



What determines the settlement intention of rural migrants in China? Economic incentives versus sociocultural conditions



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ABSTRACT

The international literature has continuously debated over what factors – economic incentives or socio-cultural conditions – are more important when migrant populations make settlement vs. return migration decisions. China's urbanization policy recently took a sharp turn toward encouraging full integration and permanent settlement of rural migrants in cities. Yet policymaking to date has relied on limited empirical evidence on determinants of migrant settlement intention. Using data derived from a twelve-city survey conducted in 2009, this paper investigates the extent to which economic incentives and socio-cultural conditions may determine the settlement intention of rural migrants in urban China. Regression analysis reveals that, although migrants with better human capital are more inclined to settle down in cities, socio-cultural attachment plays an equally, if not more important role in determining migrant settlement intention. Meanwhile, while the settlement intention of the first-generational migrants is more driven by the socio-cultural conditions, economic incentives are more important for the new-generation rural migrants. We thus call for more targeted policy design that takes into account such intergenerational differences.

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1. Introduction

A core feature of China's urbanization process, the massive scale of rural-to-urban migration has been the cornerstone of China's economic growth over the past three decades. According to the *Report on China's Migrant Population Development (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2015)*, over 2.53 million urban residents are migrant populations, accounting for over a third of China's urban population. This large number of migrants, largely

marginalized in the urban society, also constitutes the biggest challenge for the country's social sustainability and stability (Huang & Tao, 2015; Tao, Hui, Wang, & Chen, 2015; Wang & Fan, 2012; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2010).

In the past few years, the Chinese government gradually reversed its *hukou*-based urbanization policy that had discriminated against migrant populations.¹ The new policy agenda, as declared in the National Plan for New Urbanization issued in 2014 (CPC Central Committee and State Council, 2014), was to promote the transition from “land-based urbanization” to “people-oriented urbanization” that improves equity, inclusiveness, and quality of life among people in rural and urban settlements. A critical component of this so-called “people-oriented urbanization” has been to grant rural migrants access to the full citizen status in cities and towns (i.e., *nongmingong shiminhua*).

However, much of the current policymaking implicitly assumes that, once the *hukou* barrier is eliminated, rural migrants would undoubtedly choose to permanently live in cities and become formally transformed into urban citizens. As argued by some scholars, rural migrants must have both the intention and the capability to settle down in cities in order to fully become urban citizens (Liu & Xu, 2007). Whereas early literature has focused on the institutional barriers contributing to the limited capability of

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¹ For instance, in the 2012 Central Committee Working conference on the Economy, the Community Party (CPC) Leadership declared that, in order to “actively promote urbanization and increase the quality of urbanization”, a critical task was to “seek orderly transformation of rural migrants into urban citizens”. In December 2013, the CPC Central Committee held its first ever Working Conference on Urbanization, in which the central government further declared that “the primary goal is to promote the people-oriented urbanization, improve the quality of life for urban residents, and to ensure a gradual process of citizenization for migrant populations with stable employment and residence”. This declaration was reiterated by the CPC Leadership at the National Working Conference on Urban Development that took place in December 2015.

rural migrants, a growing literature is exploring the intention of China's rural-to-urban migrants to settle down in cities as opposed to return to the countryside (e.g., Cao, Li, Ma, & Tao, 2015; Fan, 2011; Liu, Wang, & Chen, 2016; Tang & Feng, 2015; Yue, Li, Feldman, & Du, 2010; Zhu & Chen, 2010). Scholars have found that the rate of willingness to permanently stay in cities is not as strong as usually suspected in public debates (Fan, 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2010), which entails further investigation of factors facilitating or prohibiting settlement intention among China's rural-to-urban migrants.

In the international migration literature, two competing theories have dominated the debate over the determinants of migrants' settlement intention. One theory emphasizes the economic incentives and depicts the settlement decision as a process to maximize the value of migrants' human capital (Constant & Massey, 2003; Khraif, 1992; Jensen & Pedersen, 2007; Massey & Akresh, 2006). The other theory, rooted in sociology, asserts that the sociocultural conditions – i.e. social attachment and integration in host and origin countries – are of crucial importance to migrants' settlement decisions (Constant & Massey, 2003; De Vroome & van Tubergen, 2014; Haug, 2008; Korinek, Entwisle, & Jampaklay, 2005; Massey, 1987; Reyes, 2001).

Recent studies in China's rural-to-urban migration also revealed a complicated mechanism involved in migrants' daily-life experiences and social integration in Chinese cities (e.g., Liu, Wang, & Tao, 2013; Liu et al., 2016; Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2015; Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2016; Xu, Guan, & Yao, 2011). Some studies have paid attention to economic incentives – such as human capital accumulation and labor market status – inductive to migrants' settlement intention (e.g., Cao et al. 2015; Fan, 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2010), while other studies stressed the importance of social-cultural determinants with specific reference to social attachment and integration (e.g. Liu et al., 2016; Tang & Feng, 2015; Yue et al., 2010; Zang, Lv, & Warren, 2015).

This paper contributes to this growing literature by empirically investigating the extent to which economic incentives and socio-cultural integration may strengthen or prohibit the intention of rural migrants to permanently settle in cities. In addition, we further extend the existing literature by exploring the cohort difference in the determinants of migrant settlement intention. The so-called “new-generational rural migrants” (or in Chinese, *xin-shengdai nongminggong*), i.e. migrant workers born since 1980 (Liu, 2010; Wang, 2001), constitute a large share of today's migrant populations in urban China. Scholars have debated whether the new-generation migrants possess a higher aspiration to formally settle down in cities than the first-generation migrants, due to their distinctive socio-economic profiles and life experiences (e.g., Liu, 2010; Yang, 2010; Zhu, Yu, Lin, & Dong, 2012). However, studies focusing on the cohort difference in the determinants of settlement intention have been limited with a few exceptions (e.g. Tang & Feng, 2015; Yue et al., 2010).

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we review the theoretical approaches to settlement intention in the literature of international migration and the literature on China's rural-to-urban migration. The empirical analysis of this paper is based on a dataset of 1953 rural migrants derived from a twelve-city migrant survey conducted in 2009. Thus in the third section, we introduce the data source, as well as variables and measurements for the regression analysis. We report empirical findings in section four and conclude with policy implications in the final section.

2. Literature review

In the area of international migration, one conventional assumption is that migrants move in order to settle down.

However, tremendous empirical findings – mostly based on cases in the US or Europe – have shown that non-permanent migration (i.e. circulation and return migration) is at least no less common than permanent migration (e.g., Hugo, 1998). A great number of scholars have sought to identify the determinants of migrants' decision of permanent settlement (e.g., Constant & Massey, 2003; Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Jensen & Pedersen, 2007; Massey, 1987). However, investigation of migrants' actual settlement behavior would heavily rely on the availability of large-scale, longitudinal survey data, which are difficult to obtain especially in developing countries. An alternative approach, therefore, has been to analyze the determinants of migrant settlement intention in order to understand the motivations of potential settlers vs. return migrants (e.g., Alberts & Hazen, 2005; De Vroome & van Tubergen, 2014; Massey & Akresh, 2006).

The existing literature has continuously debated over the relative degree and direction of effects of a series of determinants on migrant settlement decisions, with two theoretical approaches largely dominating the debate. An earlier approach, based on the neo-classical economic theory, emphasizes the economic incentives behind the migrant settlement decisions (Jensen & Pedersen, 2007). Built around the human capital theory, this approach depicts a migrant's settlement decision as a process to maximize the value of human capital and expand economic prospects (Constant & Massey, 2003; Khraif, 1992; Massey & Akresh, 2006). More specifically, education – including formal schooling and professional training – is the most notable human capital factor, whereas local language proficiency can facilitate acquisition of human capital in the destination place (Constant & Massey, 2003). As higher human capital may increase a migrant's capability to economically integrate into the destination place, education and local language proficiency both encourage settlement intention among migrant populations. In addition, a longer duration of residence in the destination may allow continuous accumulation of human capital over time, which also positively contributes to settlement intention. Relatedly, a higher status in the local labor market – e.g., better or more stable occupation and higher income – indicates better economic opportunities and achievements and, hence, better capitalization of a migrant's human capital. Overall, migrants who are more economically successful are more willing to settle in the destination (Jensen & Pedersen, 2007).

Another approach, rooted in sociology, emphasizes the social conditions behind migrant settlement decision and argues that migration should be conceived as “a dynamic social process” (Massey, 1987). Thus, the settlement vs. return decision is primarily determined by sociocultural factors, particularly the social and cultural attachment that a migrant feels toward both places of destination and origin. Such attachment may range from having family or children in the destination place or in the hometown, possessing a well-developed network of social ties, maintaining frequent interaction with local people or with people in the hometown, to psychologically feeling at home in the destination place (Constant & Massey, 2003; De Vroome & van Tubergen, 2014; Haug, 2008; Massey, 1987). Constant and Massey (2003) found that social attachment to the host place reduces the probability of return but that social attachment to the origin place may encourage return while reducing the inclination of permanent settlement. Other scholars found that stronger social networks and social interaction in the destination encourage intention to permanently settle rather than return to the origin country or city (Korinek et al., 2005; Reyes, 2001).

Discussions of China's rural-to-urban migration have long focused on the discriminative role played by the *hukou* system that had segregated migrant workers into low-class sections of labor

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