

Internal Migration and Cohabitation in China:

A Mixed-Method Study

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ABSTRACT

Migration occurs at earlier ages, lasts for long periods, and profoundly shapes migrants' experiences of cohabitation. We use a mixed-method approach based on the 2012 China Family Panel Studies and 127 in-depth interviews. To address potential selection bias, we estimated the treatment effects of migration based on propensity-score matching. Results show that migrants, particularly rural-origin migrants with longer migration duration, are more likely to cohabit than their non-migrant counterparts. Qualitative interviews reveal the main underlying mechanisms: more liberal attitudes and less parental supervision in the receiving communities, a desire to vet potential partners in the absence of background knowledge, and economic barriers to marriage that make cohabitation an attractive buffer. Although migrants may cohabit as a sub-optimal option due to life instabilities and financial pressures, cohabitation also reflects a newly gained autonomy in their private lives, attributable to the liberal mindsets toward nonconventional family behaviors in the receiving communities.

Keywords: internal migration, cohabitation, instabilities, economic pressures, liberal attitudes, China

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INTRODUCTION

In line with the growing prevalence of cohabitation worldwide, China has also witnessed a steady increase in cohabitation rates over time. From those born in the 1960s to the 1980s, cohabitation among women and men both quadrupled respectively from 4.9% to 24.0% and 6% to 24.4% (Yu & Xie, 2021). However, this rising trend may have been experienced differently across social groups, one of which is the divide between China's internal migrants and non-migrants.

China has witnessed a tremendous increase in internal rural-to-urban migration since the early 1980s, when the government relaxed the enforcement of migration restrictions. The country's migrant population reached 384 million in 2021, accounting for over 20% of the total population in China (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Job opportunities in the major migrant-receiving communities have led to both long-term migration and frequent episodic flows of rural migrants into urban areas (Liang & White, 1996). The changes in lifestyle occasioned by migration have created tremendous instabilities in the lives of individuals who find themselves spending longer periods away from their parents and family and working longer hours with more irregular work schedules (Liang, 2004; Liang & Ma, 2004; Mu & Yeung, 2018).

Most research on migrants' life instabilities in China focuses on how the migration experience has influenced job trajectories, living arrangements, and relations between migrant workers and their parents and children (Chan, 2008; Fan, 2008a; Feng, Zuo, & Ruan, 2002; Gao & Smyth, 2011; Liang & Ma, 2004). Due to the rising diversity in migrants regarding their motivations and socioeconomic backgrounds, increasing share of younger migrants move either independently for work and education, or dependently together with their family (Mu & Yeung,

2018). As migration occurs at increasingly earlier life stages and lasts for longer periods, it has begun to shape numerous critical milestones in migrants' life courses, such as romantic relationships, entry into marriage, marriage timing, assortative mating, and marital dissolution (Arnett, 1998, 2001; Yeoh, Leng, & Dung, 2013; Yeung & Alipio, 2013; Mu & Yeung, 2018; Zenteno, Giorguli, & Gutiérrez, 2013).

Moreover, previous studies on China's internal migrants have focused on low-skilled migrants from rural areas. However, integration experiences and migration motivations may differ greatly across socioeconomic status and the rural-urban divide. For example, while low-skilled rural migrants may mainly focus on fast wealth accumulation, high-skilled or urban-origin migrants may be relocating to fully embrace the lifestyles of the receiving communities (Mu & Yeung, 2018). The latter group of migrants may be just as motivated to assimilate to urban lifestyles as it is to focus on careers and wealth accumulation (Chang, 2009; Fan & Li, 2002; Gaetano & Jacka, 2013; Roberts, 2002).

There are also salient divides in the levels of acceptance of cosmopolitan and modern ideologies among migrants in China (Fan, 2008a; Jacka, 2005). Prolonged exposure to new living experiences may result in migrants' lifestyles becoming embedded in cultural and social norms such as lower fertility, gender equality, and cohabitation, that are prevalent in the receiving communities (Liang, Yi, & Sun, 2014). Migrants may also face less pressure to adhere to traditional cultural norms when they are away from their parents and childhood social networks (Chen, Liu, & Xie, 2010; Mu & Yeung, 2018). Thus, the experience of migration may work as a driver of modernization, motivating migrants to embrace more diverse and modern lifestyles.

Cohabitation is still largely viewed as an innovative behavior despite the rising acceptance it receives in China (Yeung & Hu, 2016; Yu & Xie, 2015b). On the one hand, given the uncertainty and pressures of work and life in major migrant-receiving communities, cohabitation, as a cost-sharing arrangement and a trial marriage, is prevalent among Chinese internal migrants (Liang & Chen, 2004; Sun & Ye, 2010). On the other hand, cohabitation is more common among well-educated and urban populations, who are more familiar with and receptive to western cultures (Song & Lai, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2015b). Meantime, this group of individuals is also less subjected to some of the economic pressures that make cohabitation a necessity, given better education and urban backgrounds contribute to greater economic means (Mu & Yeung, 2018; Williams, Kabamalan, & Ogena, 2013). Thus, including migrants with various educational backgrounds and both urban and rural origins allow us to directly examine the socioeconomic gradients of internal migrants' cohabitation experiences, which may shed light on the link between socioeconomic transformations and the family system in a country undergoing rapid industrialization and geographically unequal development.

In this study, using a mixed-method design, we estimate how migration has influenced cohabitation based on the nationally representative 2012 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and 127 in-depth interviews conducted in Beijing in 2015 to uncover the nuanced mechanisms through which migration may affect cohabitation. Our main research questions are the following: First, how does migration experience in China affect migrants' propensity to cohabit? Second, what are the mediating mechanisms? Third, how do gender and migration duration moderate the relationships between migration and cohabitation? Particularly, we include internal migrants across a full range of socioeconomic characteristics in terms of education level, urban versus rural origins, and migration duration, which will broaden our understanding of the decision-

making processes behind cohabitation. The study's mixed-method design enables a systematic examination of the impacts of internal migration on cohabitation behaviors along with the mediating mechanisms. To address potential selection bias and to assess the robustness of our empirical results, we also estimate the treatment effects of migration based on propensity-score matching.

UNDERSTANDING COHABITATION

In recent studies, two main theories arise to explain the growing inclination toward cohabitation, namely, the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory and the Pattern of Disadvantage (POD) theory (Yu & Xie, 2015b; Lesthaeghe, 2020). Primarily, the SDT theory posits cohabitation to be an effect of ideational change. That is, along the process of economic development, individuals increasingly associate cohabitation with individualism and liberal values (Jampaklay & Haseen, 2011; Yang & Yen, 2011; Yu & Xie, 2015b). The POD theory, on the other hand, suggests cohabitation to be an outcome of economic constraints, otherwise described as a poor man's marriage (Yu & Xie, 2015b). Compared to marriage, cohabitation is associated with more instabilities and uncertainties in life (Smock & Manning, 1997; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2008). Those who are more risk-prone and less certain about their relationships and life trajectories are more likely to cohabit (Smock & Manning, 1997). Driven by both rising acceptance of cohabitation, increasing uncertainties about the future, and intensified economic pressures, cohabitation has gained popularities among young adults as a "trial marriage" (Jones, Zhang, & Chia, 2012; Sun et al., 2014; Williams, Kabamalan, & Ogena, 2013).

Yu and Xie (2015b) argues that cohabitation in China largely aligns with the SDT theory, as corroborated by Yeung and Hu (2016) who found increased approval and lessens stigma held

towards premarital cohabitation and other liberal ideologies. Recent evidence however suggests a growing tendency for cohabitation in China to orientate towards the POD theory. Comparing cohabitation patterns between the pre-1980s and post-1980s birth cohorts, Yu (2021) finds cohabitation to be increasingly associated with lower levels of education, while cohabitation used to be more prevalent among wealthier individuals residing in urban areas. These changes suggest that over time, cohabitation in China increasingly stems from the economic constraints of entering marriage rather than liberal ideologies concerning family and marriage behaviors (Yu, 2021), that is, a transition from an SDT model to a POD model of cohabitation.

Cohabitation was traditionally stigmatized, particularly among Asian women. According to the patriarchal tradition, women were seen as the property of their parents before marriage and the property of their husbands after marriage (Xu, Ji, & Tung, 2000; Xu & Whyte, 1990). Women were often expected to marry at younger ages in exchange for better economic prospects of their husbands (Mu & Xie, 2014). Thus, they were often subject to societal expectations to remain chaste until marriage (Bennett, 2005; Samart, 2007; Yoo, 2015). Women living in cohabitation were often judged (Kobayashi & Kampen, 2015; Village, Williams, & Francis, 2010) and lacked legal protections for themselves and their children in the event of a separation (Xu & Xia, 2014). Meantime, although cohabitation has been more accepted for men than for women (Jones, Zhang, & Chia, 2012), Asian men in cohabitation are still stigmatized with cohabitation considered evidence of dereliction of their duties toward their partners and family lineage (Yoo, 2015). Thus, the legacies of sexual and marital norms that are differently applied to women and men (Ji, 2015) may influence the attitudes and practices of cohabitation among male and female migrants, which warrants empirical examination.

MIGRATION AND COHABITATION

Migration is a demographic phenomenon that has been on the rise and shaped the lifestyles of an increasing share of the population (Kulu & Milewski, 2007; Mu & Yeung, 2018). Since the main driver of migration has been the improvement of economic and developmental prospects, migrants tend to work long hours to maximize earnings and accelerate wealth accumulation (Kulu & Milewski, 2007; Liang, 2004; Liang & Ma, 2004; Mu & Yeung, 2018). Migrants typically face difficulties in adjusting to new living environments in the receiving communities. Therefore, they often express uncertainty about future plans and whether they intend to return home or remain permanently in their new locations (Fan, 2008; Gaetano & Jacka, 2013; Liang & Ma, 2004). Their lifestyles are often characterized by frequent relocations, uncertain life plans, long work hours, irregular work schedules, and unstable living arrangements (Hannemann & Kulu, 2015; Liang & Ma, 2004; Liang & White, 1996; Mu & Yeung, 2018).

The literature on the relationship between migration, union formation, and cohabitation is limited. Existing research studying the relationships between migration and family behaviors mainly focuses on Europe, North America, and Russia (Boyle et al., 2008; Muszynska & Kulu, 2007), or among Chinese diasporas (Jeffreys & Wang, 2021). Particularly regarding such a relationship in China, Mu and Yeung (2020) examined how internal migration shapes Chinese internal migrants' marriage timing and assortative mating in China.

To our best knowledge, there is no such work done on China regarding the link between internal migration and cohabitation, where massive social changes have been ongoing in a unique policy and cultural context. Since the communities receiving migrants tend to be modern and cosmopolitan, they expose migrants to diverse mindsets and social norms, including openness toward cohabitation. Meantime, given that marriage has legal implications (Thornton et

al., 2008), holds symbolic meanings as a major life course milestone (Cherlin, 2020), and is strongly associated with childbearing, particularly in Asian societies (Raymo et al., 2015), the instabilities and uncertainties of the migrant experience may result in increased levels of cohabitation. Moreover, the high costs of living and household establishments in the major migrant-receiving communities have also made cohabitation a necessary buffer for the couple to get financially ready for the wedding, housing, and other marriage-related costs (Mu & Yeung, 2018; Yu & Xie, 2015a).

Moreover, work on this topic, which involves nuanced data reflecting attitudes and emotions toward a sensitive social issue, requires analysis that goes beyond the scope of what can be captured in quantitative analyses. In this paper, we use a mixed-method approach. Through analysis of qualitative interviews, we can better understand both ideational and economic mechanisms underlying the quantitative patterns.

THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Despite the rapid increase in internal migration, China's highly restrictive residential registration system (*hukou*) constrains migrants from moving their residency, even after having lived for years in a receiving community. This is especially the case in large cities, which offer more economic opportunities and better infrastructural amenities than rural areas (Li & Zahniser, 2002). Since *hukou* is associated with various social benefits—such as education, medical care, and retirement insurance—those without a local *hukou* in the receiving communities must often contend with hardships and uncertainty (Fan, 2008a, 2008b). They are called the “floating population” in both the academic and public discourse in reference to their rootless and unstable living situations (Liang & Ma, 2004). Even those migrants who are able to obtain *hukou* status

may still face discrimination from local residents and experience great emotional strains in their daily lives because of cultural hierarchies across regions in China (Chang, 2009; Davin, 1998; Jacka, 2005; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). Not only do migrant workers tend to have less human capital, in the form of education, skills, and work experiences that lead to economic rewards and prestige than local residents, but they also face employment regulations designed to protect local residents from the competition with migrants. As a result, migrants are often left to fill physically demanding and low-skilled occupations (Mu & Yeung, 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017). A lack of cultural capital, such as limited mastery of Mandarin and deficient knowledge of urban lifestyles, adds to the difficulties for rural migrants trying to navigate the institutional and social systems of receiving cities (Choi & Peng, 2016). Often burdened with the stigma of being “second-class citizens,” migrants face obstacles to career development and full social integration (Zhang & Wu, 2017). As China’s internal migration tends to occur in frequent waves, each of which leads to long-term dislocations, it destabilizes migrants’ life course transitions.

In many instances, Chinese parents still play important roles in their adult children’s marital and even relationship choices (Davis, 2014; Liu & Mu, 2023; Thornton & Lin, 1994; Xu & Whyte, 1990; Whyte, 1995). Therefore, in the case of migrants who are away from the control and authority of their parents, they may enjoy more autonomy in making choices such as cohabiting with a partner, than non-migrants may exercise.

Moreover, in China, marrying and establishing a household requires a significant financial investment. Housing prices and other living expenses continue to skyrocket, especially in prosperous cities, where more and better employment opportunities are available. This in turn leads to overwhelming economic pressures and uncertainty for those who wish to start a family (Mu & Xie, 2014; Mu & Yeung, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2015a). In less developed and rural areas with

traditional patriarchal structures, grooms and their families are expected to spend heavily to celebrate their adult children's marriage (Davis, 2014; Thornton & Lin, 1994; Whyte, 1995; Xu & Whyte, 1990). The list of expenditures often includes a large monetary gift to the bride or the bride's family, a lavish wedding ceremony, and a new house for the newlyweds (Mu & Yeung, 2018).

Thus, cohabitation offers young people, particularly men, the option of being in a relationship while still having a buffer against the pressures of entering marriage (Hannemann & Kulu, 2015; Smock & Manning, 1997). For those who already shoulder responsibilities and face uncertainties about their lives and careers in their stressful migrant lives, it serves as a viable choice³. The greater normative acceptance of cohabitation in the migrant-receiving communities may also channel the migrants toward a new option of intimate relationships. As cohabitation gains greater acceptance and continues to increase in China, particularly in metropolitan areas which are the major migrant-receiving communities, it is important to understand the factors shaping this trend (Davis, 2005; Ji & Yeung, 2014; Mu & Xie, 2014).

Previous studies on Chinese migrants have predominantly focused on socioeconomic outcomes and intergenerational relations (Chan, 2008; Davin, 1998; Liang, 2004). Given the present trend toward ever-increasing internal migration and its disruption of traditional family structures and conventional life course trajectories, it is crucial to understand the impacts of migration on interpersonal arrangements such as cohabitation.

³ The massive population size and demographic diversity of the receiving cities may increase uncertainty on the marriage market for both migrants and non-migrants. However, such uncertainty may be lesser to non-migrants than to migrants as the former tend to have more established local social networks and insider knowledge about the socioeconomic landscapes of the city to navigate the marriage market. This may render cohabitation more readily practiced by migrants than non-migrants.

Due to the unequal regional economic and policy development, China's supercities and megacities concentrate the best urban and demographic resources. It is established that larger cities attract Chinese internal migrants due to both superior economic and non-economic incentives such as the more cosmopolitan cultures and enriched living facilities (Li, 2022; Zhang & Song, 2003). Beijing is among the most attractive destinations for internal migrants (Zheng et al., 2009). In Beijing alone, the gross domestic product created by migrant workers measures up to 32% of the city's economy (Lu & Xia, 2016). Therefore, as a site to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews, Beijing may facilitate the most salient accounts regarding how migration has changed the ideational and socioeconomic backgrounds with regards to individuals' family and private lives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this paper, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the main patterns, the mechanisms, and the variations in the relationships between migration and cohabitation. Our main research questions in this paper include the following:

First, how does internal migration experience in China affect migrants' propensity to cohabit? As aforementioned, the unique ideational and socioeconomic backgrounds may lead to migrants' higher propensity for cohabitation compared to non-migrants, which warrants empirical examinations.

Second, what are the mediating mechanisms? We aim to unfold and elaborate on the underlying mechanisms that link migration and cohabitation, as reflected by our qualitative data: (1) more liberal attitudes and less social stigma against cohabitation in receiving communities, (2) less parental supervision over mate selection in receiving communities, (3) less knowledge of

a potential partner's background and thus a desire to test the relationship in a "trial marriage," and (4) the prohibitively high cost of marriage and the instability of life in migration, which make cohabitation a more affordable alternative to marriage.

Third, how do gender and migration duration moderate the above behaviors? As argued above, the links between migration and cohabitation may differ across gender due to varying norms faced by men and women. Specifically, more relaxed norms for men regarding intimate relationships may make male migrants more likely than female migrants to cohabit. Also, because men are expected to assume the responsibilities of financial preparations for marriage, male migrants may be more likely than their female counterparts to cohabit until they are financially ready to enter marriage. Moreover, given that cohabitation is considered a modern behavior, the more exposure rural migrants have to urban lifestyles, the more likely they are to cohabit. Therefore, the duration of migration among rural-origin migrants may be positively associated with the likelihood of cohabitation.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

For the quantitative analyses, we utilize data from the 2012 wave of a nationally representative study—the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The 2012 CFPS is the only wave of CFPS data that collected information on the respondent's full migration history by retrospective questions which recall all episodes of migration. Given that the influences of migration on cohabitation require cumulative and dynamic processes, such information about migration history is important and necessary. It also includes detailed histories of respondents' intimate relationships, as well as their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, residential registration (*hukou*) status at a

younger age, and parental information. The richness of this information enables us to measure individuals' pre-migration status and trace their migration and life trajectories. We restrict the sample to ages 21 to 50 to target the years during which most individuals initiate and develop intimate relationships, receive their education, and work. The resulting sample consists of 4,380 women and 5,887 men.

For the qualitative analyses, we use 127 in-depth interviews conducted by the authors in Beijing from May to July 2015. After receiving ethical approval, recruitment took place from April to July 2015. Interviewees were recruited through public internet forums, email listservs, and word of mouth. Migrants were defined as those whose place of *hukou* at age 12 was outside Beijing. We also collected information about their current place of *hukou* to capture the interviewees' migration trajectories. For comparison purposes, we interviewed both men and women as well as migrants and non-migrants and included interviewees with various educational backgrounds to capture heterogeneities in skills and qualifications. We considered using occupation to indicate the skill profile but decided against this because housewives and college students compose a sizable proportion of migrants and using occupation as a criterion would potentially exclude them. The qualitative sample is also restricted to ages 21 to 50.

Measures

Dependent Variables

The main dependent variable in this paper is the propensity for cohabitation. It is measured as a binary variable indicating whether the respondent has ever cohabited: 0=no, and 1=yes. We use regular weighted binary logistic models. We decided against using event history analysis because individuals can transition into cohabitation from almost any type of marital status, and therefore

exposure to the risk of cohabitation cannot be reliably determined. Moreover, considering the flexibility of cohabitation, migration may lead to instabilities at all life stages. Thus, our model included cohabitation both before and after marriage and controlled for the respondents' current marital status.

Main independent variables

The main independent variable is the migration status of the respondent. This is a four-category variable designed to determine both migration status and rural versus urban origins based on whether the respondent has ever migrated and what the respondent's *hukou* status was at age 12. As aforementioned, CFPS collected information on the respondent's full migration history by retrospective questions that recall all episodes of migration. Considering the influences of migration on cohabitation involves cumulative and dynamic processes, as long as the respondent has ever involved in any episode of migration, even if she/he was not in a status of migration at the time of the survey, she/he would be coded as a migrant. Then we further categorized migrants and non-migrants according to their rural/urban origins, according to their *hukou* status at age 12, even if she/he already converted *hukou* status at the time of the survey. The variable is coded as follows: 1=urban non-migrant, 2=urban migrant, 3=rural non-migrant, and 4=rural migrant. To put things in perspective, as Beijing is our site to collect qualitative data, we can only capture migrants who were still migrating at the time of the interview, but we did retrieve their migration history during the interview.

To further pin down the respondents' exposure to urban ideational backgrounds and lifestyles, we created a separate variable to account for both migration status and migration duration, still drawing on the set of questions on migration history. The variable is coded as 1=urban non-migrant, 2=urban migrant, 3=rural non-migrant, 4=rural migrant with less than five

years of migration experience, and 5=rural migrant with more than five years of migration experience. Due to the limited number of observations for urban migrants, we do not subdivide them by migration duration.

Control variables

We control for an array of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. They include each respondent's education level (1=junior high or lower, 2=senior high, and 3= associate college or above), the respondent's age (measured in years), whether the respondent is an ethnic minority (0=no, and 1=yes), whether the respondent does not have any religious faith and is atheist (0=no, and 1=yes), whether the respondent is currently married (0=no, and 1=yes), whether the respondent is currently a migrant (0=no, and 1=yes), whether the respondent currently has urban *hukou* (0=no, and 1=yes), and the logarithm of the respondent's annual income. To put things in perspective, the main independent variable, migration status, as aforementioned, captures the combinations of the respondent's rural/urban origin and migration history. But whether they are in a status of migration and whether they hold a rural/urban *hukou* currently are associated with the main independent variable and may uniquely shape their cohabitation experience. Therefore, we additionally controlled for these two variables.

To capture the parents' socioeconomic status, we also include the average number of years of schooling completed by the respondents' parents when the respondent was 14 years old. To account for how physically attractive the respondent is likely to be on the marriage market, we include an indicator of physical appearance. This is the average of two interviewer-rated indicators of the respondent's appearance and tidiness. Both ratings range from 1 to 7, with a higher score corresponding to a higher degree of attractiveness. We include this variable to control for selection on physical appearance during the union formation process. In addition, the

model includes an indicator of cultural capital in receiving communities as measured by language proficiency. The respondents' mastery of Mandarin Chinese were rated by the interviewers on a scale of 0 to 7 (the original rating ranges from 1 to 7, and we coded those who cannot speak Mandarin at all as 0), with higher scores indicating higher levels of proficiency. Since Mandarin is the only official language in China and many migrants are native speakers of other dialects, mastery of Mandarin often translates into more job opportunities, higher socioeconomic status, more exposure to cosmopolitan ideas, and more sophisticated social skills.

To account for regional variations in receiving cities in both socioeconomic and ideational backgrounds, we further include a set of dummy variables of the destination provinces to understand when holding contextual factors constant, how migration shapes patterns of cohabitation.

Methods

We use regular weighted logistic models to estimate the propensity for cohabitation. To address potential selection bias and to assess the robustness of our empirical results, we estimated the treatment effects of migration on cohabitation using the propensity-score matching approach. Specifically, we presented propensity score matching estimates based on both nearest neighbor and stratification methods with bootstrapped standard errors.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the variables included in the models. As shown in the table, cohabitation is low in prevalence, with 6% of women and 9% of men have ever cohabited.

60% of men and women alike are rural non-migrants. Urban non-migrants and rural migrants, for men and women, all fall within the range of 17% to 21% of the sample. Urban migrants constitute the smallest group, with 4% of women and 3% of men in the sample. These patterns are consistent with the national distributions observed by other researchers, as most of the migration occurs among rural Chinese, who generally relocate to pursue better opportunities for earnings and personal development (Liang, 2004; Liang & White, 1996). In contrast, urban residents have weaker motivations for migrating (Mu & Yeung, 2020).

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 compares the prevalence of cohabitation across migration statuses. As the table shows, the prevalence of cohabitation differs very little between rural and urban respondents overall. The main difference relates to whether the respondents have ever migrated. Specifically, while only 5.0% of female urban non-migrants and 6.9% of male urban non-migrants have ever cohabited, the corresponding percentages for their migrant counterparts are 11.6% and 12.9%, respectively. Among rural non-migrants, only 4.5% of women and 6.7% of men have ever cohabited. In comparison, among rural migrants, the percentages of those who have ever cohabited are as high as 12.6% and 15.2%, respectively, for women and men. This is consistent with our theoretical expectation that cohabitation would be more prevalent among migrants, as it serves as a means of coping with life instabilities.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 shows the sample distribution of the qualitative interviews. To capture heterogeneities in migrants' skill qualifications and migration motivations, we include interviewees with various educational backgrounds. In particular, the interviews revealed that better-educated interviewees tended to have more diverse career trajectories, migration

motivations, and intimate relationship experiences. Thus, we conducted more interviews with the two groups with more education to capture such diversity. Among migrants, 27 were never married, 49 were in their first marriage, 1 was single after a divorce, and 1 was remarried after a divorce. Among migrants who had ever married, 12 of them had no children, 30 of them had one child, and 9 had two children. Our migrant interviewees also assume a diverse range of jobs. Specifically, 8 were students; 8 were in education and research jobs such as academics and teachers; 14 engaged in self-employment or freelance jobs; 16 were professionals including bankers, doctors, nurses, and clerical staffs; 9 were in service jobs including receptionists, waitresses, salesmen, deliverymen, and domestic helpers; 17 took menial jobs including security guards, mechanics, and construction workers; and 6 were housewives.

Quantitative Results

[Table 4 about here]

Table 4 shows the odds ratios from the weighted logistic models predicting whether the respondent has ever cohabited. As can be seen from Model 1, compared to rural non-migrants, both urban migrants and rural migrants are more likely to have cohabited at some point in their lives. In Model 2, we further divide rural migrants into those who have lived in migration for five years or less and those who have lived in migration for more than five years. As shown in the case of both female and male rural migrants, a longer migration duration leads to more cohabitation. This may have to do with the instabilities and uncertainties caused by a longer migration experience. It could also be attributed to the greater exposure to and acceptance of modern family forms such as cohabitation over the course of long-term living in urban areas.

However, different from our expectations, male migrants were not more likely than their female counterparts to have cohabited. We conducted a formal test of the gender difference in the migration influences by including both men and women in the same model and interacting gender with the variables indicating migration status, along with other variables. However, none of the interactions between gender and migration status were statistically significant (results available upon request). At the same time, the main effect of gender was significant and positive, indicating that in general, men tended to be more likely than women to cohabit, regardless of their migration status.

Also note that in Models 1 and 2, college-educated women are less likely to have ever cohabited than women with less education. This may be related to the high cost of marriage and household establishment. A college education is associated with increased economic resources, and given the norm of socioeconomic homogamy and hypergamy, college-educated women tend to marry men with similar or more established resources and therefore are less likely to need to postpone marriage for financial reasons. However, men are largely expected to be the primary breadwinner upon getting married, which may exert a pressure for them to postpone marriage entry and get financially ready. Moreover, educational institutions, particularly colleges, effectively serve as a marriage market as the timing of mate selection and education completion largely overlaps (Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Mare, 1991). Thus, compared to their counterparts with less education, college-educated women are less likely to cohabit because they tend to have a narrower interval between the initiation of a relationship and entry into the first marriage.

For other variables, as shown in Models 1 and 2, age is negatively associated with cohabitation. The reason for this may be greater acceptance of cohabitation and the more overwhelming economic pressures among younger respondents. Atheist women are less likely to

be ever cohabited, which is possibly attributable to the heterogeneous implications of different religious teachings for migration and cohabitation. Respondents who were currently married were more likely than unmarried respondents to have ever cohabited. This result suggests that cohabitation may work as a “trial marriage” that segues into marriage (Hulu & Boyle, 2010). Given China’s norm of universal marriage, individuals who have ever cohabited are likely to eventually marry. Furthermore, men with better physical appearance and Mandarin proficiency are more likely to cohabit, which may indicate that physical attractiveness and cultural capital are desirable characteristics for men during the courtship. Interestingly, however, these two coefficients are not significant for women, which is likely due to the fact that normative pressures make women more hesitant to cohabit, and if they are better positioned in the marriage market, they prefer marrying without first cohabiting.

[Table 5 about here]

In models shown in Table 5, we further controlled for fixed effects of the contextual variations in socioeconomic and ideational backgrounds across the destination provinces by including a set of dummy variables. As shown, the results are largely consistent with those shown in Table 4, particularly among rural migrants. This consistency suggests that the social mechanisms shaping cohabitation among migrants across different destinations should be similar, but likely with more salient patterns in more prominent destinations such as Beijing, where more cosmopolitan cultures toward private lives prevail and the economic pressures are more overwhelming. Therefore, by conducting qualitative interviews in Beijing may strengthen the depth of the qualitative data and facilitate more striking accounts regarding how migration has changed the ideational and socioeconomic backgrounds with regards to individuals’ family and private lives.

Robustness check with Propensity Score Matching Estimation

[Table 6 about here]

To address potential selection bias and to assess the robustness of our empirical results, we also estimated the treatment effects of migration based on propensity-score matching. It is likely that migration and cohabitation are both more likely to happen among individuals with certain traits than otherwise. For example, open-minded individuals are more likely to migrate and cohabit. By conducting propensity-score matching, we can compare individuals who have similar propensities to migrate, and the estimated associations between migration and cohabitation are likely to be due to the experiences of migration. Table 6 shows the estimated effects of migration based on propensity-score matching with bootstrapped standard errors. As can be seen, estimates based on the two matching methods, nearest neighbor and stratification, produce highly similar results, and both sets of estimates are consistent with results from the above logistic analyses. Specifically, we still find that both female and male migrants are more likely to cohabit than their non-migrant counterparts, regardless of their urban or rural origins. This indicates the robustness of our previous findings. It also shows that our earlier results indicate causal relationships beyond mere statistical associations.

Qualitative Results

To uncover the underlying mechanisms of the above quantitative results, we conducted qualitative interviews about attitudes toward and experiences of cohabitation. One consensus that emerged from all the interviews is that migrants are more inclined to cohabit than locals. When explaining the reasons, while some interviewees corroborated the SDT perspective by emphasizing the cosmopolitan attitudes toward cohabitation and individual autonomy in Beijing,

more referred to the sociodemographic realities that align with the POD perspective. Specifically, concerning the prevalence of cohabitation among migrants, our interviews uncovered the following major explanations: (1) more liberal attitudes and less social stigma about cohabitation in the receiving communities, (2) less parental supervision of mate selection, (3) less knowledge of a potential partner's background and thus a desire to test the relationship in a "trial marriage," and (4) the prohibitively high cost of marriage and the instability of life in migration, which make cohabitation a more affordable alternative to marriage. In the following, we elaborate those mechanisms with selected interview quotations that are most nuanced and in-depth.

More Liberal Attitudes and Less Social Stigma in the Receiving Community

Yuanyuan, age 25, is a single female migrant from a rural area who has vocational school education. Her father is a high school graduate, and her mother completed junior high school. When asked whether cohabitation before marriage is acceptable to her, she answered:

Yes, now the society is very open, and cohabitation is another form of marriage. It is a trial marriage, and it is better than divorce. Nowadays [the] divorce rate is too high, and sometimes I [think], it is good if we can just remain in [a] romantic relationship, without getting married.

Shuli, age 34, is a female migrant from a rural area who has a junior high school education. She is in her second marriage. Her parents are both illiterate. When asked about her attitude toward cohabitation, she replied:

Cohabitation before marriage? Isn't that normal nowadays? Ha-ha. Especially considering that there are many people like us, away from hometowns. If we are at home, we may be reluctant to [cohabit] because we don't have the conditions and opportunities [there]. It is more convenient when we are outside [our hometowns], right?

When we probed further about whether she found attitudes toward cohabitation more liberal in the receiving communities than in her hometown, she firmly answered “Yes.”

Weaker Social Control in the Receiving Community

Aside from the influence of attitudes in the receiving communities, the interviewees cited being away from parental supervision as an important factor in migrants' attitudes and behaviors with respect to cohabitation.

Beiliang, age 48, a male urban Beijing local, has a senior high school education. He is in his first marriage, and his mother and father are graduates of primary school. In the interview, he expressed a negative attitude toward cohabitation but noted the difficulty in controlling young migrants' behaviors when they live far away from their parents' supervision.

It is up to individual choices. It is unacceptable to me, as it is very hasty and irresponsible. However, it is others' business. We can hardly control it. If ... young people work outside [their hometowns] and sneakily live together, you can hardly find out or explicitly ask about it, right? If the two are determined to get married, and just want to save more money for marriage, it is understandable, but still not good. After you

get married, you can do whatever you like. We Chinese have a conservative tradition. People will look down upon you anyway (if you cohabit).

Such as latitude in private lives among migrants is particularly felt when the migrants have straightforward comparisons with the Beijing locals. Wan, aged 29, is a female urban migrant with a master's degree. Her father attended associate college, and her mother completed senior high school. She is in her first marriage with a Beijing local. When recalling her pre-marital experiences, she complained about how her then fiancé refused to cohabit with her due to parental pressures:

I used to be upset with my husband (then fiancé), because he just had to go home every day. Once I suggest him living together with me, he said no, that he had to go home, otherwise his parents would be unhappy. I was speechless... I have a lot of migrant friends cohabiting with their partners, it is not a bad thing.

The Desire to Test Relationships before Marriage Given the Lack of Background Information on Partners

Nowadays, migrants live an increasingly itinerant life, spending most of their time away from their hometowns and close social and familial networks. The need to remain mobile and work long hours interferes with the ability to vet potential spouses, especially outside of the reach of those networks. Cohabitation provides migrants with an opportunity to get to know and form a closer relationship with a potential spouse.

Xin, age 24, is a single female Beijing local, from a rural region, with a college education. Her father and mother completed junior high school and primary school, respectively. When asked about whether cohabitation is acceptable, she emphasized that cohabitation allows couples to get to know each other from different angles, and this is especially beneficial if a potential partner is a migrant coming from a very different background.

I think I will only cohabit if I decide to get married. Given that, I think cohabitation is a must. When we are in the relationship, he is just with me in Beijing by himself, and he may totally change when he goes back to his hometown. You can eat outside, go shopping, and play together with him. However, he may look entirely different under the situation in his hometown. For example, some men seem to be spoiling their wives, but may be a total male chauvinist at home. I think we need a test, not just him for me, but also me for him.

The Prohibitively High Cost of Marriage and Cohabitation as a More Affordable Option

Given the prohibitively high costs of marrying and establishing a household, cohabitation offers a desirable alternative. It enables individuals to live together as a couple while preparing financially for marriage. This is especially relevant for migrant couples who have not decided where to settle.

Han, age 36, is a single male migrant from a rural area with a junior high school education. His father and mother are graduates of primary school and junior high school, respectively. Although he expressed the view that it is acceptable for two people who like each other to cohabit, he took a different view toward marriage. While he did not see an “economic

foundation” as a precondition for cohabitation, he did see it as *a must* for couples who planned to marry. When asked why, he explained:

Because in rural areas, a big banquet is necessary for a wedding. All relatives care about how luxurious the wedding is. After all, I am a man, even if it is not extravagant, I need to have the basics. One only gets married once in life, so at least I need to make the wedding memorable.

Consideration of the economic pressures accompanying marriage and household establishment entered the answers of not only interviewees with lower levels of education but also those with higher educational attainment. Wan, as introduced above, when asked if cohabitation was acceptable to her, she answered that she was not particularly against it and viewed it as a “trial marriage.” Then she followed up on the financial benefits of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage:

Migrants often cohabit to share the cost of rent. I have many classmates doing it. It is not a bad thing, as long as they are determined to get married. It is convenient for life and costs.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study used data from a nationally representative survey and in-depth interviews with 127 interviewees in Beijing to examine how migration has influenced cohabitation in China. Using a mixed-method approach, the study aimed to examine the general patterns and uncover the

underlying mechanisms driving cohabitation in the country's migrant populations. To further address potential selection bias and assess the robustness of our empirical results, we also estimated the treatment effects of migration based on two propensity-score matching methods.

We found that both urban and rural migrants are more likely than their non-migrant counterparts to experience cohabitation. Additionally, longer migration duration appears to contribute to cohabitation among rural-origin migrants, possibly due to the pronounced disparities in economic development and modernization across China's urban-rural divide. Cohabitation is more accepted in cosmopolitan areas, which constitute a large share of the migrant-receiving communities. Prolonged exposure to receiving communities and their modern cultural and social norms may influence the values and behavior of migrants, weakening parental influence and ties to traditional cultural values and social networks. Thus, the experience of migration may work as a driver of modernization, motivating migrants to embrace more diverse and modern lifestyles. However, contrary to our predictions, male migrants were not more likely to cohabit than their female counterparts. One possible explanation is that men in general are more likely to cohabit than women, regardless of their migration status, which dilutes the associations between migration and cohabitation.

Qualitative interviews allowed us to explore the underlying mechanisms behind behaviors around cohabitation in the Chinese migrant population. Specifically, liberal attitudes toward cohabitation and the absence of parental supervision within the receiving community, along with financial pressures, emerged as major drivers of migrants' higher propensity to cohabit. Specifically, migrants generally find more normative acceptance of cohabitation in Beijing than in their hometowns and also cite the lack of parental supervision over their dating and intimate relationships with parents at a geographical distance. In addition, they note the

desirability of testing partnerships through a “trial marriage” in the absence of information about partners’ backgrounds and agree that cohabitation represents a means of avoiding the significant financial pressures of marriage.

This paper has some limitations. First, due to the nature of the data, migration status and experience of cohabitation are defined on the basis of whether the respondent has “ever” migrated or cohabited. As a result, the temporal order of the two events is hard to determine. Still, in the current paper, using propensity-score matching methods to estimate consistent treatment effects of migration validates the causality of the relationship. Second, the available data is based on work-related migration and therefore fails to capture migration experiences that have other causes, such as education or marriage. It would be useful to examine the links between migration and cohabitation when more detailed data on migration history are available. These limitations serve as possible avenues for future studies on this topic.

Despite the limitations, this study, with a mixed-method research design, is one of the first to examine the patterns of the links between migration and cohabitation, and to uncover the various social processes that have driven the link in China. By doing so, we demonstrate the centrality of migration in shaping individuals’ life course trajectories through counteracting social forces. This study also highlights the importance of understanding Chinese internal migrants’ cohabitation experiences in their embedded social contexts beyond the modern-traditional binarization. As argued by Lesthaeghe (2020), besides the regularities predicted by ideational and socioeconomic factors as captured by the SDT and POD frameworks, the “Built-in Ethno-Historical Patterns” (EHT) should be highlighted to reflect how contextualized specificities in ideational and socioeconomic factors unfold differently across the world. Specifically, to Chinese internal migrants, on the one hand, they face unique socioeconomic

realities driven by a combination of life instabilities and financial pressures in their migrant lives and meantime the persistent and gendered norms to fulfill wealth accumulation for marriage. Thus, they may be constrained in their choices and pushed to cohabit as a sub-optimal option and “trial marriage”. On the other hand, cohabitation may also reflect a newly gained autonomy in migrants’ private lives, attributable to the cosmopolitan and liberal mindsets toward nonconventional family behaviors such as cohabitation in the receiving communities.

Thus, patterns shown in this study emphasize the subtle and nuanced interactions and negotiations between socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures and norms, and individual agency. The overarching and state-promoted modernization processes in China have profoundly shaped and reshaped individuals’ family lives. Yet, competitive, consumerist, and expensive urban lifestyles and the lingering family norms limit such progresses. In coping with such pressures, migrants incorporate fluidity in their family options to balance between socioeconomic and cultural realities, modernity and traditions. Family and private choices can hardly be characterized by a definitive conceptual divide. Instead, personal motives related to economic capabilities, ideology, and competition for power are profoundly driving marital and related private choices.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Analytical Samples

	Women		Men	
	<i>Mean/%</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>Mean/%</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
ever cohabited	6.31		8.66	
<i>Independent Variable: Migration Status</i>				
urban non-migrant	17.58		16.53	
urban migrant	4.32		3.08	
rural non-migrant (reference)	60.69		59.75	
rural migrant	17.41		20.64	
<i>Independent Variable: Control Variables</i>				
Education				
junior high or less (reference)	60.39		63.83	
senior high	19.31		18.24	
associate college or above	20.30		17.93	
age	35.31	8.42	36.12	8.40
minority (ref.=no)	7.07		8.31	
atheist (ref.=no)	88.51		90.21	
currently married (ref.=no)	83.79		82.37	
currently migrating (ref.=no)	11.91		8.69	
current urban hukou (ref.=no)	39.33		35.26	
parental SES (average parental schooling)	6.45	2.81	6.15	2.70
Personal annual income	16371.8	22640.0	25246.3	55674.3
physical attractiveness (1-7)	5.61	0.98	5.52	1.02
mandarin (0-7)	3.80	2.49	3.73	2.44
Total	4,380		5,887	

Note: China Family Panel Studies 2012. All statistics are weighted to be nationally representative.

Table 2. Cohabitation by Migration Status

Migration Status	% Ever Cohabited	
	Women	Men
urban non-migrant	4.98	6.94
urban migrant	11.61	12.88
rural non-migrant	4.53	6.66
rural migrant	12.57	15.17
Total	4,380	5,887

Note: China Family Panel Studies 2012. All statistics are weighted to be nationally representative.

Table 3. Sample Size of the Qualitative Study (n=127)

Educational Background	Migrant		Non-migrant	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
college or above	16 (10)	13 (10)	11 (5)	7 (5)
senior high school or associate	11 (10)	18 (10)	13 (5)	7 (5)
junior high school or below	10 (10)	10 (10)	5 (5)	6 (5)

Note: Numbers in the parentheses are the originally planned sample sizes for the respective educational groups.

Table 4. Logistic Models Predicting Whether Ever Cohabited (in odds ratios)

Independent Variables	Ever Cohabited (ref.=no)			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Migration Status (ref.=rural non-migrant)				
urban non-migrant	0.967 (0.343)	1.085 (0.302)	0.985 (0.350)	1.084 (0.302)
urban migrant	2.495 [†] (1.193)	2.180 [†] (0.953)	2.708* (1.266)	2.256 [†] (0.987)
rural migrant	3.153*** (0.892)	2.445*** (0.445)	----	----
rural migrant, 5 years or less	----	----	2.846*** (0.879)	2.097*** (0.453)
rural migrant, more than 5 years	----	----	4.013*** (1.453)	2.984*** (0.695)
Education (ref.=junior high or less)				
senior high	1.024 (0.263)	0.925 (0.167)	1.015 (0.260)	0.926 (0.167)
associate college or above	0.475* (0.180)	0.870 (0.198)	0.468* (0.177)	0.880 (0.200)
age	0.895*** (0.019)	0.875*** (0.011)	0.893*** (0.020)	0.874*** (0.011)
minority (ref.=no)	0.881 (0.322)	0.885 (0.219)	0.868 (0.320)	0.904 (0.224)
atheist (ref.=no)	0.566* (0.159)	0.760 (0.161)	0.560* (0.158)	0.764 (0.161)
currently married (ref.=no)	6.445*** (3.242)	10.709*** (2.996)	6.430*** (3.230)	10.286*** (2.902)
currently migrating (ref.=no)	0.650 (0.194)	0.791 (0.193)	0.582 [†] (0.188)	0.696 (0.183)
current urban hukou (ref.=no)	1.552 (0.440)	1.054 (0.221)	1.528 (0.433)	1.055 (0.222)
parental SES (average parental schooling)	1.060 (0.058)	0.990 (0.031)	1.060 (0.058)	0.988 (0.031)
ln(annual income)	1.023 (0.016)	0.998 (0.011)	1.024 (0.016)	0.999 (0.011)
physical attractiveness (1-7)	1.023 (0.102)	1.150* (0.078)	1.019 (0.101)	1.152* (0.078)
mandarin (0-7)	1.036 (0.042)	1.061* (0.031)	1.036 (0.042)	1.060* (0.031)
Intercept	0.275 (0.243)	0.427 (0.266)	0.296 (0.261)	0.462 (0.288)
Chi-squared	107.23	206.46	106.35	206.74
Number of parameters	15	15	16	16
N	4,380	5,887	4,380	5,887

Note: China Family Panel Studies 2012. [†]p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. All statistics are weighted to be nationally representative and are based on two-tailed tests. SES = socioeconomic status.

Table 5. Logistic Models Predicting Whether Ever Cohabited (in odds ratios), **including dummy variables of province of current residence**

Independent Variables	Ever Cohabited (ref.=no)			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Migration Status (ref=.rural non-migrant)				
urban non-migrant	1.003 (0.377)	0.926 (0.273)	1.020 (0.385)	0.922 (0.272)
urban migrant	2.075 (1.033)	1.684 (0.765)	2.253† (1.112)	1.747 (0.791)
rural migrant	3.098*** (0.913)	2.344*** (0.437)	----	----
rural migrant, 5 years or less	----	----	2.751** (0.900)	1.993** (0.443)
rural migrant, more than 5 years	----	----	4.008*** (1.396)	2.874*** (0.680)
Chi-squared	211.96	284.92	211.13	287.93
Number of parameters	39	38	40	39
<i>N</i>	4,379	5,786	4,379	5,786

Notes: China Family Panel Studies 2012. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. All statistics are weighted to be nationally representative. Coefficients on control variables and dummy variables of provinces of current residence are not shown.

Table 6. Propensity Score Estimation of Migration Effects

Outcome	Matching Method	Rural Origin		Urban Origin	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Cohabitation	Nearest Neighbor	0.034 *** (0.010)	0.013 † (0.009)	0.050 *** (0.018)	0.027 † (0.020)
	Stratification	0.020 *** (0.006)	0.013 † (0.008)	0.056 *** (0.009)	0.023 * (0.011)

Note: China Family Panel Studies 2012. The coefficients are effects of migration in linear probabilities respectively for rural- and urban-origin respondents, estimated using propensity score methods predicted by age, education, minority status, parental education, physical appearance, mental health, and province of birth. Numbers in the parentheses are bootstrapped standard errors. †p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.