

The Influence of Hukou on Young Women's Mate Selection Process--A Case Study of Central and Eastern China

Yihan Jin^{1*†}, Jialu Li^{2†}, Dicheng Wen^{3†}

¹Ural Institution, North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power, Zhengzhou, China

²School of Sociology and Political Science, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

³Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 1643302237@qq.com

†These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first author.

Abstract. This study explores the influence of the hukou system on young women's mate selection in Central and Eastern China. The hukou, as a household registration system, plays a crucial role in determining an individual's social and economic status, influencing marital choices in modern China. By employing quantitative and qualitative methods, including questionnaires and in-depth interviews, this research examines how hukou preferences vary across different regions and the factors that shape women's mate selection criteria. The findings reveal that while hukou remains an important consideration, many women prioritize emotional compatibility over hukou status. Furthermore, regional differences show that women in East China emphasize family background more than their counterparts in Central China. This study contributes to understanding how institutional factors, such as the hukou, interact with evolving social values, offering insights into contemporary mate selection practices in China.

Keywords: hukou, unmarried women, mate selection

1. Introduction

The Hukou system is a crucial legal institution in China. It is designed to collect and confirm basic information about citizens, such as birth, death, kinship, and legal address, to safeguard their rights and interests in employment, education, and social welfare. With the passage of time, hukou not only represents the place of residence but also largely determines an individual's social and economic status [1]. As a result, hukou has become one of the key factors influencing individuals' decision-making, especially regarding marriage and the choice of spouse. Relevant studies have shown that several women prefer to marry men who hold hukou in large cities. This trend has led to changes in women's migration patterns nationwide, exacerbated development imbalances between rural and urban areas, and triggered a series of hukou-related social problems.

Recently, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs released a draft of the Regulations on Marriage Registration (Revised Draft for Public Comments), which stipulates that mainland residents will no longer be obliged to provide a hukou book when registering for marriage or divorce. This reform

initiative has attracted widespread social attention. The hukou can visualize the marital status, which can prevent fraudulent and bigamous marriages from occurring. Given this, this study explores the relationship between the hukou system and women's mate selection behavior and how hukou affects women's preferences in mate selection.

Although the existing research was very further and completed, however, most of them have focused mainly on the perspectives of married women and their migration between rural and urban areas, with less attention paid to the situation of unmarried women and a need for more analysis of the differences between different regions.

This paper aims to explore the impact of the hukou system on women's mate selection process in central and eastern China through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The findings will help fill the gaps in the existing literature, especially in understanding unmarried women and their cross-regional differences.

2. Literature review

Hukou is a distinctive symbol of status in contemporary China. In 1951, the central government initiated the hukou system in urban areas and extended it to rural areas in 1958 [2]. Since 1958, China has strictly restricted population movement between rural and urban areas through legal means, thus establishing a dual urban-rural household registration system [3]. However, as the reform of the marketized economic system continues to advance, the drawbacks of the dual household registration system have gradually emerged. In 1978, in the context of reform and opening up, the state began adjusting and gradually reforming the hukou system[4]. In 2014, the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Advancing the Reform of the Household Registration System, which explicitly proposes to abolish the difference between the agricultural and non-agricultural hukou and to unified registration as resident hukou. This reform aims to eliminate identity differences and discrimination and promote social equity [5].Urban hukou status confers large economic benefits such as preferential access to good schools, prestigious occupations, and state-subsidized welfare benefits[6]. It requires non-local hukou citizens' compliance if they want to enter different cities or villages to reside[7]. This naturally creates a restrictive barrier between the hukou of different regions (Including first and second-tiered cities, urban and rural areas, etc.) Consequently, according to previous studies, hukou shapes mate selection in important ways in China's marriage market, and the hukou type is a status boundary that is difficult to cross in marriage[8].

Overall, on a national macro level, the hukou system has profoundly influenced various facets of Chinese society, especially the mate selection process. Meanwhile, on the personal micro level, as a result of advances in education, the spread of feminism, and the awakening of women in some traditional areas where male chauvinism is excessively harmful, nowadays, there proves to be a dramatic change in young women's mate selection process, they tend to have a stronger preference than men to match with a spouse who shares similar characteristics[9]. Therefore, it is necessary to study the relationship between the abovementioned changes in the nature of overall policy and the evolution of the individual awakening nature.

However, the frequent revisions to hukou policies in recent years have rendered. Some previous studies are less representative of the current realities and trends, highlighting a lack of timeliness in the existing literature. This research explores young women's perspectives on spouse selection, particularly concerning the regional disparities between Central and Eastern China.

3. Hypothesis

In this section, three hypotheses are developed regarding the relationship between the hukou factor and women's mate selection process. In the model, women's mate selection preferences depend on three dimensions: geographic factors, personal traits, and external influences.

Hypothesis 1: The hukou factor is believed to be relatively important in women's mate selection process.

First, as scholars have noticed, the impact of hukou on women's mate selection process is substantial, and rural hukou holders may suffer from profound disadvantages in the marriage market. However, as women's education level increases and the rise of feminism makes women more open-minded and tolerant, this study explores whether women still value hukou in the process of mate selection in the context of the new era.

Hypothesis 2: People will sacrifice the consideration of other factors, such as love, because of the hukou factor in women's mate selection process.

Previous studies illustrate the increasing commercialization of love for people nowadays. Love is being used as a “transaction” for personal profit, and the number of true love-seekers is decreasing [10]. Moreover, due to the immigration policy, people may marry in exchange for benefits, and there are more so-called commercial marriages between the upper classes [11]. According to the traditional thinking of the older generation, they desperately want their children to get married as early as possible. They are more in pursuit of the right match, so some people get married to fulfill their parents' wishes rather than for love [12]. Therefore, this study aims to determine whether women give up the consideration of emotional compatibility for the sake of the hukou factor in women's mate selection process.

Hypothesis 3: There is a difference in the reasons for preferring the hukou factor between Central China and East China, with East China placing more importance on the family background of the spouse.

The samples selected for this study were mainly from two regions, Central China and East China. East China is located on the east coast of China and has relatively developed economies and high urbanization rates. What's more, with the expansion of city size, the threshold of hukou is getting higher. It is more demanding to obtain hukou in developed cities [13], so this study examines whether women in East China value hukou because they have higher expectations of their spouse's family background.

4. Methodology

4.1. Investigation design

The investigation was carried out using a professional online questionnaire platform. The questionnaire was designed for unmarried adult females whose age ranges from 18 to 35 years old with the majority (82) aged between 18~23. Females in this age range are mainly unmarried and are in a stage of pursuing suitable mates actively, being the main target. Participants were limited to and grouped into Central China and Eastern China. The geological condition, the level of economic development, and social customs present differences in these two typical areas in China. The questionnaire was to find out their perspectives on Hukou policy's influence on mate selection, while also concerning their preferences in certain Hukou status. The total amount of valid questionnaires collected was 106 out of 125. The software SPSS was used to analyze statistical data

collected from the questionnaires. Apart from this, online and offline interviews were carried out among 6 participants.

Regarding the design of the questionnaire, it was divided into five parts. The first part mainly investigated the respondents' background information, such as age, emotional status, hukou type, hukou registration place, highest education and occupation, etc., which provided basic data support for the subsequent analysis. The second part explored respondents' importance of hukou in mate selection and the reasons for the existence of preference for hukou through the setting of scale questions, which helped to understand how the hukou factor affects the decision-making process of mate selection. The third part focused on exploring the regional differences between central and eastern China, as well as understanding whether migration has an impact on mate selection. The fourth part consisted of open-ended fill-in-the-blank questions to solicit suggestions on the hukou system, as well as to further understand the impact of migration. The final section asked respondents if they were interested in participating in a follow-up in-depth interview and asked those who were willing to do so to leave their contact information.

For the design of the interviews, eight questions were created and divided into five sections. The first part began with a general understanding of the respondent's lifestyle and profession, to bring them closer together and establish a positive communication atmosphere. In the second part, based on the results of the previous questionnaire, respondents' attitudes towards the hukou were analyzed to ensure consistency and at the same time to find out more details. The third part delved into the importance of the hukou as one of the marriage considerations, especially how it shaped or limited people's daily lifestyles and its impact on future families. The fourth part asked respondents to tell real-life examples of mate selection that they or people around them have encountered due to their hukou, to gain more insight into respondents' perceptions of regional differences. The final section inquired about respondents' expectations of the reform of the household registration system and discussed how these changes might alter future perceptions of mate selection.

4.2. Variable settings

4.2.1. Independent variables

The research grouped the potential influence factors into three separate groups. The first group is the geographic factors, including economic development level, cultural customs, educational resources, social environment and security, cost of living, and transportation convenience (X_{11} - X_{16}). The second group is personal traits, including family background, emotional compatibility, financial capability, age, physical appearance, lifestyle habits, and educational background (X_{21} - X_{27}). The third group is external influences from the environment, including the influence from family members, the influence from friends or peers, and the influence from societal norms (X_{31} - X_{33}). All above were filled into 3 matrix scale problems according to their groups. The options given are marked 1-5 points, with a higher mark representing a deeper influence.

4.2.2. Dependent variables

The influence of the Hukou policy on mate selection of females was divided into three parts (two are derivatives of the other), the overall degree of influence, the particular degree of influence in Central China, and the particular degree of influence in Eastern China.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis validated the data collected, including percentages and frequencies. This paper describes and analyzes the overall situation of the sample by describing the age, relationships, hukou type, highest educational attainment, employment status, and monthly disposable income of the respondent group. In this study, 125 questionnaires were collected and 19 invalid questionnaires were deleted leaving 106 valid questionnaires with a validity rate of 84.8%. The majority of the respondent group was 18-23 years old, totaling 72.6%. Among them, 45.3% had no relationship experience and 54.7% had relationship experience, which was evenly distributed. Respondents with academic degrees of bachelor's degree, master's degree, and above accounted for a total of 91.5%. Since most of the survey samples were conducted on campus, students accounted for 78.3%, and those with a corresponding living allowance of 1,000-3,000 yuan accounted for 66%. The details are shown in the table 1 below.

5.2. Analysis of influencing factors

5.2.1. Emotional compatibility and lifestyle habits

From Tab 2, the average values of “Emotional compatibility” and “Lifestyle habits” are very large, both above 4.4, and the average value of “Emotional compatibility” even exceeds 4.5, which shows that in modern society, people increasingly realize that marriage is not only the combination of economic and social status, but also the matching of the two people's emotions.

5.2.2. Age and societal norms

The mean values of the influence of age and societal norms are relatively small, both below 3.8. This indicates that women's views on mate selection have become more progressive and inclusive, allowing them greater freedom to express personal preferences and reducing the constraints of traditional gender roles.

5.2.3. External and geographic factors

In terms of external influences, women attribute more importance to the influence of family members, which suggests that women wish their partners to have the support and recognition of their parents and relationships supported by family members may be perceived as more secure.

In terms of geographic factors, women place more importance on the level of economic development of the region. A higher level of economic development usually means better employment opportunities, educational resources, medical facilities, etc., which indicates that women attach more importance to the quality of life.

5.3. Regional differences and the hukou factor

People considered the Hukou policy as an influencing factor in their mate selection, with a majority of 79.2%. Females aged between 18-23 considered economic development level, cultural customs, social environment, and security and transportation convenience when they are facing mate selection. Among these factors, people in Central China considered economic development level

significantly more than people in Eastern China. On the other hand, the influence of educational resources and cost of living also presented differences between the two areas. Personal traits were heavily influenced by the Hukou region. Except for age and lifestyle habits, the other factors of influence in the group showed polarized trends, with at least a 0.1 difference in every variable. According to different customs in the two areas, the influence from surrounding societal environments was similar, with people considering little about societal norms but putting more emphasis on influences from family members. Differences still existed in factors regarding the influence of family members and friends.

5.4. Validation of hypotheses

According to the results, the answers of respondents partly verify our hypothesis but also overturn or complement other points of view.

First, the assumption that people think that the hukou factor is relatively important in the mate selection process. According to the average value, the data for the question of the importance of hukou is greater than 3, so the first hypothesis is valid.

Second, it was assumed that people would sacrifice the consideration of other factors such as love because of the hukou factor. The mean and standardized regression coefficients show that this is not the case, as the mean value of the factor of emotional attraction is greater than 4.5, which indicates that people place a high value on emotional attraction. Meanwhile, the standardized regression coefficients of other factors such as level of economic development and family background are relatively large, while the standardized regression coefficients of looks and lifestyle habits are negative and relatively large in absolute value. Therefore, it is believed that people will sacrifice some of their consideration of looks and lifestyle habits because of the hukou factor.

Finally, it was hypothesized that there are differences in the reasons for preferences for hukou factors between Central and East China, with East China placing more importance on a spouse's family background. Comparing the standardized regression coefficients for Central China and East China, a certain difference can be observed in the values between the two regions. Specifically, in the factor of family background, the value of Central China is 0.033, and the value of East China is 0.505, which is a larger difference, so it can be assumed that East China places more importance on family background. So, the third hypothesis is valid. As well as the difference between the level of economic development and physical appearance is relatively large, Central China attaches more importance to the level of economic development, and East China attaches more importance to physical appearance.

Table 1: Descriptive statistical analysis

Program	Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	18-23	77	72.6	72.6	72.6
	24-29	26	24.5	24.5	97.2
	30-35	3	2.8	2.8	100.0
Relationships	No dating experience	48	45.3	45.3	45.3
	Currently in a relationship	30	28.3	28.3	73.6
	Previously in a relationship	28	26.4	26.4	100.0
Hukou type	Rural area	36	34.0	34	34.0
	Town or count	13	12.3	12.3	46.2
	City	57	53.8	53.8	100.0
Highest educational attainment	Junior high school or below	2	1.9	1.9	1.9
	High school or vocational school	4	3.8	3.8	5.7
	Junior college	2	1.9	1.9	7.5
	Bachelor's degree	65	61.3	61.3	68.9
	Master's degree or above	32	30.2	30.2	99.1
	Other	1	0.9	0.9	100.0
Employment status	Full-time	7	6.6	6.6	6.6
	Part-time	6	5.7	5.7	12.3
	Freelancer	7	6.6	6.6	18.9
	Unemployed	3	2.8	2.8	21.7
	Student	83	78.3	78.3	100.0
Net salary monthly	Less than 3000 RMB	8	7.5	34.8	34.8
	3000-5000 RMB	7	6.6	30.4	65.2
	5000-8000 RMB	3	2.8	13	78.3
	8000-10000 RMB	3	2.8	13	91.3
	10000-15000 RMB	2	1.9	8.7	100.0
	1000-3000 RMB	70	66.0	84.3	84.3
	3000-5000 RMB	9	8.5	10.8	95.2
	5000-8000 RMB	2	1.9	2.4	97.6
	More than 8000 RMB	2	1.9	2.4	100.0

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of women's mate selection factors(N=106)

Dimensions	Factors	Mean	St. Deviation	Variance	Valuation
Geographic factors	Level of economic development X ₁₁	4.33	0.792	0.627	Very unimportant = 1 Somewhat unimportant = 2, Neutral= 3, Somewhat important = 4, Very important = 5
	Cultural customs X ₁₂	3.87	1.041	1.084	
	Educational resources X ₁₃	4.31	0.849	0.721	
	Social environment and security X ₁₄	4.12	0.967	0.935	
	Cost of living X ₁₅	3.98	0.932	0.868	
	Transportation convenience X ₁₆	4.23	0.930	0.866	
Personal traits	Family background X ₂₁	4.12	0.902	0.813	
	Emotional compatibility X ₂₂	4.56	0.705	0.497	
	Financial capability X ₂₃	4.25	0.871	0.758	
	Age X ₂₄	3.76	0.890	0.791	
	Physical appearance X ₂₅	4.02	0.851	0.723	
	Lifestyle habits X ₂₆	4.46	0.783	0.613	
External influences	Educational background X ₂₇	4.09	0.823	0.677	
	Influence of family X ₃₁	4.18	1.012	1.025	
	Influence of friends/peers X ₃₂	3.90	1.004	1.008	
	Influence of societal norms X ₃₃	3.76	1.167	1.363	
Importance of hukou	Importance of hukou Y	3.55	1.131	1.279	

Table 3: Statistics of factors' influence on mate selection (N=106)

Dimensions	Variables	Regression Coefficients		
		Overall	Central China	Eastern China
Geographic Factors	X ₁₁	0.289	0.563	0.143
	X ₁₂	0.174	0.011	0.148
	X ₁₃	-0.073	-0.141	0.070
	X ₁₄	0.126	0.102	0.050
	X ₁₅	0.016	0.026	-0.145
	X ₁₆	0.174	0.091	0.279
Personal Traits	X ₂₁	0.402	0.040	0.643
	X ₂₂	0.061	-0.055	0.044
	X ₂₃	0.061	-0.139	0.195
	X ₂₄	0.010	0.166	0.062
	X ₂₅	-0.252	-0.280	0.063
	X ₂₆	-0.424	-0.209	-0.446
External Influences	X ₂₇	0.011	-0.252	0.049
	X ₃₁	0.067	-0.066	0.213
	X ₃₂	-0.132	-0.001	-0.289
	X ₃₃	0.014	0.069	-0.070

Table 4: Statistics of factors' influence on mate selection (N=106)

Dimensions	Variables	Standard Regression Coefficients		
		Overall	Central China	Eastern China
Geographic Factors	X ₁₁	0.237	0.489	0.114
	X ₁₂	0.187	0.013	0.151
	X ₁₃	-0.064	-0.128	0.061
	X ₁₄	-0.064	0.107	0.049
	X ₁₅	0.016	0.026	-0.139
	X ₁₆	0.167	0.090	0.267
Personal Traits	X ₂₁	0.316	0.033	0.505
	X ₂₂	0.041	-0.041	0.028
	X ₂₃	0.044	-0.118	0.126
	X ₂₄	0.008	0.170	0.049
	X ₂₅	-0.212	-0.269	0.047
	X ₂₆	-0.307	-0.142	-0.334
External Influences	X ₂₇	0.009	-0.234	0.034
	X ₃₁	0.062	-0.066	0.191
	X ₃₂	-0.128	-0.001	-0.281
	X ₃₃	0.016	0.083	-0.083

6. Discussion

There are some limitations in this study. First, the sample size of 106 questionnaires is inadequate, resulting in significant fluctuations and inaccuracies within the data that fail to accurately represent the overall demographics of individuals in Central and Eastern China, encompassing both urban and rural areas. Second, the geographic distribution of respondents is overly dispersed; for instance, the majority of respondents from Central China are concentrated in Henan, while in Eastern China, the predominant region is Shanghai. Third, the extensive number of questions covered in the questionnaire may have contributed to participant fatigue and tediousness, potentially compromising the authenticity of their responses and the reliability of the final data analysis. Fourth, the interview format primarily employed a question-and-answer approach, limiting the intention to encourage interviewees to elaborate on their perspectives outside the provided syllabus.

Despite these limitations, the research yielded notable findings. Individuals holding hukou from first-tier cities, as well as those with non-rural hukou, often exhibit a sense of superiority over their peers. For example, Jin, a respondent with a Shanghai hukou from a wealthy family, stated, "I won't marry far away; I might consider Beijing, but I will only remain in areas with comparable or superior economic conditions." This highlights that hukou serves as a significant social benchmark for some young women, particularly those living in well-economically developed first-tier cities, leading to "invisible discrimination." Further exploration into the underlying factors reveals that familial attitudes play a crucial role. As Wang, a respondent from Henan, articulated, "Everyone wants their daughters to find partners who possess similar social and economic backgrounds to ensure that consumption standards are maintained." This finding corroborates the first hypothesis regarding social stratification.

It is important to highlight that in response to the second interview question, "What do you think about the hukou system?", participants provided diverse and thought-provoking perspectives. For instance, Shi, a senior student from Henan, noted, "My friend Jiang, originally from Chongqing, relocated her hukou to Tibet due to her father's job, allowing her to gain admission to the same university as me with a lower score. Consequently, some individuals may seek hukou in Xinjiang or Tibet to benefit from reduced admission scores available to ethnic minorities."

This observation suggests that biases against certain regions are less about the hukou itself and more reflective of disparities in regional development. From a reformative standpoint, dismantling the hukou barriers between large and small cities, as well as urban and rural areas, necessitates a focus on regional economic development. For instance, equitable distribution of educational resources should prioritize remote and ethnically diverse regions, ensuring fairness and avoiding undue criticism of areas with moderate economic performance. Such reforms could facilitate the growth of underdeveloped regions in central and western China, encouraging individuals to consider these areas for personal and professional opportunities. This shift would likely diminish regional prejudices and expand the options for marital choices, fostering a more open and tolerant perspective regarding partner selection.

7. Conclusion

The process of mate selection is not only an essential dimension in the study of marriage and intimacy but also an effective way to explore social mobility and its influencing mechanisms. The results reveal the relative significance of hukou in women's mate selection but also indicate that a larger number of women tend to prioritize emotional compatibility over hukou status, which reflects the shifting trend of personal values in contemporary Chinese society from concentrating on material conditions to placing more emphasis on spiritual fulfillment.

In addition, the study finds further differences across regions: women in East China prioritize Hukou more because they are concerned about their potential partner's family background than those in Central China. This regional difference demonstrates the role of cultural environment and economic development in shaping individual mate selection criteria and deepens the understanding of the complex interactions between the hukou system and other social factors.

As China's industrialization process accelerates and urbanization level continues to rise, large-scale population migration not only facilitates the transformation of social and economic structures but also profoundly affects people's mate selection. By exploring the above-mentioned elements, this study provides new perspectives for understanding women's mate selection preferences in contemporary China and provides an in-depth study of the impact of institutional factors, i.e., the hukou policy, on individuals' choices. Future research directions should focus on investigating the

social policy implications behind these variations and their impact on the construction of modern marital life. This study is crucial for contributing to the discussion of gender roles, marriage patterns, and family construction in China's rapidly changing society, and by understanding how the hukou affects marital choices, policymakers can better address the social and psychological inequalities caused by the hukou.

Acknowledgement

Yihan Jin, Jialu Li and Dicheng Wen contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first authors.

References

- [1] Lu, Y. (2008). Does hukou still matter? The household registration system and its impact on social stratification and mobility in China. *Social Sciences in China*, 29(2), 56-75.
- [2] Lu, M., & Wan, G. (2014). Urbanization and urban systems in the People's Republic of China: Research findings and policy recommendations. *China's Economy: A Collection of Surveys*, 83-98.
- [3] Wu, Q. T. J. (2022). Changes and Reforms of the Household Registration System since the Founding of New China and Lessons Learned from Experience. *Construction in old areas*(03), 25-31.
- [4] Yao, X. (2004). On the Evolution and Reform of China's Household Registration System. *Law science*(05), 45-54.
- [5] Lei, B. Y. G. (2016). China bids farewell to dual urban-rural household registration system. *People's Daily Overseas Edition (PRC newspaper)*, 1.
- [6] Wang, Y., & Schwartz, C. R. (2018). Hukou intermarriage and social exclusion in China. *Research in social stratification and mobility*, 56, 28-39.
- [7] Hung, J. (2022). Hukou system influencing the structural, institutional inequalities in China: The multifaceted disadvantages rural hukou holders face. *Social Sciences*, 11(5), 194.
- [8] Tian, F. F., Qian, Y., & Qian, Z. (2018). Hukou locality and intermarriages in two Chinese cities: Shanghai and Shenzhen. *Research in social stratification and mobility*, 56, 12-20.
- [9] Hu, Q. (2024). Social status and marriage markets: Evaluating a Hukou policy in China. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 22(2), 477-509.
- [10] Wang, P. (2021). Love in China (1950–now). In *International handbook of love: Transcultural and transdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 955-973). Springer.
- [11] Zeng, L., & Liao, T. F. (2022). Social exchange in mate selection of female migrants in China. *Marriage & Family Review*, 58(3), 199-224.
- [12] Xia, Y. R., & Zhou, Z. G. (2003). The transition of courtship, mate selection, and marriage in China. *Mate selection across cultures*, 231, 246.
- [13] Zhang, J., Wang, R., & Lu, C. (2019). A quantitative analysis of Hukou reform in Chinese cities: 2000–2016. *Growth and Change*, 50(1), 201-221.