

Labor out-migration and agricultural change in rural China: A systematic review and meta-analysis



Hua Qin ^{a,*}, Tim F. Liao ^b

^a Department of Rural Sociology, Division of Applied Social Sciences, University of Missouri-Columbia, USA

^b Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

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ABSTRACT

The relationships between migration and agriculture represent a key aspect of rural restructuring in China and many other developing countries. Previous research largely generated mixed and incomplete findings on the effects of rural out-migration on agricultural change. Meta-analysis is considered as an important research strategy for comparing and integrating results from individual studies. Using a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) approach, we conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of recent case studies of labor out-migration and agricultural change in rural China. The analysis revealed general contextual patterns of migration impacts on agriculture. Migration-induced agricultural change was mainly conditional upon the specific conjunctural configuration of a rural community's economic development level or geographical locality, its land resources and dependence on agriculture, and whether the period under investigation was post-agricultural tax abolition. Overall, this meta-study provides the big picture of the complex migration–agriculture relationships in rural China, which is often missed in smaller-scale case studies. Such synthetic findings are particularly useful for informing evidence-based rural development planning and policy making.

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1. Introduction

Rural areas across the world constantly experience social, economic, and environmental transitions. Under the overarching processes of economic globalization and climate change, rural restructuring has become an important research topic linking multiple social science disciplines such as geography, sociology, anthropology, and planning (Woods, 2005). Although the existing literature on rural structural changes mainly focuses on developed countries, increasing research interests in similar issues in the developing world context have emerged in recent years (Long and Woods, 2011; Long, 2014; Woods, 2007). With the largest rural population among all nations and a rapidly growing market economy, China presents a particularly useful case for the study of restructuring processes and their consequences in rural areas.

Restructuring generally involves substantial changes in the conditions of, and the relationships between, constituent sectors of human society (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Lovering, 1989). For both developed and developing countries, major dimensions of

rural restructuring include (see Fig. 1): (1) shifts in agriculture and other economic activities (natural resource-based or not); (2) rural demographic dynamics (e.g., aging population and in- or out-migration); (3) altered sociocultural characteristics (e.g., traditions, perceptions, value systems, and community relations); and (4) changes in the rural environment including land use and land cover, soil quality, forest conservation, and rural pollution (Nelson, 2001; Wilson, 1995; Woods, 2005). Rural migration holds a key role in this framework since it is both an essential component of rural restructuring and a main driving force of changes in other dimensions. While contemporary rural restructuring in developed countries is characterized by urban-to-rural migration flows (also known as turnaround migration or counterurbanization), much of the rural population mobility in the developing world involves (seasonal) labor migration from rural villages to urban centers. Rural labor migration and agricultural change are among the most widely studied aspects of rural restructuring in China and many other developing countries (Bernstein, 2015; Carr, 2009; Gray, 2009; Jokisch, 2002; Long et al., 2011; Qin, 2009, 2010; Zhang et al., 2015). However, previous research largely generated mixed and incomplete findings on the effects of rural out-migration on agricultural change.

* Corresponding author. 216 Gentry Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA.

E-mail address: qinh@missouri.edu (H. Qin).

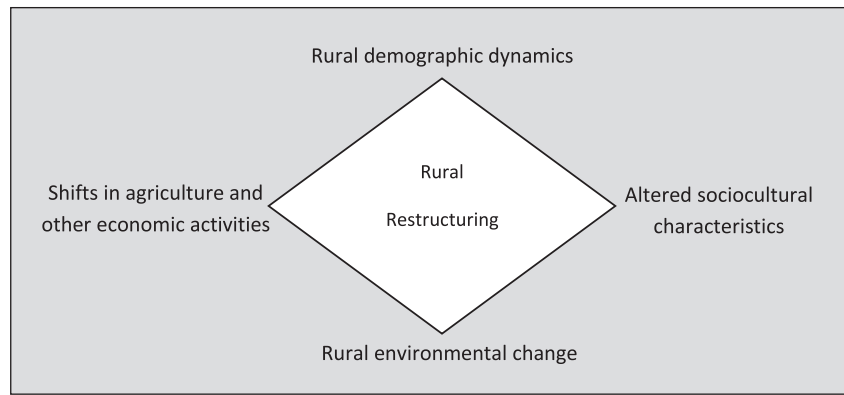


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework of rural restructuring. Source: Adapted from Nelson (2001).

The primary purpose of this study is to identify general patterns of migration impacts on agricultural production in rural China through a systematic review and meta-analysis of the recent literature. Meta-analysis has been increasingly used to integrate findings from individual case studies in environmental and natural resource social sciences (Pagdee et al., 2006; Qin and Grigsby, 2016; Robinson et al., 2014; Romero-Lankao et al., 2012; Rudel, 2008). Since the social and economic outcomes of migration in origin areas are highly contingent on local development contexts (de Haas, 2006; Durand and Massey, 1992), a case-oriented meta-analysis is especially suitable for examining why the impacts of labor out-migration on agriculture are positive in some rural communities of China but negative in others. Such synthetic analysis can also provide a broader understanding of the complex migration–agriculture relationships in rural China, which is often missed in smaller-scale case studies.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the current literature on rural migration and agriculture in developing countries and particularly in China. Section 3 describes the detailed procedures of our systematic review and meta-analytical method. After presenting the results of the meta-analysis in Section 4, we conclude with interpretations of major findings and some implications for future migration and rural restructuring research (Sections 5 and 6).

2. Rural out-migration and agricultural change

2.1. Rural out-migration and agriculture in the developing world

Both agricultural production and labor migration are important livelihood strategies in the rural areas of developing countries (Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2009). Distinct views exist with regard to the impacts of migration and remittances on rural livelihood outcomes. In the traditional “dependence and underdevelopment” view, rural out-migration exacerbates social and economic inequalities and creates an ever increasing dependency on labor migration, thereby undermining local livelihoods and social structures (Lipton, 1980; Reichert, 1981). By contrast, the “new economics of labor migration” view contends that migration and concomitant remittances can improve rural livelihoods through loosening production constraints, diversifying income sources, and providing financial capital for investment (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1999). Based on an extensive literature review on the relationships between migration and rural development, de Haan (1999) concluded that the effects of migration on rural livelihoods were context-dependent and no easy generalizations could be made.

In a similar vein, there is a long-standing debate on the effects of

rural labor migration on agricultural change in migrant sending communities (Gray and Bilsborrow, 2014; Jokisch, 2002; Mazambani, 1990; Qin, 2010). A popular view is that rural out-migration leads to labor shortage and thus threatens agricultural production (Black, 1993; Collins, 1988; Zimmerer, 1993). For instance, case studies from Zimbabwe found labor migrant households had less average farm labor input and lower production efficiency than non-migrant households, and suggested in general labor migration was detrimental to communal land agriculture (Mazambani, 1990). A more recent rural household survey in the southern Yucatán peninsular region of Mexico also found that labor migrant households cultivated significantly less farmland and were more likely to invest in pasture development on extant land than non-migrant households (Schmook and Radel, 2008).

Nevertheless, an alternative view on the migration impacts on agriculture contends that remittances generated from labor migration can compensate for the reduction in labor input and provide capital resources for agricultural improvement and land purchases (Durand et al., 1996; Stark, 1980; Taylor, 1999). Abundant empirical evidence from different regions has also been gathered to support this argument. In rural Albania, McCarthy et al. (2006) found that households with international labor migrants had smaller land area planted in staples, fewer agricultural labor hours, and lower crop diversification index than non-migrant households. However, the results also suggested that the loss of household agricultural labor was compensated by increased access to capital and that overall migration led to improvements in both agricultural and total household incomes. Likewise, de Haas (2006) showed that international migration remittances enabled migrant households to invest more than other households in water pumps, farmland reclamation, and the hiring of agricultural labor in Southern Morocco, and thus contributed to increased agricultural production. Additionally, Hull (2007) found that migrant households with remittances in rural Northeast Thailand were more likely than non-migrant households and households with migrants but no remittance to engage in traditional rice cultivation because of their enhanced capabilities to hire paid farm labor.

In addition to the two polarized views discussed above, a “middle-path” finding from south-central Ecuador showed that small landholding agricultural systems were not disturbed by labor out-migration, nor were remittances invested in agricultural cultivation or farm expansion (Jokisch, 2002). No significant difference in agricultural productivity was found between migrant and non-migrant households, or between different categories of migrant households (i.e. international or domestic migration). Drawing on household survey data from the southern Ecuadorian Andes, Gray (2009) also suggested that migrant-sending

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