



# Opportunity or new poverty trap: Rural-urban education disparity and internal migration in China



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## ABSTRACT

Despite its rapid economic growth, China has never managed to reduce its rural-urban divide with its reforms and marketization of the economy. The huge gap between urban and rural education is embedded in the disparity in educational investment, children's educational attainment, school quality and the returns to education. Migrant children move with their parents to urban cities to pursue a better education. However, the Chinese household registration system (hukou system) limits migrant children's rights and access to basic education in the cities. Will migrant children benefit from a better-quality education in the cities, or will they continue to be constrained by their hukou registration? Will the large-scale internal rural-urban migration provide the opportunity to reduce rural-urban education inequality in China, or will it merely create a new education-poverty trap? Based on publicly available large-scale survey data (RUMiC), this paper applies logistic regression and survival analysis to illustrate the new education-poverty trap imposed on migrant children by the institutional constraints and hierarchies in children's education, created by the Chinese household registration system in Chinese cities.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid economic growth in China has never successfully eradicated its urban-rural disparity (Knight, 2013; Wang, Piesse, & Weaver, 2010). On the contrary, this disparity has actually grown over the decades. Political preferences for urban development and inadequate investment in rural education have caused a rapidly increasing urban-rural gap in children's educational attainment, school quality and returns to education (Connelly & Zheng, 2007; Hannum, 1999; Wang, 2011). According to Chinese official statistics, primary school enrollment in basic education starts out high in both urban and rural areas, but due to the gap in the quality of education, the dropout rate among rural children is also high (Brown & Park, 2002).

The huge urban-rural disparity and imbalanced economic development in China put the rural population into a poverty trap, where few economic resources and little human capital are allocated to help them break out. Migration and education are considered important ways for the rural poor to free themselves from the rural poverty trap. Labor migrants have high expectations of better economic opportunities in the cities, as well as better education so that their children do not get drawn back into the rural poverty trap. Thus, migrants bring their children to the cities with the hope of acquiring a higher-quality education for them. However, the household registration system (hukou system) explicitly allocates rights to public welfare and services depending on one's formal place of residence.

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The current empirical studies on education-poverty trap are focused on their traditional correlations, that is, the vicious trap created when poor cannot afford education which is important for the poor out of poverty (Barham, Marchan, & Pestieau, 1995; Brown & Park, 2002). This paper adds on another perspective on a new form of education-poverty trap, with urban-rural disparity of education quality and institutional barrier by hukou system. The education-poverty trap is formed by large urban-rural disparity in school quality, while migration is one attempt to break this trap, hoping to benefit from the better school quality in urban cities. The effects of migration on migrant children's education are mixed: school quality is better, but migrant children have limited access to urban schools due to the constraint of hukou system and face the challenges of integrating into urban life.

Although an important and dominant institutional system in China for four decades—one that is currently undergoing extensive reform—the hukou system's role has become controversial. This paper will deliberately examine the role of the hukou system in migrant children's educational attainment in cities by differentiating among migrant children with different hukou registration status. Based on a large-scale survey on Chinese rural-urban migrants in 2008, this paper conducts logistic regressions and survival analysis to explore the effects of hukou registration system on constraining migrant children's access to education in urban areas in China. They either drop out school early or are forced to return to rural school with low quality, which indicate the role of hukou registration system on drawing them into the new poverty trap.

The paper starts by describing the institutional background of the Chinese household registration system. Section 2 discusses not only its traditional role in migrant children's educational attainment over the past decades of labor migration, but also recent reforms and developments. Section 3 discusses the education-poverty trap theory and the role of migration in breaking out of that trap. The data and methodology applied in the paper are described in Section 4, and the descriptive data in Section 5. Two groups of models and the findings are explored in Section 6, which applies logistic regression and survival analysis to demonstrate migrant children's schooling situation in cities. Finally, Section 7 discusses the role of internal migration and the hukou system in escaping from the persistent education-poverty trap among the Chinese rural population.

## 2. Institutional background: household registration system and migrant children's educational attainment

The large-scale internal migration in China can be traced back to early 1990s and continues to grow dramatically. These internal migrants, most of whom are from rural areas, have become the backbone of China's rapid economic development. Cai, Du, and Wang (2011) estimate the total stock of "rural migrant labor" to have been about 155 million in 2010, while the 2010 population census reported 221.4 million people as not living in their registered location for over six months (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010). The latter figure did not include those who moved within the same city or town. Long-standing internal rural-urban migration in China is accompanied by a substantial number of migrant children moving to urban cities. Based on the 2010 Chinese population census, there were at least 20 million rural migrant children in urban cities.

The household registration system, since its first implementation in 1958, has played a key role in discrimination against the rural population, restricting their mobility and access to social benefits (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994). It has left the large population of internal rural migrants in a rather disadvantaged situation and has, therefore, caused various social problems. Based on the hukou system, strict local institutional restrictions were stipulated to restrict migrant children's equal access to public schools. Researchers report various financial and administrative barriers to migrant children's school enrollment in urban cities (Chen & Yang, 2010; Goodburn, 2009; Li & Placier, 2015; Li, Zhang, Fang, et al., 2010). Since the early 1990s, the migrants themselves have opened unlicensed private migrant schools that provide education to a large number of rural migrant children (Goodburn, 2014; Kwong, 2004; Wang & Holland, 2011). Unfortunately, though, these private schools suffer from poor facilities and low-quality teachers. Moreover, even if migrant children receive basic education in urban cities, they are not fully admitted to the entrance examination to qualify for tertiary education. Many early studies found that migrant children had considerably lower school enrollment (Guo, 2002; Wu & Zhang, 2015) and worse school academic performance (Liang & Chen, 2007) than urban children.

On the other hand, there has been great effort to change central policies to facilitate migrant children's access to education in urban cities. The Chinese National Education Committee and Public Security Department published "Trial Measure of School Education for School-aged Children among the Urban Floating Population"<sup>1</sup> in 1996 and "Interim Measure of School Education for Migrant Children"<sup>2</sup> in 1998. The central government published "The Decision of Basic Education Reform and Development"<sup>3</sup> in 2001 and "The Notice of Improving Education of Children of Rural Migrant Workers"<sup>4</sup> in 2003. The notices emphasized the responsibility of local city governments to provide equal education to migrant children without charging extra fees. The new Compulsory Education Law in 2006<sup>5</sup> emphasized migrant children's legal entitlement to "equal rights of education" in local areas.

<sup>1</sup> China education news, 2 April 2010, "Measures for school enrollment of school-age migrant children and adolescents in urban areas (trial)" (《城镇流动人口中适龄儿童、少年就学办法(试行)》), [http://www.jyb.cn/china/jyssdjt/201004/t20100402\\_350809.html](http://www.jyb.cn/china/jyssdjt/201004/t20100402_350809.html), downloaded on 2 Jan 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2 March 1998, "Interim measures for school enrollment of migrant children and adolescents" (《流动人口少年就学暂行办法》), [http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_621/200409/3192.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_621/200409/3192.html), downloaded on 2 Jan 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The central people's government of the People's Republic of China, 13 October 2006, "Decision on the reform and development of basic education" (《关于基础教育改革与发展的决定》), [http://www.gov.cn/jztzl/nmg/content\\_412402.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jztzl/nmg/content_412402.htm), downloaded on 2 Jan 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, 30 September 2003, "Opinion on further improving the compulsory education for children of migrant workers in urban cities" (《关于进一步做好进城务工人员子女义务教育工作的意见》), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-10/08/content\\_1112722.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-10/08/content_1112722.htm), downloaded on 2 Jan 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The central government of the People's Republic of China, 30 June 2006, "Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China" (《中华人民共和国义务教育法》), [http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2006-06/30/content\\_323302.htm](http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2006-06/30/content_323302.htm), downloaded on 10 May 2016.

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