



# The impact of parental migration on children's school performance in rural China<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

A substantial proportion of China's rapid economic growth is attributed to its large number of rural to urban migrants, but most of these migrants' children are left behind in rural areas, mainly due to China's household registration system. Any attempt to identify the impact of parental migration on children's school performance may encounter the problem of endogeneity. We use unique survey data from more than 7600 4th and 5th grade students from 74 rural elementary schools. Using an instrumental variable estimation, our results indicated that having migrant parents can marginally reduce a child's math score rank by 15.60%, which implies that the current economic growth in China partially jeopardizes the future of the next rural generation. Based on a bivariate probit model, the results show that compared to neither parents being migrants, migration of the father reduces the rank of a child's math score by 8.37%, and migration of the mother reduces the rank by 23.30%.

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## 1. Introduction

A substantial proportion of China's rapid economic growth is attributed to the exodus of a massive number of hard working rural people to urban areas. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, 2012), there were more than 200 million emigrants in 2011, which is double the figure from a decade ago (Taylor & Martin, 2001). Migration, which is tightly linked to labor productivity growth, is a significant contributor to rapid economic growth rates and long run national welfare (De Haan, 2000; Glauben, Herzfeld, & Wang, 2008; Taylor & Martin, 2001; Tian & Yu, 2012; Wang, Herzfeld, & Glauben, 2007; Wang, Huang, Zhang, & Rozelle, 2011).

Under constraints from institutional arrangements, such as the Household Registration System (*hukou*), in China, rural migrant families who live in cities benefit little from the available human resource service programs that fund education and health. One example of these families' problems is that their children cannot be enrolled in urban public schools without them having to pay

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more than the parents of the children who have urban *hukou* have to pay, and they usually cannot afford this cost (Lai et al., 2009). The latest research indicates that migrant students who are unable to enroll in public schools perform significantly worse than their more fortunate counterparts (Chen & Feng, 2013). Although there are a number of private and for profit schools that the children of rural to urban migrants can attend in some cities, the high tuition of these schools is accompanied by poor facilities and under-qualified, demotivated teachers. Furthermore, most of these schools, which are not certified by the government, run the risk of being shut down. Thus, in most cases, these families' school aged children are left behind in villages when the parents move to the city for work (Wu et al., 2004). According to the census that was conducted in 2005, 58 million children, accounting for 21.7% of the 0–17 age cohort of children, were left in villages by their migratory parents (NBSC, 2005). The Sixth National Population Census indicated that this number increased again from 3 million to 61 million in 2010, which represents 37.7% of rural children (NBSC, 2011). At the compulsory education stage (elementary and junior high school), the number of children who are left behind is 22.7 million (MOE, 2011).

The consequences of rural to urban migration are described in the recent literature and have been amplified, given the increased trend. There are many articles on the impact of parental migration on left-behind children in the context of international migration. There are two types of effects: positive and negative.

First, migration not only imparts significant benefits to individuals through higher returns for working capability, but also has strong and transformative impacts on the rural families and the communities from which the migrants come (Ellis, 2003). The results from many empirical studies in different countries show that a mixture of individualistic and familial motives explains the impact of remittances on children's schooling (Kuhn, 2006, in Bangladesh; Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2010, in the Dominican Republic; Calero, Bedi, & Sparrow, 2009, in Ecuador; Edwards & Ureta, 2003, in El Salvador; Yang, 2008, in the Philippines; Alcaraz, Chiquiar, & Salcedo, 2012, in Mexico; Antman, 2012, in Mexico; Lu & Treiman, 2011, in South Africa). According to these researches, migrants can increase their own level of economic livelihood, and these families can, thus, invest more in certain aspects of their children's education. For example, Antman (2012) estimated the causal effect of parental migration on children's educational attainment by looking within the family to measure variation in siblings' ages at the time of parental migration. She found a statistically significant positive effect of parental U.S. migration on educational attainment for girls and found that the absence of fathers does not play a major role in determining children's educational outcomes. Instead, the results suggested that the marginal dollars from U.S. migrant remittances appear to enable families to be able to further educate their daughters.

Second, parents' migration, which is usually undertaken without the consent of their children, can be expected to lead to various inconsistencies in children's school performance. Parental migration could result in a lack of adult labor in the home, and the left-behind children have to perform household works, which may lead the children to complete less total schooling than children in non-migrant families (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2007, in Mexico) or may restrict their access to school households (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011 in Mexico; Mansuri, 2006 in Pakistan). McKenzie and Rapoport examined the impact of migration on educational attainment in rural Mexico. By employing historical state migration rates as instruments, they found evidence of a significant negative effect of migration on school attendance and attainment. Furthermore, the absence of a parent results in the loss of parental attention and supervision over the children, which leads to poorer school performance. Particularly, the absence of a parent may negatively affect the left-behind children's psychological wellbeing and, thus, lead to academic, behavioral, and emotional problems (Lahaie, Hayes, Piper, & Heymann, 2009, in Mexico). This conclusion is consistent with the findings of the study by Spera (2005), which suggested that parental involvement and monitoring are robust predictors of children's academic achievement.

In the case of China, the empirical result of the effect of parental migration on the educational outcomes of left-behind children is also mixed. Liang and Chen (2007) indicated that temporary parental migration into cities or suburban areas in the Guangdong province significantly decreased children's school enrollment rate due to the absence of parental fiduciary. Many migrants leave their children with grandparents in the village. However, studies have found that the children are usually looked after by poorly-educated grandparents who are unable to substitute the roles of the parents (Biao, 2007). Grandparents may either spoil the children or fail to provide enough emotional care (Wang, Zhang, Sun, & Zhang, 2006; Zhang et al., 2007). Further, living with grandparents is often negatively correlated with certain health outcomes (Gao et al., 2010). Other studies, including the ones by Lee (2011), Meyerhoefer and Chen (2011) and Wen and Lin (2012), found that children whose parents had migrated were worse off in terms of school enrollment and years of schooling than children whose parents had not migrated.

In contrast, migrants remit a large share of their income, and the amount of these remittances is responsive to the needs of other family members (Du, Park, & Wang, 2005; Taylor, Rozelle, & De Brauw, 2003). Thus, migrants can invest more in certain aspects of their children's education, such as tutoring, computer assisted learning and other academic resources that effectively improve the children's intellectual performance (Lai et al., 2009; Li, Han, Rozelle, & Zhang, 2010). Chen, Huang, Rozelle, Shi, and Zhang (2009) studied left-behind children in the Shaanxi Province in China, and they did not find evidence that parental migration affected school performance (average Chinese and math test scores) negatively. They actually found that having a migrant father improved the left-behind children's school performance. However, these results, as noted by the authors of the paper, might not be robust.

The main hurdle in conducting ideal research on this topic is the problem of endogeneity. Omitted variables that are correlated both with migration and children's outcomes may cause problems, but endogeneity can also result from the possible reverse causalities between children's school performance and parental migration. Rather than there being a possible negative impact of parental migration on children's school performance, it could be that parents alter their decision to migrate to improve their children's school performance.

In summary, this study examines whether the effect of parental migration on children's school performance is positive or negative, identifies whether the migration decision is exogenous, and determines whether there are differences in the impact of a migrating mother versus a migrating father on school performance. By using a bivariate probit model, this study proposes instrumental variable (IV) estimations to answer these questions. The study is based on unique survey data that were obtained from a sample of 7648 4th and 5th grade pupils in the rural areas of the Ningxia Autonomous Region and the Qinghai province in northwest China.

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