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Population migration and children's school enrollments in China, 1990–2005 ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of migration on children's school enrollment by analyzing the micro-data from Chinese population censuses in 1990 and 2000 and mini-census in 2005. We match school-age children (7–14 years old) with their parents, and examine how migration status and parents' absence affect children's school enrollment in urban China. We also compare rural–urban migrant children with their peers in both origin counties and destination districts. Results show that migrant children are less likely to be enrolled in school than urban local children and that children of rural registration status are particularly disadvantaged in school enrollment over the whole examined period in urban China. Rural–urban migrant children fare significantly worse than non-migrant children in both origins and destinations and noticeably they are even less likely than left-behind children to be enrolled in school. The likelihood of being enrolled in school increases for rural–urban migrant children as they spend more time in destinations.

1. Introduction

Market reforms and ensuing economic growth have brought about a surge in internal migration in China. In the pre-reform period, by virtue of the household registration system (*hukou*), the Chinese government set up an "invisible wall" to demarcate different places of residence, and especially to set the urban and rural sectors apart, with the aim of controlling population migration (Chan, 1994; Wu and Treiman, 2004). Economic reform in the past three decades has relaxed such administrative control. Consequently, geographic mobility has risen and changing jobs has become much easier than before (Hao, 2012; Ou and Kondo, 2013). The size of the "floating population", which consists of migrants who have resided at the place of destination for at least six months without local household registration status, reached 144 million in 2000 (Liang and Ma, 2004) and 147 million in 2006 (National Bureau of Statistics in China, 2006).

These migrants, predominantly farmers from inland provinces, tend to not only move further and stay longer for better economic opportunities, but also to bring their spouses and children once they have settled down in cities. The younger ones

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may even choose to start a family in the destination cities. In the 1990s, the city-born children of early migrants were beginning to reach school age. The new tidal wave of migration is also bringing to cities more school-age children migrating with their parents. Without local permanent registration status, migrant parents have to fork out extra to get their children into local schools, posing a huge burden on many migrant parents (Lu, 2007). Consequently, most migrants had to leave the care of their children to grandparents in their origin homes because they could not afford the extra costs to bring their children with them. These children, known as *liushou ertong* (left-behind children) in Chinese, have been found to exhibit various psychological and developmental problems (Liang et al., 2008; Lu and Zhou, 2013; Xiang, 2007).

Hence, population migration has yielded significant impact on the well-being of children, be they migrant children or left-behind children. The provision of educational opportunities for children affected by migration has become an important issue concerning education policy makers and the public at large in China, which has fundamental implications for the country's sustainable development in the future (Duan and Zhou, 2005; Liang et al., 2008; Yang and Fan, 2012).

Most literature on internal migration in China tends to focus on the demographic patterns of migration and the socioeconomic consequences for migrants and community development (e.g., Liang, 2001; Liang and White, 1996; Ma, 2001; Yang and Guo, 1996; Zhang and Wu, 2013; Zhao, 2000). With few recent studies on the wellbeing of an increasing number of children affected by migration (e.g., Lee and Park, 2010; Liang and Chen, 2007; Lu and Zhou, 2013; Yang and Fan, 2012), systematic and rigorous empirical analyses of the issues remain relatively limited. First, most studies focus either on migrant children or on left-behind children, rather than placing them in a broad context for comparisons (with Liang and Chen, 2007 being an exception). Second, previous studies mainly employ either the census data from one province or the survey data on migration in selected regions; a systematic analysis of the situation at the national level has yet to emerge. Finally, the existing literature is limited to a snapshot analysis of how migration affects children's school enrollment in the 1990s only, without updated information on the changing situations in the context of massive population migration since then.

In this article, by analyzing the micro-data from population censuses in 1990 and 2000 and mini-census in 2005, we attempt to fill the gap and address the educational consequence of population migration to school-age children in China. Specifically, we examine how migration status and parents' absence (family structure) affect the likelihood of children's school enrollment, paying special attention to comparing rural–urban migrant children with their peers in both origin counties and destination districts. Our findings could shed lights on the roles of migration status, family structure, and rural *hukou*, and underlying mechanisms in determining children's school enrollment in contemporary China.

2. Social exclusion, family structure, and educational consequences of migration to school-age children in China

In a broader and comparative perspective, the issue of migration/immigration and children's educational outcomes has been one of the major topics in sociological inquiries. In the United States, scholars have shown that residential and school moves would lead to an increase in high school drop-outs and poor academic performance (Long, 1975; Pribesh and Downey, 1999). Why migration has negative impact on children's education? The prevailing explanation is that migration could results in the loss of social capital in school, the neighborhood, and community of origins, as social capital plays an important role in preventing school dropouts and enhancing learning outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Teachman et al., 1999).

Compared to internal migrants in developed countries, the impact of transnational immigration on children's educational outcome is less clear, largely contingent upon the human capital, social capital and other resources of their parents and communities (e.g., Xie and Greenman, 2011; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). Empirical analyses show that, after taking into account of various background characteristics, the bulk of immigrant children often reach parity with or fare even better than their native-born peers (see reviews in Zhang, 2014). Social policies and civil rights legislations have largely afforded immigrant children opportunities for socioeconomic advancement in the host countries. For instance, immigrant children, even undocumented, are by law entitled to free public education from kindergarten to grade 12 in the United States (Lu and Zhou, 2013). Even if some immigrant children have poorer educational outcomes than their native-born peers, the disparity is mainly due to immigrant parents' lower socioeconomic status, rather than their immigration status *per se*.

Studies of the educational consequences of migration to children in the United States typically adopt non-migrant children as the comparison group, without further differentiating between those in origins and in destination, probably due to the fact that regional inequality is not a severe issue in the country. Immigrant children are seldom compared to their peers in origin countries, simply because the latter's information is not available in most empirical analyses.

While the extensive literature on internal migration or transnational immigration in western countries, especially in the United States, can inform our studies of similar issues in China, there are two distinct features that characterize the experience of Chinese children affected by migration. The first is the persisting role of the household registration system (*hukou*) in social exclusion of migrants and their children in destinations. The second is the changing family structure resulted from the massive population migration.

Social exclusion refers to the process in which individuals or social groups are systematically blocked from or denied full access to various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to other members (Silver, 1994). It is a useful concept to help us understand the disadvantages encountered by the Chinese internal migrants in cities. The household registration system (*hukou*) has been served as a unique institution since the 1950s to divide Chinese rural and urban populations for the distribution of resources and life chances and the control of migration under state socialism (Wu and Treiman, 2004). After decades of economic reform, while its control over migration has been relaxed, the *hukou* continues to be employed by many local governments as the basis of providing employment opportunities and allocating subsidies and