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Religion and trust in strangers among China's rural-urban migrants

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ABSTRACT

During China's rapid urbanization, the social marginalization of its rural-urban migrants has attracted increasing scholarly and social attention. At the same time, China is experiencing a rising tide of religion, the impact of which on social integration remains unexplored. Based on a large-scale survey for rural-urban migrants, we find that being a religious believer is associated with a higher level of trust towards strangers. In addition, participating in religious-related activities has a positive impact on trust for both believers and non-believers. We test the robustness of our results using instrumental variable analysis. We conjecture that prosocial values in religious teaching and social interaction opportunities contribute to rural-urban migrants' generalized trust. Our results indicate that informal institution such as religion can be important in forming social capital for marginalized social groups.

1. Introduction

Rural-urban migrants account for a large share of the urban labor force in many transition economies along the process of urbanization. This process could result in an erosion of social capital for rural-to-urban migrants, as they lose a large part of their safety net related to the original community (Bartolini & Sarracino, 2015; Williamson, 1995). Moreover, rural migrants often face political discrimination and economic marginalization, which reduces their sense of belonging and the levels of trust that they have in the host cities (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007). China is a typical example where hundreds of millions of people migrate from rural areas to cities for better employment opportunities. They contribute greatly to the country's economic growth, but receive unequal treatments. Along China's urbanization process, the social marginalization that its rural-urban migrants face is receiving an increasing level of scholarly and social attention (Démurger, Gurgand, Li, & Yue, 2009; Meng & Zhang, 2001).

At the same time, there is a rapid revival of religion in China (Yang, 2009). Religion could play an important role in forming individual attitudes and behaviors. The impact of religion on individual outcomes, especially pro-social attitudes has been studied extensively in western countries, most of which are dominated by Christianity (Eichhorn, 2012; Ellison, 1991; Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2003; Popova, 2014). However, the study of religion is still rare in developing countries such as China where religion has been suppressed for a long time and the society is undergoing dramatic transformations. In particular, as formal institution is not performing well for China's low-income rural-urban migrants, religion might be one of the few institutions that they can access. Therefore, China's rural-urban migrant population presents an interesting case for studying the potential impact of religion.

In this paper we focus on the impact of religion on trust towards strangers among China's rural-urban migrants. Trust is a key indicator of social capital and is crucial for the functioning of civil societies and healthy economic systems (Algan & Cahuc, 2013; Herreros, 2004). In particular, generalized trust in other people with whom the individual has never met or may never meet again, is an important prerequisite for a society featured by general cooperation (Lindstrom & Rosvall, 2016). Besides, trust is also positively

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related to individual well-being (Lindstrom & Mohseni, 2009; Rostila, 2007). In the context of China, a quickly urbanizing society, the level of generalized trust is a key factor in improving social integration and alleviating social tension in urban society (Sun & Wang, 2012). Based on a large scale micro-level survey data in China, we investigate the impact of religion on generalized trust among the rural-urban migrants. We found that both having a religious identity and involvement in religious-related activities are associated with a higher level of trust in strangers. This result maintains after controlling for a large number of demographic and socio-economic factors that might impact trust simultaneously. Furthermore, we also use instrumental variable analysis to deal with the endogeneity problem and test the robustness of our results. Our study is among the first to specifically examine the impact of religion among China's rural-urban migrants, one of the most vulnerable groups in urban China. The results suggest that to better integrate migrants into the urban society, policy makers have to create more social interaction opportunities for them.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the institutional background and relevant literature. Section 3 describes the data and methodology. Section 4 presents main empirical results. Section 5 applies instrumental variable analysis as a robustness check. Section 6 examines the impacts of different religious traditions. Section 7 concludes.

2. Institutional background and related literature

2.1. A revival of religion in contemporary China

Religion plays an important role in the history of China. However, religion was suppressed for a long time after the Chinese Communist Party, which adopted atheism as a fundamental doctrine, came to power in 1949. In the reform period (after 1978), the Chinese government gradually allowed more tolerance of religion (Potter, 2003). The loosen of political control, the collapse of the traditional ideology, and the rapid change of social structure push many Chinese people turn to religion to fill in the spiritual vacuum, especially the disadvantaged group (Potter, 2003; Yang, 2006; Yang, 2009). Official estimate of the number of people belonging to organized religions in the mid-2000s was around 100 million (US Department of State, 2010). This figure however is considered to be an underestimate by many scholars. Data from several large independent surveys in general suggest that between 10 and 15% of the Chinese population belongs to an organized religion (Y. Chen & Williams, 2016; Y. Lu, 2012). A 2006 survey found that 31% of the Chinese considers religion to be important in their lives (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011). Besides, according to data from the World Value Survey (WVS), the proportion of Chinese residents belonging to religious denominations increased from 3% in 1990 to 15% in 2012. In sum, scholars in general acknowledge that there is a rapid growth in religion in contemporary China (Yang, 2009; Y. Lu, 2012; Stark & Liu, 2011). However, the impact of religion in contemporary China has not been widely studied and existing studies mainly focus on the aggregate-level association between religion and regional development (Xu, Li, Liu, & Gan, 2017; Ying, Liu, Bao, & Zhou, 2017; Q. Wang & Lin, 2014). Giving religion's growing popularity, more religion-based research in China is urged for (Ashiwa & Wank, 2006; Yang, 2009).

2.2. Rural-urban migrants as “second-class citizens”

During the past three decades, China has been experiencing a large scale population migration. The number of rural-urban migrants increased from about 25 million in 19,990 to more than 200 million in 2010 (Meng, 2012; National Population and Family Planning Commission of China [NPFPC], 2011). Although rural-urban migrants have contributed greatly to China's economic growth, they are discriminated under the household registration (*hukou*) system. Socioeconomic disparities exist in many domains between rural-urban migrants and urban locals. For example, rural-urban migrants are often employed in low-income jobs with poor working condition (Démurger et al., 2009; Meng & Zhang, 2001) and are excluded from the social welfare system in urban areas (Min, Zhuang, & Liu, 2015; Zhu, 2003).

While migrants' objective socioeconomic conditions in China have been under close scrutiny in the literature, their level of trust has not been much discussed. Trust in other people is a merit that promotes desirable societal and individual-level outcomes, and is an important indicator of how well migrants are integrated into the host society (Algan & Cahuc, 2013; Dinesen, 2010; Herreros, 2004). In the context of urban China, the level of trust in non-acquaintances among rural-urban migrants might be particularly vulnerable. Existing studies indicate that people are less trusting when they live in new environment and lack of connections in host communities (De Vroome, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013). Rural-urban migrants in China tend to be geographically segmented in host cities, lacking opportunities of social interactions (Liu, Dijst, & Geertman, 2014). Moreover, social stigma against rural-urban migrants is common in urban China. Rural-urban migrants are often labeled as unhygienic, uncultivated, and dangerous (X. Chen et al., 2011). Stigmatization could increase social distance between locals and migrants and reduce opportunities for interpersonal interactions, resulting in low level of trust between people (X. Chen et al., 2011; Z. Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2016). Finally, exploitation and discrimination experience of migrant workers might further erode their trust in the host society.

2.3. Religion and trust

Religion might promote trust in several ways. First, most religions teach their followers to develop an ethics of generosity and reciprocity towards others including strangers, which might promote adherents' trust in other people (Neusner & Chilton, 2005; Ruiters & De Graaf, 2006). Second, religion can also induce trust through social interaction in religious-related activities. According to societal theories of trust, individuals could develop trust attitudes when interacting with others in society (Daniels & von der Ruhr, 2010). Religious-related activities might provide a platform that stimulates social cohesion, fosters a favorable attitude towards

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