

Changing roles of marriage and family status for labor migration? The case of rural China

Background and research questions

It is not new to demographers that China's internal migration has been changing both in a rapid manner and in multiple other aspects. Two themes become increasingly clear from the literature on internal migration in China. First, a cohort replacement among the migrant population has been taking place. Just as with migration in almost all contexts, China's internal migrant population is young, measured by its age composition (Yang & Chan, 2023). Research has shown that compared with older cohorts of migrants, younger cohorts migrated earlier for the first time, such as shortly after finishing their compulsory education (Chen & Fan, 2018; Cheng, 2014). Considering the concurrent delaying trends in age at first marriage and first birth over cohorts (Yu & Xie, 2022), the life course trajectory of experiencing migration, marriage, and childbearing would be changing across the cohorts. Second, couple and family migration has increased significantly (Chan & Ren, 2018; Fan & Li, 2019). Single people have been making up a large share of the migrant population in China. Although married people did migrate for work three decades ago, husbands often migrated alone to support their wives and children in their hometowns. Nowadays, more married couples migrate together, and many of them move with their children.

We use retrospective data from the 2019 wave of the China Household Income Survey and standard event history techniques to study individuals' first labor migration. Given the overall rural-to-urban migration flow in China, this study focuses on rural-origin individuals. One of the aims of this study is to provide an updated descriptive picture of how the timing of first labor migration changes in relation to first marriage and first birth. We compare ages at first marriage, first birth, and first labor migration among men and women born from 1951 to 2000. Second, we use discrete-time logistic models to investigate 1) gender differences: whether the roles of marriage and childbearing for first labor migration differ for men and women, and 2) birth cohort differences: whether the roles of marriage and childbearing for first labor migration differ for men and women from different birth cohorts.

Descriptive results

As shown by Table 1, for men from the 1951-60, 1961-70, and 1971-80 birth cohorts, first labor migration often seemed to have occurred after first marriage and becoming a parent, if at all. The timing of migration events relative to marriage and childbearing had largely reversed. The median age at first labor migration for the 1981-90 cohort was lower than those at first marriage and first birth. The bottom panel shows women's similarly changing life course trajectories over birth cohorts, but also with some nuanced differences. The switch in the timing of first labor migration relative to first marriage and first birth seems to have occurred somewhat later for women than for men. Only in the 1991-2000 birth cohort did a clear pattern for women emerge that migration tended to occur at younger ages than for first marriage and childbearing.

Table 1: Men's and women's ages of 25%, 50%, 75% having experienced first labor migration, first marriage, and first childbearing, by birth cohorts

	Age at first marriage			Age at first birth			Age at first migration			Mean age at the survey
	25%	50%	75%	25%	50%	75%	25%	50%	75%	
Birth cohort										
(men)										
1951-60	23	24	26	24	26	28	—	—	—	63
1961-70	22	23	25	23	24	27	35	—	—	53
1971-80	22	24	26	23	25	28	23	36	—	44
1981-90	23	25	29	24	26	31	20	24	31	33
1991-2000	25	—	—	27	—	—	20	22	26	24

Birth cohort (women)										
1951-60	21	22	24	22	24	26	—	—	—	63
1961-70	20	22	23	21	23	25	—	—	—	53
1971-80	21	22	24	22	23	26	29	—	—	44
1981-90	21	23	25	22	24	27	21	26	—	33
1991-2000	22	26	—	23	—	—	21	23	—	23

Model results

Gender differences

The question central to this study is whether men's and women's decisions to migrate for work for the first time are driven differently by marriage and childbearing dynamics. As shown by Table 2, model comparisons indicate that compared with men's, women's first labor migration is more constrained by their childbearing responsibilities.

Table 2: Discrete-time logistic models of first labor migration (Odds ratios)

	Dependent variable:		
	First labor migration		
	Men (1)	Women (2)	Gender differences (3)
Married (Ref: unmarried)	0.73 (0.64, 0.82)	0.68 (0.57, 0.80)	Prob > $\chi^2(1) = .406$
Number of children aged 0-6	0.87 (0.81, 0.93)	0.77 (0.70, 0.85)	Prob > $\chi^2(1) = .011$
Number of children aged 7-18	0.83 (0.78, 0.88)	0.74 (0.67, 0.81)	Prob > $\chi^2(1) = .009$
Birth cohort: 1961-70 (Ref: 1951-60)	2.68 (2.56, 2.79)	4.43 (4.20, 4.66)	Prob > $\chi^2(4) = .000$
. 1971-80	5.80 (5.68, 5.92)	12.70 (12.47, 12.92)	
. 1981-90	15.23 (15.11, 15.36)	35.12 (34.88, 35.35)	
. 1991-2000	22.73 (22.59, 22.87)	49.81 (49.56, 50.05)	
Age	1.27 (1.25, 1.29)	1.33 (1.29, 1.36)	Prob > $\chi^2(2) = .039$
Age squared	1.00 (1.00, 1.00)	1.00 (1.00, 1.00)	
Education: High school (Ref: up to middle school)	1.07 (1.01, 1.14)	1.26 (1.17, 1.35)	Prob > $\chi^2(2) = .000$
. College	0.85 (0.77, 0.93)	1.15 (1.05, 1.25)	
Number of siblings: 1 (Ref: 0)	1.09 (1.00, 1.18)	1.13 (0.99, 1.26)	Prob > $\chi^2(2) = .129$
. 2 or more	0.98 (0.88, 1.09)	1.13 (0.99, 1.28)	
Birth order: Second child (Ref: first child)	0.99 (0.93, 1.06)	1.01 (0.93, 1.09)	Prob > $\chi^2(2) = .005$
. Third or later child	1.04 (0.97, 1.12)	0.89 (0.80, 0.98)	
Urban hukou at age 14 (Ref: rural hukou)	1.17 (1.02, 1.32)	1.26 (1.10, 1.43)	Prob > $\chi^2(1) = .511$
Constant	0.0002 (-0.38, 0.38)	0.0000 (-0.54, 0.54)	
Person-years	234,494	241,762	

Birth cohort differences

We fitted models with interactions to test cohort trends in how marriage and childbearing have been related to men's and women's first labor migration. For ease of interpretation, we computed and plotted predicted probabilities of first labor migration for men and women from different birth cohorts based on the models with these interactions (see Figures 1-3).

Overall, we find little support for the expectation that over birth cohorts, marriage has become less of an impediment for first labor migration (Figure 1). Overall, Figures 2 and 3 underline that instead of a weakening constraining role of childbearing responsibilities over birth cohorts, there is evidence for such constraints becoming relatively stronger. This is particularly the case for having children aged 7-18.

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of first labor migration by marital status for men and women across birth cohorts

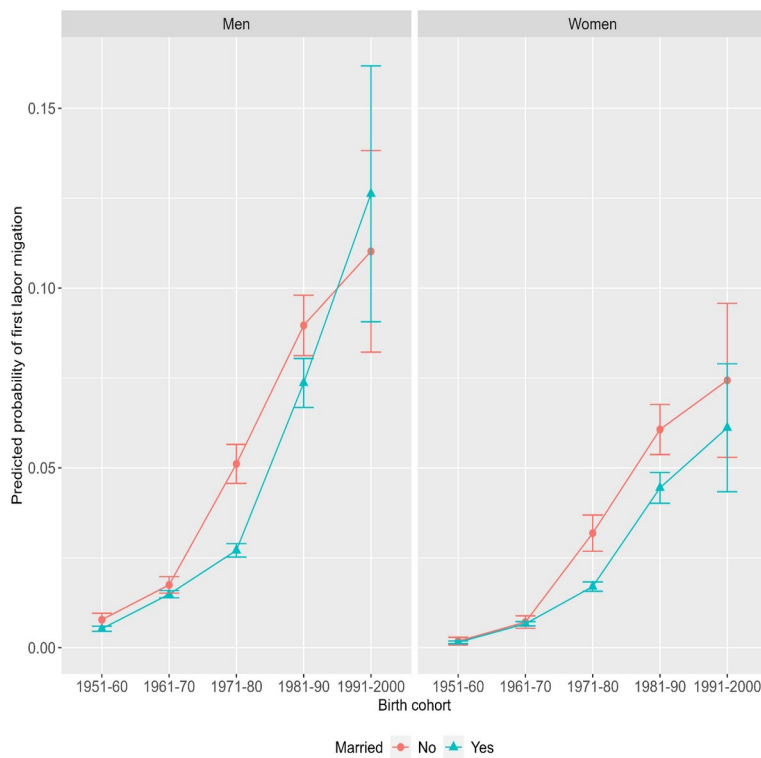


Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of first labor migration by number of children aged 0-6 for men and women across birth cohorts

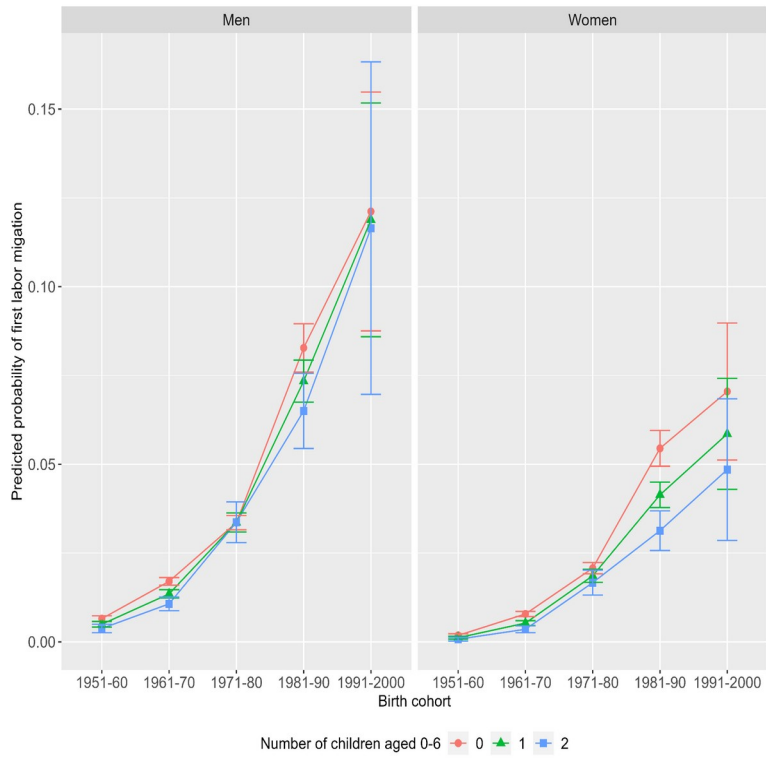
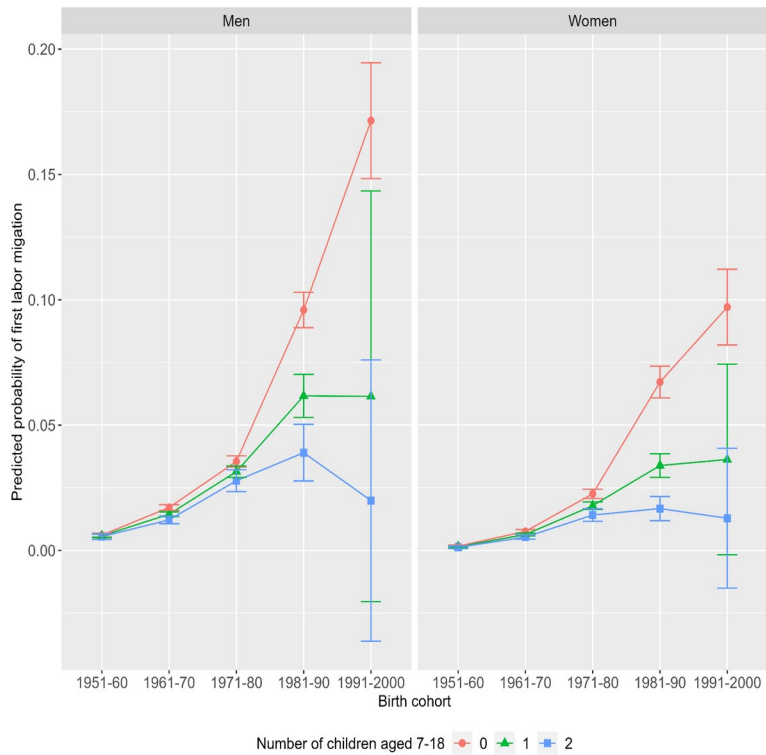


Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of first labor migration by number of children aged 7-18 for men and women across birth cohorts



Conclusions

Descriptively, we provide an account of updated and nationally representative estimates of the timing of first labor migration among different birth cohorts of men and women in China. We found that across all birth cohorts from 1951-2000, women had overall lower risks of first labor migration than men and that there is a cohort trend towards earlier ages at men's and women's first labor migration. Model results show that there are gender differentials in the association of childbearing responsibilities with first labor migration decisions, a finding consistent with the gender division of labor in the Chinese context. Parenthood responsibilities impede women's first labor migration more than men's, as mothers are often expected to assume the primary nurturing role for their children. Over birth cohorts, the role of having children in shaping men's and women's decisions of first labor migration is also becoming more, rather than less, of an obstacle to their migration. These patterns are more marked for having children aged 7-18 than having children aged 0-6.

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