multinomial logistic regression. By excluding single migrants and childless couple migrants, the model focuses on families that have children. In the models, I define sole migrants as the reference group, and I include four groups of independent variables: demographic, children, socioeconomic characteristics, and migration characteristics (Table 2, showing only t-values and odds ratios).

AGE is significant and negatively associated with couple migrants and partial family migrants. That is, younger migrants are more likely than older migrants to engage in couple and partial family migration. GENDER is significant and negatively related to couple migration and family migration. The odds of men being couple migrants are about 74 percent less than that of women, relative to sole migrants. The odds of men being family migrants are about 79 percent less than that of women. These results are consistent with the expectation that women are much more likely than men to be couple migrants or family migrants instead of sole migrants. EDUCATION is not significant for couple migrants, partial family migrants and family migrants.

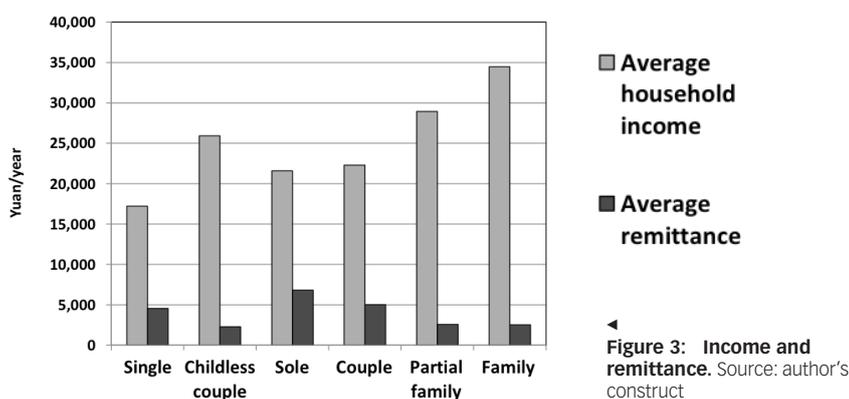
CHILDREN NUMBER, referring to the total number of children a migrant has, is significant and positively related to partial family migration. Having one more child increases the odds of being partial family migrants by 36 times, relative to sole migrants. This large odds ratio reflects first of all the relatively small number of children in migrant families – the sampled households have on average only 1.4 children – that is, one additional child would have a significant impact on household arrangement decisions.

Type	Description	Weighted Percentage
1. Single	Single	27.9
2. Childless couple	Married, spouse in Beijing, no children	7.1
3. Sole	Married, spouse and all children in the home village	14.5
4. Couple	Married, spouse in Beijing, all children in the home village	13.3
5. Partial family	Married, spouse in Beijing, some children in Beijing and some in the home village	5.5
6. Family	Married, spouse in Beijing, all children in Beijing	26.2
Subtotal		94.5
7. Other forms	Married, spouse and/or some or all children in places other than Beijing and the home village, or other forms that do not fall under the above categories	5.5
Total		100.0

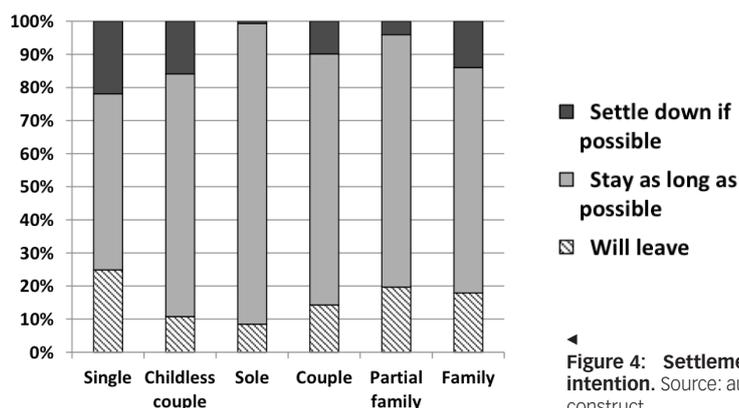
▲ **Table 1:** Forms of migrants’ household arrangement. Source: author



▲ **Figure 2: Children.** Source: author’s construct



▲ **Figure 3: Income and remittance.** Source: author’s construct



▲ **Figure 4: Settlement intention.** Source: author’s construct

Independent variables	Couple migrants*		Partial family migrants*		Family migrants*	
	t	Odds ratio	t	Odds ratio	t	Odds ratio
Demographic						
AGE	-2.80***	0.80	-2.67**	0.78	-1.38	0.88
GENDER (reference: female): MALE	-1.90*	0.26	-1.01	0.47	-2.11**	0.21
EDUCATION (reference: junior high and below)						
SENIOR HIGH AND ABOVE	-0.97	0.44	-0.55	0.70	0.06	1.05
Children						
CHILDREN NUMBER	-1.68	0.45	5.05***	35.98	-0.72	0.60
CHILDREN AGE	2.39**	1.19	1.92*	1.19	0.63	1.05
Socioeconomic characteristics						
INCOME	-0.27	1.00	0.76	1.00	1.65	1.00
REMITTANCE	-0.94	1.00	-2.73**	1.00	-2.76**	1.00
RENT	3.09***	1.01	3.09***	1.01	3.08***	1.01
LIVING AREA						
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT (reference: do not trust)						
TRUST	2.10**	5.00	0.79	1.83	1.12	2.77
NOT SURE OR NO ANSWER	-0.03	0.97	-1.38	0.24	-0.07	0.95
Migration characteristics						
MIGRATION EXPERIENCE	2.76**	1.20	2.43**	1.16	3.12***	1.19
REASON (reference: others)						
MAKE MONEY	-0.33	0.82	-1.74*	0.24	-3.43***	0.21
INTENTION (reference: will leave)						
STAY AS LONG AS POSSIBLE	-2.42**	0.29	-1.86*	0.17	-3.32***	0.19
STAY PERMANENTLY IF POSSIBLE	0.65	2.27	-1.25	0.07	-0.08	0.91

“Sole migrants” is the reference group.

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

▲ **Table 2:** Results of multinomial logistic regression. Source: author

Multinomial logistic regression is a model that is used to predict the probabilities of the different possible outcomes of a categorically distributed dependent variable, given a set of independent variables. One category of the dependent variable is chosen as the reference category. Separate *odds ratios* are determined for all independent variables for each category of the dependent variable with the exception of the reference category, which is omitted from the analysis.

Odds ratio (OR) is a way to quantify how strongly the presence or absence of property A is associated with the presence or absence of property B in a given population. If the OR is greater than 1, then having “A” is considered to be “associated” with having “B” in the sense that the having of “B” raises (relative to not-having “B”) the odds of having “A”.

Migrants with more children may choose the partial family arrangement which spreads the burden of childcare between themselves and the left-behind family members. CHILDREN AGE, referring to the average number of children, is significant and positive for couple migrants and partial family migrants. One year increase in children’s mean age increases the odds of being couple migrants and partial family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 19 percent. That is, in general migrant children are younger than left-behind children.

Socioeconomic characteristics refer to migrants’ economic and social situations in Beijing. INCOME, measured by the monthly household income earned in Beijing, is not significant for any groups. REMITTANCE, referring to the average monthly remittance migrants send home, is not significant for couple migrants but is significant and negative for partial family migrants and family migrants. On average, a yearly increase in remittance of 1,000 yuan reduces the odds of being partial family migrants and family migrants, relative to sole migrants, by about 26 percent. Having the spouse and children in the city reduces the migrant’s need to financially support the home village, 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 the left-behind who care for the children.

RENT refers to the monthly rent migrants pay and LIVING AREA to the migrants’ per capita living area in Beijing. RENT is significant and positively related to couple migration, partial family migration and family migration. LIVING AREA is significant and negatively related to partial family migrants but not significant for couple and family migrants. These results suggest that more people in the household demands a bigger space which entails higher rent and lower per capita living area.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT is related to migrants’ level of comfort with the host society, and is represented by two dummy variables: TRUST and NOT SURE OR NO ANSWER. “Do not trust” is the reference. TRUST is significant and positive for couple migrants: they are more likely to trust the government than sole migrants.

MIGRATION EXPERIENCE refers to the number of years since the first migration and is significant and positively associated with couple, family and partial family migration, relative to sole migration. One year increase in migration experience increases the odds of being couple migrants by 20%, the odds of being partial family migrants by 16%, and the odds of being family migrants by 19%. This suggests that experience in and familiarity with migration eases the decision to have both spouses and their children participate in migration. REASON refers to the most important migration reason for the first migration. MAKE MONEY is coded one and OTHER (other reasons) is coded zero. It is significant and negative for partial family migrants and family migrants; that is, they are less likely to move for the purpose of making money, relative to sole migrants.

INTENTION refers to migrants’ intention to stay in Beijing and is represented by two dummy variables, STAY AS LONG AS POSSIBLE and STAY PERMANENTLY IF POSSIBLE. “Will leave” is used as the reference group. The results appear contradictory but are revealing. STAY AS LONG AS POSSIBLE is significant and negative for couple migrants, partial family migrants and family migrants, relative to sole migrants, who are less likely to choose “stay as long as possible” than “will leave,” relative to sole migrants.

But, STAY PERMANENTLY IF POSSIBLE is not significant for couple, family and partial family migrants. Put together, the above suggests that wanting to stay in Beijing as long as possible is different from wanting to settle down permanently.

Discussion and conclusion: migrant household arrangements

This paper has focused on the various forms of household arrangement of rural-urban migrants in China. By doing so, I have sought to conceptualize migration as a process of circulation, one that is informed by and contribute to the literature on translocal geographies, the left-behind, and the split household. Rural-urban migrants in China join many migrants elsewhere in their circulating between the home and the site of work, their splitting the household where some family members pursue migrant work and some are left behind, their developing translocal livelihoods, and their uncertainty about where to eventually settle down. They also demonstrate the need to problematize the notion of the family when so many migrant families pursue household-splitting as a long-term strategy. Using data from a migrant survey in Beijing conducted in 2007, I have shown that new forms of household arrangement are pursued as more and different family members join the migration stream. Both the single and sole-migrant models – where men are more highly represented than women – used to be the norm, but couple-migrant and family-migrant models are now common as wives and children increasingly participate in migration. What seems clear is that migrant work is now an established way of life for rural Chinese, so that sending both spouses to the city is increasingly accepted.

Children seem to play an important role in the diversity of migrant household arrangements. First, in general left-behind children are older than migrant children, which may be related to China's educational regulations and limited educational opportunities in cities for migrant children. Second, the partial family-migrant model enables childcare responsibilities to be spread out between the city and the countryside. Third, the amount of remittance migrants send home is a function of their household arrangement: households with left-behind children send



▲ **Figure 5:** School for migrant children. Photo: Cindy Fan

significantly larger proportions of their income as remittance compared to households with migrant children. It is not clear if the increased prevalence of couple migration and family migration signals intention to settle down in the city. My findings suggest that regardless of whether migrants' family members also live in the city, migrants prefer to stay in the city as long as possible, in order to maximize economic returns from migrant work, but they do not tend to plan or have the resources to settle down permanently.

On the whole, this paper's findings underscore the active involvement and strategizing of rural Chinese to make the best of their options, by pursuing different forms of household arrangement and sending more family members to maximize income from migrant work. The newer forms of household arrangement do not seem to imply a transition from temporary migration to permanent migration. In that light, it is entirely conceivable that despite *hukou* reforms the practice of translocality, straddling the city and the countryside, and circular migration will persist.

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Cindy Fan

was born and educated in Hong Kong. She obtained her PhD from Ohio State University. Since 1989 she has been a Professor in the Department of Geography of University of California, Los Angeles (with research interests in population, migration, regional development, gender, ethnicity, and China). She is also Vice Provost for International Studies and Global Engagement, past Chair of the Department of Asian American Studies and former Associate Dean of Social Sciences.

Contact:
fan@geog.ucla.edu