

# How birthplace and education influence marriage choices in China

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Many people choose their spouse based on shared values and interests. But in China, another important, relatively unknown factor plays a role: hukou, and it may be contributing to growing socioeconomic disparity in the country's largest city, according to a new UBC study.

Hukou is a household registration system in China that limits access to social benefits largely based on the birthplace of the holder. A UBC-led sociology study, published this week in the *Chinese Sociological Review*, examines the effect of hukou and [education](#) on heterosexual [marriage](#) patterns in China's largest city, Shanghai. Residents with Shanghai hukou, for example, have better access to jobs, schools, housing and other opportunities in that city compared to migrants, who are effectively treated as second-class citizens. For migrants, obtaining Shanghai hukou is challenging and rarely successful.

The researchers found that, in Shanghai, local hukou shapes individual marital choices and is considered a valuable attribute in the marriage market.

"When we think about marriage, we often think about love and romance," said Yue Qian, the study's lead author and assistant professor of sociology at UBC. "But in reality, marriage choices are usually filtered by other factors. In this study, we found that hukou has a significant effect."

The researchers used data from a 2013 population survey in Shanghai

that asked respondents who were born in the 1980s about their own and their spouses' hukou and education when they first got married. The sample included 1,247 couples.

In cases of hukou intermarriage— where one spouse has Shanghai hukou and the other is a migrant—couples were more likely to involve a Shanghai husband and a migrant wife (14 per cent) than a Shanghai wife and a migrant husband (six per cent), the researchers found.

Education also proved to be an important factor in marital decisions, with the probability of a migrant marrying a spouse with Shanghai hukou increasing with the migrant's education level.

"It's a bit of a tradeoff," said Qian. "If someone with Shanghai hukou marries a migrant, then their migrant spouse needs to at least have the same or a higher [education level](#). Otherwise, it seems they have nothing to gain economically from marriage."

The findings are important because they reveal how China's hukou system is widening resource inequality between migrants and locals and between the educated and less educated, said Qian. This is especially true in Shanghai where nearly half of the population is made up of migrants.

Qian is now studying Asian immigrants to the United States. Since hukou is similar to citizenship status, she is interested in seeing if similar marriage patterns emerge.

**More information:** Yue Qian et al, Assortative Mating by Education and in Shanghai, *Chinese Sociological Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/21620555.2017.1288066](https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2017.1288066)

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