

Female Labor Migrants to Shanghai:  
Temporary “Floaters” or Potential Settlers?

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# Female Labor Migrants to Shanghai: Temporary “Floaters” or Potential Settlers?

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## Introduction

China is experiencing the largest labor migration in history, caused by economic reforms in the 1980s that increased the demand for labor in urban areas and the supply of labor from agriculture, and permitted by a reduction in the effectiveness and enforcement of controls against migration during the same period. For the most part, this labor mobility is seen as a necessary and even desirable aspect of economic modernization, but labor migration from rural areas to the cities, estimated at 45 million (Ministry of Labor, 1997), is increasingly a source of concern. This is especially true in large cities like Shanghai, where the non-registered or “floating” population is more than 3 million, the equivalent of one migrant for every four residents. These migrants are viewed much as are guest workers in other countries – their labor is desired but their presence is not – and with few exceptions they are forbidden permanent residency.

In this regard, the profile of the average rural laborer migrating to the large cities is somewhat reassuring: like circular migrants in other parts of the world, the majority are young males who leave their families in rural areas and who stay in their destinations for less than a year (Mallee, 1996). In Shanghai, the stereotypical male migrant is a worker at one of the city’s thousands of construction sites who works long hours, lives in a makeshift shed located on the site, and returns to his rural household when the job is done. Female migrants have received much less attention, but the stereotype for those working in the dynamic coastal zones is of a young unmarried factory worker who lives in a dormitory and returns to her village to marry and bear children (Chen, 1996). These stereotypes give the impression that migration to the large cities of China can be managed (through residency and work permits as well as better information on job availability) to conform to the rapidly changing needs of China’s economy, and that the permanent settlement of migrants and their families in the large cities of China is not occurring.

The question of settlement can only be resolved *post hoc*, after a migrant has established a variety of ties with the destination that make it unlikely that she will return to her origin. The question that will be addressed here is considerably more modest, and

concerns the creation of an environment in which settlement *could* occur based upon the characteristics of the migrant and her position in the city.

As the syntax above indicates, the focus of this paper is on women. The first reason for this focus is that women have been “significantly under-represented in the literature on China’s rural-urban migration,” with their characteristics merged with those of males to form a composite, mostly male, migrant population (Davis, 1999: 22). That migration in developing countries is a gendered process, determined not only by socially-defined roles for men and women that configure household strategies of production and reproduction in origin areas, but also by segmented labor markets in destination areas (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992), has only recently begun to be incorporated into the literature on Chinese migration (Ngai, 1999). Consequently, female labor migrants in China often behave differently than their male counterparts: not only are their occupations different (Davin, 1996), but they typically (with exceptions of long-distance migration to destinations like Guangdong (Fan, 1999)) migrate for shorter distances (Yang, 1996) and stay longer (Mallee, 1996). Moreover, by potentially “breaking through the limitations put upon them by men, tradition, and the state,” their experience as migrants is likely to alter their position in society more than males (Davis, 1999: 38). This paper presents data on a large and representative sample of female migrants in Shanghai, China’s largest city, and thus significantly advances our knowledge of rural women migrants in urban areas of China.

The second reason for the focus on women is that they are the basis of migrant families, and that settlement is usually a family process. Male migrants frequently leave their wives at home to take care of children and to farm (Mallee, 1996), while married female migrants in the large cities of China often accompany their husbands. A 1994 survey of 400 married women migrants in Beijing found that 84 percent migrated with their husbands or other family members (Hoy, 1996). A survey of rural migrants working in urban enterprises in Beijing, Wuhan, Suzhou and Shenzhen found one third of the women were accompanied a spouse, and that the longer a migrant stayed in the city, the greater the probability that he or she would want to stay indefinitely (Knight, Song and Jia, 1999).

This paper will examine the migration of women to China’s largest city, Shanghai, based upon data collected in 1993 on 54,372 individuals in the Fifth Sampling Survey of the Floating Population of Shanghai. The characteristics of these women will be explored, as well as factors determining their duration of stay in Shanghai, with the aim of developing a more complete picture of female labor migration to the large cities of China. The data both confirms the existence of the stereotypical young unmarried female factory worker who returns to her village, and suggests that there are many women who do not fit this

stereotype, who are working with their husbands in a variety of occupations, who have brought their children with them, and who are staying longer in the city. These women and their families may be the vanguard in a transition from temporary labor migration to settlement in China's large cities.

### **Labor migration to Shanghai**

Shanghai is China's largest city, one of the three centrally-administered cities that stand at the top of the pyramidal hierarchy that defines the structure of rural-urban relations in China (Cheng and Selden, 1994; Chan, 1994). China's "premier industrial metropolis" has a city core 300 km<sup>2</sup> with 8.9 million residents out of a municipal total of 6,341 km<sup>2</sup> and 13 million residents (Yusuf and Wu, 1997). Per capita income of all urban households in Shanghai was 4,297 yuan in 1993 (8.7 yuan = \$1), compared to a national average of 2,577 yuan for urban households and 922 yuan for rural households (State Statistical Bureau, 1994). Among China's cities, it is first in investment, output, retail sales, imports and exports, financial revenue, and many other measures. With the development of the multi-billion dollar Pudong area across the Huangpu River from the city center, Shanghai is destined to become the commercial and industrial hub of China. During the first half of the 1990s, multinational corporations rushed into the region, with contracted foreign investment growing from \$3.5 billion in 1992 to \$10 billion in 1994 (Vasuki, 1995). An article in *The Wall Street Journal* exclaimed "What's going on in Shanghai, and up and down the China coast, might be the biggest construction project the planet has ever seen" (Sterba, 1993).

### FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The physical labor entailed in transforming Shanghai from the stately but moribund queen of the China coast to a modern metropolis is mainly done by migrants, whether in construction, manufacturing, sanitation, vending or transport. Not only do Shanghai's resident youth shun this "bitter, dirty, arduous, and low prestige work" (Solinger, 1995: 129), but there are too few of them to accomplish the task. Shanghai's registered population remained constant from the end of the 1950s until the reform period began in the late 1970s, and grew slowly from that point on (State Statistical Bureau, 1994). Low fertility and an aging population caused natural increase to stagnate and then turn negative in the early 1990s, while net official migration from 1980 through 1988, checked by highly restrictive regulations governing residence, averaged just over 50,000 persons per year (Gui and Liu, 1992). The result is the unusually vertical age distribution for Shanghai's registered permanent

population, shown in Figure 1. The age distribution of the migrant population, shown in Figure 2, is highly complementary to the one above, providing the young workers to fill the jobs left vacant by Shanghai's aging labor force.

### **Description of the data**

The Fifth Sampling Survey of the Floating Population of Shanghai was conducted by the Shanghai Bureau of Public Security and the Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, with survey design by the Population Institutes of Fudan University and East China Normal University and the Institute of Population and Development Research of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. It was administered to approximately 2 percent of Shanghai's floating population, defined as those people (with the exception of daily commuters) in Shanghai on December 10, 1993 who were not registered as permanent residents. The entire municipality, which includes 14 urban districts and 6 rural counties, was used as the area of reference; by the definition that yielded 26.2 percent of China's of population as urban in the 1990 census, just over two-thirds of the population of the municipality was urban in 1993 (Yao and Yin, 1994).

Residences of the floating population were divided into five types: (1) family and collective households; (2) inns and hotels; (3) boats; (4) enterprises and institutes; (5) free markets, railway and bus stations, and other places that migrants and transients congregate temporarily. A stratified cluster sample was used for migrants living in households: from each of six strata (defined according to the locale's position in the urban hierarchy, from central subdistrict to rural village), 2 percent of the neighborhood and village committees were randomly sampled, yielding a total sample size of 259,138 persons. Similar care was taken to derive the samples from other types of residences: an enumeration of the floating population in hotels, enterprises, marketplaces and other sites was conducted and a sample of approximately 2 percent drawn, and 2 percent of the boats were sampled. This methodology yielded a sample of 54,372 migrants, and resulted in an estimate of 2,810,000 ( $54,372 \div .02$ , adjusted for undercount) as the size of Shanghai's floating population as of this date.

Each migrant was asked his or her primary reason for migration: 41,084 (75.6 percent) chose "economic"; 12,022 (22.1 percent) chose "social"; and the remainder, 1,266 migrants, came for study, training, or to attend a meeting. Under each of these three motives, migrants further selected from among six to nine categories. Previous analysis of this data lumped together all economic migrants, which included occupations as diverse as farming and stock market trading (Wang, *et al.*, 1995). This study re-categorizes the sample population into "rural labor migrants," "social migrants" and "other migrants."

“Rural labor migrants” were the 32,967 economic migrants who held an agricultural *hukou* (household registration)<sup>1</sup>, whose main occupation prior to migration was in agriculture, and who came to Shanghai to engage in manual labor, construction, handicrafts, housekeeping, commerce or farming, rather than for a job assignment. The rationale for excluding the 7 percent of economic migrants with an agricultural *hukou* but whose previous occupation was not farming from the category of rural labor migrants is that holding an agricultural *hukou* no longer says much about one’s occupation or whether he or she is from an urban or rural locale. By this procedure, there are undoubtedly omitted from the category of rural labor migrants some people who should logically belong within it: for instance, there were 807 migrants with an agricultural *hukou* whose previous job was in manufacturing, some of whom might have been workers in small-scale village enterprises who exhibit few differences from migrant neighbors whose main occupation was farming. However, it is felt that the gain in explanatory power through segregation of this homogeneous group of migrants will more than compensate for the exclusion of some portion of the total number of economic migrants who might have come under similar circumstances. Moreover, the occupational composition of migrants prior to their arrival in Shanghai has increasingly converged towards agriculture, from just one-fourth of the total floating population in 1985 to over two-thirds in 1993 (Wang *et al.*, 1995).

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The remaining migrants were divided into two categories, “social” and “other.” The social category is the same as in the questionnaire, and includes those 12,022 sampled individuals who came to Shanghai to visit family and friends, for reasons related to marriage, for retirement, tourism, health care, or who were in transit. Of the remaining 9,383 migrants who were classified as “other,” two-thirds held a non-agricultural *hukou*, two-thirds listed their previous position as a teacher, student, professional, clerical, or a related occupation, and about one-third were living in a hotel. Further analysis shows that more than half were professionals or business people on a short-term assignment in Shanghai. Since the focus of this paper is on rural labor migrants, neither this heterogeneous group nor the social migrants are considered in the analysis that follows. Table 1 compares these three categories of migrants on most of the basic variables for which data were collected.

## **Age and marital status of female rural labor migrants**

Like temporary labor migrants in most parts of the world, and consistent with the stereotype, Chinese rural labor migrants were predominantly younger males: Table 1 shows that three-fourths were from 18 to 34 years old, and that almost three-fourths were men. Figure 2 reveals that female rural labor migrants were more concentrated than men in younger age cohorts: there were as many women as men ages 15 to 19, and many more women ages 20 to 24 than in any other cohort, while the ages of men were evenly distributed throughout their twenties. Table 2, which provides a detailed description of the characteristics of rural labor migrants to Shanghai by gender, shows that almost half of the female labor migrants were from 18 to 24 years old, while less than a third of the male migrants fell in this age bracket.

### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 also shows that more women than men were single. This is directly related to women's younger ages: within the 18-24 age group 85 percent of both men and women were single, while 80 percent of the men and 87 percent of the women ages 25 to 34 were married. Figure 3 shows that the number of single female labor migrants approximately halved every year after the age of 21, until by the age of 30 there were fewer than 10 single women. The number of married female labor migrants rose over the same range of ages, but more slowly, so that by the age of 30 the total number of women migrants was less than half its peak. In contrast, Figure 4 shows the total number of male labor migrants did not fall as the proportion married rose. Thus it appears that many women stopped migrating after marriage, while marital status was not as important a factor as age for male labor migrants.

### FIGURES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE

This observation that is supported by a number of other studies in China. A nationwide survey found that the percentage of women in non-farm work of all types, including that involving migration, fell from 30 percent to 19 percent when they married (Parish, Zhe and Li, 1995). Marital status did not affect the probability of male migration in Sichuan, but that it reduced the probability of female migration independent of the number of her children (Zhao, 1999). Marriage was the most powerful predictor of female labor migration in Hubei province (Yang and Guo, 1999). Mallee (1996: 117), based upon a review of rural surveys, concludes "women tend to remain in the village after marriage, while for men marital status makes less of a difference in migration decision making."

Why the significant decline in female labor migration with age and marriage? Important factors include not only women's greater familial responsibility, lower educational level, and social and cultural norms that proscribe unmarried women traveling alone (Yang, 1996), but also the fact that young, unmarried women are preferred by the factories and workshops that employ them because they are cheaper. Solinger (1995) says, "textile factory managers openly acknowledge the savings they can garner by not having to provide day care centers, paid pregnancy leave, nursing allowances, or housing for workers' families when they hire young single peasant women from the countryside and house ten to twenty in a room on bunk beds. In fact, being single is a precondition for peasant women to work in these firms; there was never any such rule for urban women." The authors of the book based upon the 1993 survey concur: "in the textile industry, using young and skillful women is the best choice for enterprises, and because the use value of these women decreases with their age, enterprises may replace them with younger workers" (Wang *et al.*, 1995).

Figure 3 also shows that the vast majority of female labor migrants over the age of 25 were married. By the age of 29 the proportion of female rural labor migrants who were married in the sample – 98 percent – exactly matches the proportion of rural women across China who were married by that age (Jacka, 1997).

The significant question for our purposes is whether these married female labor migrants were on their own or with their husbands, for in the former case their migration was probably temporary, while in the latter they *may* establish permanent residence with their families in Shanghai. While the survey did not directly address this question, data concerning these women's occupations, type of employer and place of residence indicate that many married female labor migrants were in situations in which they could easily be with their spouses. The next section will address this question. The following section will address the issue of the duration of stay of female rural labor migrants, and the last section the question of whether those women migrants who were classified as "social" migrants might not actually be the spouses of male rural labor migrants, increasing further the proportion of rural laborers who were migrating as couples.

### **Occupation and sector of employment of female rural labor migrants**

The data in Table 2 show that female rural labor migrants in Shanghai worked mainly in three types of jobs: manual labor (48.3 percent), which often meant a job in a factory; commerce (18.6 percent), which included street peddlers, small vendors and service personnel; and handicrafts (16.3 percent), which encompassed low-technology production

processes such as weaving straw mats, knitting sweaters or painting lacquerware.<sup>2</sup> Male migrants, in contrast, worked less in handicrafts and much more in construction.

Table 3 further disaggregates the employment of female migrants by the sector in which they were employed: state (which includes government agencies and institutes), collective, private, foreign joint venture, township and village enterprises (TVEs), and self employed. Three out of five female rural labor migrants were either self employed or working for TVEs.

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The largest single occupational/sectoral grouping of female migrants was composed of manual laborers working in TVEs. These were the laborers in factories that attract millions of young women to China's coastal cities, a process that has received considerable attention in the foreign press (Chen 1996; Goldstein and Huus, 1994). Less than a third of these workers were married, far less than the average for migrant women. The reason is not only that they were somewhat younger (56 percent were from 18 to 24 versus 48 percent for the overall sample), but that 55 percent were housed in dormitories, where cohabitation with their spouses was unlikely. Only one female TVE laborer in five was both married and living in a residence (which, since most were unrelated to the household head, means they were renting space from a permanent resident of Shanghai), and was thus able to establish their own residence and settle in the city.

The second largest occupational/sectoral grouping is composed of self-employed women working in commerce. In contrast to TVE workers, four out of five of these women were married. Lee (1998: 830) notes that most women migrants to Shenzhen working in service and commerce were married; unmarried young women were proscribed from these jobs because "conservative village people associated service jobs in public areas with rendering sexual services to men." Of those who were married, nine out of ten lived in the household of a permanent resident, and thus could easily have been living with their husbands. Moreover, the nature of the work they were doing, such as vending in street markets, means that they could have been working with them as well.

#### TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

These two occupation/sectoral groupings illustrate the connections that exist between the marital status of female rural labor migrants and characteristics such as their age,

occupation, sector, and residence. These relationships are examined more directly in the logistic regression shown in Table 4, with the odds ratios reflecting the influence of each of the independent variables upon the probability of being married. As noted above, age is an important and significant variable – each year almost doubles the probability of being married. Residence in a dormitory is also highly significant and more than halves the probability of marriage. The sector of employment is insignificant in most cases, but being employed in an occupation where it is possible to work together with one’s spouse, such as handicrafts, commerce or farming, greatly increases the probability of marriage for female rural labor migrants. Those who were illiterate were more likely to be married, while those educated above the normal level of junior middle school were less likely. These data paint a rather consistent picture of married female labor migrants as older, less educated or even illiterate, and employed in an occupation where they could be working with their husbands.

### **Duration of stay of female rural labor migrants**

Another clue to the potential for migrant settlement is their duration of stay in Shanghai. A distinguishing feature of labor migration in China and elsewhere is that it is predominantly circular, not permanent: migrants usually return regularly to their villages, retaining their ties to the land as part of a strategy of spatial and sectoral diversification of household labor (Roberts, 1997). Chinese labor migrants usually time their return home during the Spring Festival in order to enjoy the holiday with family and maintain contact with other village-based migrants, thereby facilitating success in future migrations. The data on duration of stay are consistent with an annual return home during the Spring Festival: as of the survey date shortly before the Spring Festival, Table 2 shows that more rural labor migrants had been in Shanghai between six and twelve months than any other length of time, and that only one-fourth had stayed more than a year.

### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Duration data must be used with caution: an origin survey will miss migrants who have yet to return home, while a destination survey will miss those migrants who have already returned, and will only record how long members of the sample population have stayed by the date of the survey, thus censoring their duration. As long as the inflow increases annually, a distribution of duration of stay such as that shown in Table 2 could result even if no migrants ever left. However, in that case a survey taken at an earlier date would show fewer migrants with long durations of stay. Were the proportions of migrants in

each duration “cohort” (the concept is analogous to that of an age cohort) to remain the same between two surveys, we could plausibly assume stability over time in the distribution of migrants’ duration of stay. Table 5 shows that durations of stay for Shanghai’s floating population were stable between 1988 and 1993, with 69 percent staying less than one year in 1988 versus 71 percent in 1993. This stability allows us to predict that the majority of short stayers in 1993 will not become long stayers, and thus to make inferences concerning the differences between these two groups.

Table 6 presents the results of a logistic regression that relates whether a migrant to Shanghai has stayed in the city for more than one year to his or her demographic and occupational characteristics. By including some migrants who will eventually stay more than a year in the group of those who have stayed less time, the true difference between these groups is understated: if a particular characteristic were to be shown to significantly influence the probability of staying more than a year in Shanghai, the actual impact of this variable on duration would be greater than the estimated coefficient. Therefore, the magnitude and significance of the coefficients are conservatively biased downward.

#### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Table 6 shows that the odds of both female and male rural labor migrants staying in Shanghai more than a year are increased significantly by being older, married,<sup>3</sup> possessing a certificate of temporary residence, and related to the household head where they reside. The effect of province of origin is also similar for men and women: the probability of rural labor migrants staying more than a year is significantly greater when they were from the neighboring provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui. Proximity, which should facilitate more frequent trips home and terminate a duration spell, appears to have increased length of stay in Shanghai. This seemingly counterintuitive result makes sense when put in the context of migrant networks – the largest numbers of migrants come from these provinces, and the networks that they form could facilitate longer stays in Shanghai. That the probability of staying more than a year is also significantly greater for migrants from non-neighboring Sichuan province lends support to this hypothesis, for after the three provinces named above, Sichuan contributes the largest number of migrants to Shanghai.

What is particularly interesting for the purpose of examining the question of whether these married female labor migrants were accompanying their spouses is that both the magnitude and the significance of the coefficients on occupation and sector are very similar for men and married women, while they are very different for married and single women. For

instance, both married women and men who worked in manual labor or commerce were more than twice as likely as those in the reference sector to have stayed over a year, while the coefficient is not significant for single female migrants. Single women in handicrafts were far less likely to stay a year, while married women and men were more likely to do so. Similarly, only for men and married women did being self employed or working in a TVE significantly increase the probability of staying more than a year. Thus, with few exceptions, the influence of occupation and sector on the duration of stay of married female labor migrants more closely matches their influence on male labor migrants than it does their influence on single women. This provides another indication that married female labor migrants were not coming alone, but were accompanying and working with their migrant husbands.

The analysis in this section has revealed that, of the 32,967 rural labor migrants in the 1993 floating population of Shanghai 28 percent, or 9,124, were women. Of these women 51 percent, or 4,659, were married. If all of these married women were migrating with spouses, then close to one-third of the 15,020 married male rural labor migrants would have been accompanied by their wives. Without considering labor migrants who might be married to those classified as “social migrants,” a maximum of 9,318 ( $4,659 \times 2$ ) of the 32,967 rural labor migrants, or 28 percent, could have been migrating as couples.

### **Rural labor migrants classified as “social” migrants**

Migrants who stated their primary reason for coming to Shanghai was “social” comprised 22.1 percent of the total sample. The main reasons these migrants gave for coming were to visit friends and relatives (74 percent), for health care (7 percent) and for reasons related to marriage – either to marry or to join their spouse (6 percent).<sup>4</sup> The proportion of the total floating population that were social migrants declined steadily over the decade preceding the survey, from 83 percent in 1984 to 37 percent in 1988 to 22 percent in 1993 (Wang *et al.*, 1995). The argument made in this section is that many of these social migrants were probably members of households of male rural labor migrants.

Table 1 shows that the characteristics of social migrants were quite distinct from those exhibited by rural labor migrants. There were more women than men, and only about one-fourth of the total were between the ages of 18 and 34, the prime ages for labor migration. Examination of the underlying data show that many were children, and those who were not were better educated than labor migrants: 26 percent of the social migrants between the ages of 15 and 34 had at least a high school education, compared to only 12 percent of rural labor migrants. Nearly half of the social migrants held a non-agricultural household registration, and

they had been in Shanghai longer than have the rural labor migrants. But apart from these differences and their common motive of “visiting” people in Shanghai, we really know very little about them. They are extremely diverse, and there are no occupational descriptions, such as exist for construction or factory labor, to tell us what they did all day.

What we do know is that more than three-fourths of these social migrants lived in the household of a permanent resident, and that more than half of these were related to the resident head of this household. The following analysis separates those migrants related to the resident household head from those who were not, in order to examine the hypothesis that the many women and children in latter group were in fact members of the households of male labor migrants.

Figure 5 presents a population pyramid of the 5,223 social migrants who were related to the resident head of the household with whom they lived. It shows that the numbers were approximately equal across age cohorts, with three exceptions. The first was children in their school-age years, of whom 77 percent were part of the immediate family (spouses, parents or children) of the resident head of household. Shanghai’s boom has meant the destruction of many central-city neighborhoods, forcing residents to relocate in the suburbs. If they do not change their household registration to their new neighborhood, they are classified as part of the floating population. In Guangzhou, “many residents settled in new housing ... have declined to shift their registration because they want their children to be eligible to attend superior schools in their former neighborhoods” (Ikels, 1996: 27). The same motivation could have been acting in Shanghai, an hypothesis supported by the fact that over half of the children in the immediate family of the household head were from another district of the municipality of Shanghai.

#### FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

The second relatively large group of migrants related to the resident household head was composed of young women: two-thirds of the migrants between the ages of 15 and 34, and even more of those in their twenties, were women. Two-thirds of these young women were part of the resident’s immediate family (spouse, children, or parents), and three-fourths of these were married. Thus it is likely that these married women were the wives of residents. Of the one-third of the related young women who were not members of the immediate families of residents, more than half were married; most of these were probably married to sons of the household head.

Several other characteristics of this group of women ages 15 to 34 stand out: more were from Shanghai than from anywhere else, the majority held a non-agricultural *hukou*, and their durations of stay were comparatively long, with almost two-thirds having been in the city for more than a year and 29 percent over three years. Of those 25 years old or more, the most common reason given for being outside their normal place of registration was marriage. Last, despite their long durations in Shanghai, more than half had not registered their change in residence. All of these facts point in one direction – that many of these women were the wives of residents who had been constrained by China’s *hukou* system from changing their permanent residence to that of their husbands.

The last exception to the relatively vertical age pyramid of social migrants related to the resident household head is the large cohort of the elderly. As might be expected, the most common reason given for their migration (other than to visit) was retirement, and almost one-fourth were widowed. Most of these people were probably visiting or living with their children. Like the young women above, the majority were from Shanghai.

The above analysis points out that the classification of persons related to the resident household head where they reside as “social migrants” is only half right: most were not migrants at all, in the conventional sense of having moved some distance from their homes, but at least they were outside their place of official residence for a “social” reason – to be with their families – and do not belong in the group of rural labor migrants that is the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

However, separating these related migrants from the category of social migrants who were *not* related to the resident household head where they lived, and who were probably renting accommodations from this individual, reveals more about the latter group than the former. Figure 6 shows that these unrelated migrants, 6,799 individuals comprising 57 percent of all social migrants, mainly fall in two categories – young women and very young children. The hypothesis advanced here is that many “social” migrants in these two groups were in fact members of the households of rural labor migrants: if children, they were accompanying their working parent(s); if young women, their husbands.

#### FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

This hypothesis is supported by comparison of the characteristics of these two populations with the characteristics of related migrants and of rural labor migrants. One third of the large cohort of young children unrelated to the household head lived in a dormitory, work site, or other type of residence that is typically connected to the employment of rural

laborers. These children were overwhelmingly from the major labor-exporting provinces – Anhui (34 percent), Jiangsu (26 percent) and Zhejiang (17 percent) – and only 4 percent came from Shanghai. These proportions closely resemble the origin provinces of female rural labor migrants shown in Table 2, rather than the origin provinces of children of the same ages who were related to the household head, of whom 44 percent were from Shanghai and only 6 percent from Anhui. Their durations of stay in Shanghai parallel the durations of stay of female labor migrants in Table 2: 50 percent had stayed less than six months, 19 percent from six months to one year, 22 percent for one to three years, and 9 percent over three years. These facts point in one direction – that these were children of rural labor migrants.

The comparison of the large cohorts of unrelated female “social” migrants ages 20 to 34 with female rural labor migrants of the same age shows many similarities. They had almost identical levels of education: 10 percent were illiterate, 34 percent had graduated from primary school and 45 percent from middle school, compared to 9 percent, 35 percent and 52 percent for female rural labor migrants. The previous occupation of rural labor migrants was by definition agriculture, compared to 88 percent for these female social migrants who were unrelated to the household head and only 37 percent for those related to the household head. The rank ordering of their origin provinces was Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Sichuan, compared to Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan and Jiangxi for young female labor migrants. In contrast, over one-third of female social migrants of the same age who were related to the household head were from Shanghai.

The differences between these two groups are equally illuminating: 90 percent of the young female social migrants were married, compared to only 51 percent of the young female labor migrants. The duration of stay of female social migrants was comparatively short, with 71 percent having been in Shanghai for less than six months and only 15 percent over one year, more closely resembling the duration of stay of male than of female labor migrants. These data support the hypothesis that the majority of these young female “social” migrants were actually the spouses of male labor migrants. We cannot know their precise purpose for accompanying their husbands (they overwhelmingly said they had come “to visit”), nor do the data permit matching them with their husbands and/or children to form complete migrant households. We can, however, speculate that many may have come to work, especially in the same or complementary occupations as their husbands (vending, food preparation at construction sites, etc.) Others, perhaps lacking an adequate support system for the maintenance of themselves and their children at home, may have been accompanying their working migrant husbands and caring for their children.

Whatever their position, if our hypothesis is correct and these large cohorts of young women and very young children were part of the households of economic migrants, then their classification as “social migrants” is inappropriate for most purposes. Their reason for coming was economic, if perhaps once removed, and (except for the young children, who have important implications for educational policy) their use of infrastructure and administrative services, such as transportation or systems of labor allocation, would be more similar to that of labor migrants. Were the 4,020 individuals in these two cohorts – children less than 10 and women ages 20-34 – all members of the households of rural labor migrants, the relative proportion of the floating population in rural labor migrant households would rise from 60 to 68 percent.

In the previous section, the number of married female labor migrants was matched to married male labor migrants, bringing the potential number of rural labor migrants who could have been migrating as couples to 9,318 out of a total of 32,967 rural labor migrants. If the 1,279 young married women who were classified as “social migrants” were in fact the spouses of rural labor migrants, another 2,558 ( $1,279 \times 2$ ) migrants could be classified as rural laborers migrating as couples, bringing the total to 11,876 ( $9,318 + 2,558$ ) out of a total of 34,246 ( $32,967 + 1,279$ ) rural labor migrants and their spouses. By this crude estimate, 35 percent of rural labor migrants could have been migrating as couples, bringing with them a significant number of children less than 10 years old.

This number is within the range of smaller sample surveys that directly address the question: a 1995 Shanghai survey concentrating on the first of the five residence types covered in this survey found that one-fifth of the migrants with agricultural household registration came with their families (Wang and Zuo, 1996). A summary of a 1997 survey of migrant workers in Shanghai reported that over one-fourth have moved with their families (Fudan University, 1997). A 1996 survey of four urban areas, Beijing, Wuhan, Suzhou and Shenzhen, found one-third of the migrant workers in those cities were accompanied by a spouse (Knight, Song, and Jia, 1999). While these studies directly address the question that is here supported only indirectly, the contribution of this paper is to base this conclusion on a much larger and more representative data set, while at the same time situating this family migration within the gendered structure of migration to Shanghai, including job opportunities, living arrangements, and the demographic characteristics of migrants.

## **Discussion**

Women comprise a significant proportion of rural labor migrants in the large cities of China, but what we know about them is often anecdotal and focuses upon the most visible

segment of this population – young, unmarried factory workers. This paper, based upon a carefully designed survey that included 18,030 female migrants to Shanghai, widens this focus to comprise the variety of situations in which women migrants are living and working in the city.

Their demographic and employment characteristics highlight not one, but two broad categories, with marriage the distinguishing characteristic between them. Of those members of the floating population that were classified as rural labor migrants because they held an agricultural *hukou* and had previously worked in agriculture, 28 percent were women, and half of these were married. The vast majority of unmarried women were very young; the proportion married rose rapidly after the age of 20, until by the age of 25 four out of five were married.

Married female migrants were considerably different from their single sisters: they had lower levels of education or were illiterate, and were employed in occupations such as commerce, handicrafts and farming where they could be working with their husbands. The influence of being employed in these occupations upon their duration of stay in Shanghai more closely resembled its influence on male migrants than its influence on single female migrants, indicating that these populations behaved similarly. These findings support the hypothesis that the majority of these married female migrants are migrating and working with their husbands as couples.

Closer analysis of those women classified as “social” migrants rather than labor migrants points in a similar direction. The characteristics of young women ages living in housing where they were not related to an official resident of the city more closely resembled the characteristics of rural labor migrants, and particularly male labor migrants, than they did the characteristics of women who were related to the resident household head. The same was true of unrelated children. Thus it is likely that these women and children are also members of rural labor migrant households, expanding to over one-third the proportion of migrants from rural areas who could be migrating as couples.

While rural labor migrants have been stigmatized by the residents of large cities, these residents have also been comforted by the stereotypes of male construction workers and young women working in factories. The assumption is that these migrants will return to their rural villages, the men having left their families at home and the young women ceasing to migrate when they marry. While a majority of rural labor migrants may follow this path, the existence of a significant number of migrant couples and their dependents undermines this assumption. These couples are living and earning their livelihood in Shanghai, and the

potential exists for their eventual settlement. Migrants from neighboring provinces, which have stronger support networks in the city, are already staying longer.

What is the likelihood that settlement will actually occur? The “invisible wall” of China’s system of household registration system (Chan, 1994) “makes permanent family settlement in the cities extremely difficult for rural migrants; indeed, the barriers bear comparison with the barriers to transnational migration elsewhere in the world” (Davin, 1999: 77). These difficulties are particularly pronounced for women: even among professionals, husbands and wives are frequently separated or forced to live without being officially registered because of the difficulty of transferring the wife’s household registration to the husband’s location. Until 1998, the *hukou* status of children followed that of the mother, so that even if a husband were to obtain permanent urban residence, the children could not become legal residents unless the wife could also (Chan and Zhang, 1999). Nevertheless, difficulties of this type have not deterred transnational labor migrants in other settings from eventual settlement (Chavez, 1988).

China’s household registration system has been effective in the past because it denied entitlements to persons who were not official urban residents, the most important of which have been a job, housing, access to food through ration coupons, and education (Cheng and Selden, 1994). Migrants now have an advantage on the first in many occupations: residents no longer are entitled to a job and typically disdain the types of jobs that migrants do, and migrants are often preferred by employers because they work harder and cheaper.<sup>6</sup> Food coupons have been eliminated. This leaves education and housing as the two major barriers preventing permanent family settlement in the cities.

Concerning education, a common solution is for migrants to leave their children at home in care of relatives (Davin, 1996). Care by relatives is actually the norm for rural mothers in China: the Sample Survey on the Status of Women in China found that in 52 percent of rural families the first child is cared for by a grandmother for several years (Jacka, 1997). Nevertheless, the Shanghai survey identified about 3,081 migrant children less than 15 years of age living in a residence where they were unrelated to the household head, or about one child for every two rural labor migrant couples. Over half of these were below school age, but that still leaves a significant number of children to be educated, over 75,000 if these sampled children represent 2 percent of the total.<sup>7</sup>

Like other barriers to migrant settlement, denial of access to education is being eroded, both by the efforts of migrants and some branches of government. Schools have been formed by migrants in Beijing’s Zhejiang Village (Ma and Xiang, 1998), and migrants from Pucheng in Fujian Province have supported a school in Shanghai in cooperation with the city’s

education department (Xinhua News Agency, 1997). In fact, the government's concern about the education of the estimated 2 to 3 million migrant children (Davin, 1999) has led to the initiation of pilot programs in several cities to provide schooling (Qingle and Housen, 1997). It is likely that the interests of migrants and several government agencies will coincide to make education more accessible for the children of migrants (for an excellent discussion of the interests and roles of the various government agencies involved in the administration of migrants, see Solinger (1999)).

The lack of affordable housing is perhaps the most important remaining urban barrier to migrant settlement in the cities. In Shanghai, the per capita living space of migrant renters is 8.2 square meters, one half of that of residents who themselves complain about cramped housing, and for this migrants pay 130 yuan out of a salary that probably does not exceed 600 yuan per month (Wang, 1997). As pressure to control migration to the large cities increases, those who most directly benefit from the presence of these migrants – employers and residents who provide rental housing – have been targeted to bear the burden through increased fees and regulations. Illegal dwellings have been demolished, with public security forces in Beijing conducting three sweeps of migrant housing in 1998 alone (*China Daily*, 1998).

These regulations have been imposed and enforcement tightened precisely because they are the last bulwarks to permanent settlement in the cities. As migrant networks expand and intensify, providing a more secure environment for rural labor migrants to live as families in the cities, they will need to be made even more draconian to prevent settlement. The result, if they also serve to drive this population further underground, will be an even larger number of migrant families living in the cities without access to important social services such as health, education, and family planning.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. Every person in China is registered in a household registration book (*hukou bu*), which defines the family as either an agricultural household (*nongye hukou*) or urban resident household (*chengshi jumin hukou*), with the latter entitled to subsidized housing, social insurance, medical care and, until recently, employment. The division between the two categories is so inflexible that it has been characterized as a “structural cleavage” (Blecher, 1985), with the *hukou* system “the institutional guardian of the deep urban-rural divide that has characterized China since the mid-1950s” (Cheng and Selden, 1994: 667).
2. It is interesting to note that one of the most stereotypical occupations of migrant women, domestic service, employed only a small proportion of the total number of women. Moreover, while the majority of women in domestic service did fit the stereotype of being young and unmarried, their age distribution was distinctly bimodal, and many of the older women classified as “married” were actually widowed, comprising almost 60 percent of the total number of widows in the entire sample of female rural labor migrants.
3. While Table 6 separates married from single female rural labor migrants, a separate logistic regression confirms that married women were 46 percent more likely than single women to stay over a year.
4. A study of household headship patterns and migration shows that many couples were separated by job assignment, and that women who moved to join their husbands cited “marriage” as the reason for their move (Goldstein, Guo and Goldstein, 1997).
5. For a thorough analysis of migrants living in Shanghai households at an earlier stage in the migration process, see Goldstein, Goldstein and Guo (1991).
6. This advantage continues to exist despite the fact that employment availability and registration restrictions for migrants have been tightened in response to growing urban unemployment caused by layoffs in state-owned enterprises (O'Neill, 1998; Regulations, 1996).
7. It is estimated that more than 100,000 of Beijing's more than 2 million labor migrants are school-age children (McGurk, 2000).