**Title:** The Influence of *Hukou* and College Education in China’s Labor Market

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**Research grant providing support for this work:** National Foundation for Philosophy and Social Science Research, China, “Social network analysis models in multi-disciplinary perspective.” (Project #: 13&ZD177)

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**Abstract:** This paper classifies China’s urban labor force into six categories in order to examine the roles of birthplace, *hukou,* and education in an individual’s job placement and wage attainment in urban China. The analysis of CGSS2010 data shows that (1) when rural-born individuals gain both urban *hukou* and college education, they begin to enjoy an equal workplace and wage attainments as the college educated urbanites; (2) when a rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer does not occur, the rural-born college educated experience fewer chances on working in the state-owned enterprises than the college educated urbanites, and earn lower wage than the college urbanites; (3) among the non-college educated, people who have no urban *hukou* are not only having the least chance to work in good sectors, but also earning least. This paper creatively develops the six-category scheme and has, for the first time in research, differentiated the roles of birthplace, *hukou* transfer, and college education in workplace and income attainments in urban China.

**Key words**: birthplace; *hukou*; sector; wage income

The household registration system (*hukou*) is China’s basic institution for allocating socioeconomic resources and opportunities (Lu, 2008). Many studies have shown that rural migrants face discrimination in the cities, and their job and wage attainments are significantly lower than urbanites. There are two theoretical perspectives to explain rural-urban disparities in the labor markets. One is human capital theory. It is argued that rural migrants are treated differently from urban workers not because they are rural migrants, but because they generally have lower education than urbanites (Démurger et al., 2009). The alternative perspective is labor market segmentation theory. While labor market segregation by gender and race is common in market economies (Altonji & Blank, 1999), China’s labor market segregation is chiefly characterized by the *hukou* status: rural birthplace and rural household registration are the discriminatory factors for the rural-urban disparities in the cities (Knight et al., 1999; Cai et al., 2001; Xie, 2007).

I argue that we must carefully think of the implications of the two theories in order to understand the underlying logic of the rural-urban disparities in the labor markets. For example, if the human capital theory is credible, then the rural people who have achieved higher education is expected to experience no labor market discrimination even if they have not completed the rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer. If, on the other hand, the labor market segmentation theory is credible, then the rural people who have completed the rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer should not experience labor market segregation. In this paper, we will use a new research design to explore the interactive role of education and *hukou* in workplace and wage attainments among workers of rural and urban origins.

**Current Research and Unfinished Tasks**

The Chinese *hukou* system classified people into rural or urban category by the criterion of birthplace (Lu, 2003). One study shows that the *hukou* system traditionally had played four important roles in China’s social stratification and population control: managing population information, providing the foundation for allocating resources, controlling migration, and controlling special groups (Wang, 2010). Consequently, if a rural resident wanted to move to a city for a better life, it was very difficult to do so.

Economic reform initiated in the late 1970’s relaxed restrictions on rural-to-urban mobility. The number of rural migrants working in urban areas began to increase dramatically in the 1980s, and now rural migrants have been a major part of industrial workers in China (State Council, 2006). At the same time, however, only a few of them can transform their *hukou* status from a rural to an urban one through formal channels, such as organized job transfer, attainment of higher education, or joining the army (Wu & Treiman, 2004). The rural workers who have made no *hukou* transfer do not have formal rights of residency in the destination cities. They are also not eligible for receiving any state welfare benefits that are allocated only to urbanites (Solinger, 1999). This is despite the fact that rural migrants could work on non-agricultural work and “temporarily” live in the cities. According to official statistics, urban workers’ average monthly wage was ¥3483 in 2011, while rural migrants’ ¥2049 (China’s National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The wage differential is large, as urbanites earned 70% higher than rural migrants.

Researchers have attributed the urban-rural wage differential to *hukou* system, and they have used two theoretical perspectives to explain this phenomenon: human capital and labor market segregation. Human capital theory points to the importance of education, skills, and on-the-job training for increasing a worker’s productivity, which in turn increase his/her wage income (Becker, 1964). Using this theory, Chinese researchers have argued that lower education and skills are the major constraints to rural migrants, causing them to get lower wage income (Li & Li, 2007). Using data from a 2005 national probability sample, Xing (2008) shows that rural migrants’ average hourly wage was 64% of urban workers, but 90% of this differential is due to personal characteristics, mainly education and work experience (Démurger et al, 2009).

At the same time, some scholars have pointed out that the *hukou* system has created a two-tier labor market in the cities in which urban residents are favorably treated while their rural migrant counterparts are discriminated against (Meng & Zhang, 2001). Government policy often prohibits rural migrants from finding good jobs. With an increasing number of laid-off workers in the city, the government takes steps to help laid-workers find jobs again. To provide more opportunity for the laid-workers, many cities control the number of rural migrants, and they also limit rural migrants’ occupation. Rural migrants can only find the jobs that urban residents are not willing to take. Urban residents are entitled to many social benefits, while rural migrants are entitled to little social welfare. For example, rural migrants cannot take part in urban medical insurance system. If they cannot find job in urban, they are not covered by official unemployment statistics, they also have no rights to consume the service sponsored by the government. Their children have no rights of access to education in urban schools unless they pay extra money (Zhao, 2000). Wang (2003) uses Oaxaca-Blinder (Oaxaca, 1973) shredding method to explain the kinds of discrimination that are against rural migrant workers. She found that if we control for personal characteristics of respondents, there is still 76% of wage differential that is due to discrimination. It means that *hukou* system plays an important role in leading to the wage differential between rural migrant works and urban workers. The studies of Xie and Deng also support this view (Xie, 2007; Deng, 2007).

From the literature just reviewed, we can see that many studies have ignored the complex nature of the wage differential between urban workers and rural migrant workers. Currently, researchers have treated rural migrant workers are as a homogenous group, which, I argue, is a false assumption. Some people can transfer their *hukou* status from rural to urban through formal channels. I identify two sources of heterogeneity within rural migrant workers.

First, rural migrant workers differ tremendously in level of education. Although many researchers have argued for the important role that education plays in wage attainment by rural migrant workers (Wu & Treiman, 2004), no one has yet identified a particular level of education that presents a key structural constraint on discrimination against rural migrants. There is a Chinese phrase saying that fishes are free after having jumped over the dragon gate (鲤鱼跳龙门). I argue that in Chinese society today a rural migrant having obtained college or higher education is like a fish having jumped over the dragon gate; this is because the level of college or higher education contains valuable knowledge and potential productive assets that give the highly educated, urbanite or rural-born, both the market signal and the negotiation power in a competitive labor market. If so, analytically researchers must isolate highly-educated rural migrant workers from the rest of the group.

Second, rural migrant workers also differ in their actual *hukou* identity because some of them may have experienced a rural-to-urban status transfer at the time they search for jobs in the labor markets. Fan (2002) found in a Guangzhou survey that the rural migrants who have experienced the *hukou* transfer are actually doing better, in terms of job types and wage income, than the entire urbanite group in the labor market. Her finding is consistent with those from a nationally representative sample survey (Wu, 2007), and lead to the conclusion that this phenomenon is sample-selection bias (Wu, 2008). That is, rural people who could have gained the urban *hukou* status are elites, and they do not represent the majority of rural migrants. Liang (2004) divided the migrants into temporary migrants and permanent migrants (those who have obtained urban *hukou*), and found that temporary migrants are less likely to be employed in prestigious occupations than permanent migrants.

The above analysis leads to a 6-category classification of China’s urban labor force: (1) the highly-educated rural-born who have experienced rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer; (2) the highly-educated rural-born who have not experienced rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer; (3) the less-educated rural-born who have experienced rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer; (4) the less-educated rural-born who have not experienced rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer; (5) the highly-educated urbanite; and (6) the less-educated urbanite. For simplicity of expression, I’ll term the above six groups in the following short names: educated transfers, educated non-transfers, less-educated transfers, less-educated non-transfers, educated urbanites, and less-educated urbanites. A comparison of these six groups will help us simultaneously reassess the influence of *hukou* status and higher education on job placement and wage attainments

**Data, Variables, and Methodology**

**Data.** We analyze data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS thereafter) 2010, a biannual survey based on a national representative sample of the adult population aged 18 or older in both rural and urban China. A multistage stratified random sampling method is used. One eligible person aged 18 or older is randomly selected from each sampled household as the survey respondent. In this paper, we only study the urban China’s labor market, so our research subjects are the people whose age are between 21 and 65, working in the urban labor market, and having wage. In China, people will have college’s degrees by 21 years old, and have bachelor’s degrees by 22 years old.

**Dependent variable.** We usejob placement and annual wage income to measure status attainment. Job placement is the respondent’s work sector, for which we consider four sectorial placements: a placement in government organizations, state-owned enterprises, collective enterprises, or private enterprises. Annual wage income is the respondent’s annual wage income in 2009. In regression analysis to be presented shortly, we use a natural logarithm transformation of wage income to allow for a percentage differential interpretation of the effects of independent variables.

**Independent variable.**  *Hukou*status and educational level are the core independent variables in this article. We synthesize respondent’s household registration at birth, respondent’s household registration at present, and respondent’s access to higher college to generate a six-group classification: 1= educated transfers, 2= educated non-transfers, 3= less-educated transfers, 4= less-educated non-transfers, 5= educated urbanites, and 6= less-educated urbanites.

**Control variable.** As for people’s family background affect their social stratification. We therefore include respondent’s family economic status at his 14 years old as control variable. It is a continuous variable from 1 to 10, and 1 means the lowest family economic status. In China, not all cities have equal income levels. In other words, income level in places like Beijing or Shanghai is much higher than other urban locations. So we divide the locations into two groups: the first-tier cities and the non-first-tier cities. The first-tier cities include Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. We take respondent’s gender, age, and marital status as other control variables.

**Results**

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables. As shown, mean annual wage income differs significantly among the six status groups. Although the F-test does not provide a category-to-category comparison, we can arrange the six groups from high to low annual wage income: educated transfers, educated urbanites, educated non-transfers, less-educated transfers, less-educated urbanites, and less-educated non-transfers. Without further analysis, this ordering of the six groups shows that college education makes a significant difference in annual wage income, and *hukou* status also makes a difference between transfers and non-transfers. We will see whether or not this ordering survives statistical significance test when personal attributes are controlled for in a regression analysis that is conducted shortly.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Variables on six kinds of *Hukou* status type

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Rural-Born | | | | Urban-Born | |  |
| (1)  Educated transfers | (2)  Educated non-transfers | (3)  Less-educated transfers | (4)  Less-educated non-transfers | (5)  Educated urbanites | (6)  Less-educated urbanites | Chi2/F test |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mean annual wage income | 50,982 | 45,860 | 25,971 | 20,703 | 47,430 | 24,958 | 49.05\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sector |  |  |  |  |  |  | 861.87\*\*\* |
| Government organization | 15.30% | 5.88% | 4.66% | 0.83% | 10.62% | 4.40% |  |
| State-owned enterprise | 48.40% | 16.18% | 18.97% | 6.51% | 45.19% | 27.89% |  |
| Collective enterprise | 6.39% | 7.35% | 5.34% | 2.50% | 6.07% | 5.53% |  |
| Private enterprise | 29.91% | 70.59% | 71.03% | 90.16% | 38.11% | 62.19% |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Gender (male) | 64.16% | 54.41% | 54.31% | 63.66% | 52.28% | 62.44% | 35.97\*\*\* |
| Age | 36.89 | 31.18 | 42.39 | 39.74 | 36.62 | 43.81 | 66.52\*\*\* |
| Marital (married) | 86.07% | 66.18% | 90.00% | 89.70% | 73.86% | 84.05% | 113.23\*\*\* |
| Location (first-tier cities) | 28.08% | 20.59% | 11.55% | 5.22% | 42.50% | 25.13% | 437.76\*\*\* |
| Family economic status | 3.38 | 3.90 | 3.27 | 2.86 | 4.35 | 3.61 | 57.14\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Number of cases | 438 | 68 | 580 | 1,321 | 593 | 796 | 3796 |
| \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1 | | | | | | | |

Job placements to economic sectors are also significantly different among the six status groups. Relatively more educated transfers have jobs in government organizations and state-owned enterprises (15.30% and 48.40%, respectively) than educated urbanites (10.62% and 45.19%, respectively), and members of the latter group are more likely to have jobs in private enterprises. Educated non-transfers do not equate educated transfers and are significantly less likely to work in government organizations and state owned enterprises (5.88% and 16.18%, respectively) and more likely to work in private enterprises (70.59%). Among the less educated, non-transfers are least likely to work in government organizations or state-owned enterprises. Once again, we will see if these differences in sectorial placements survive statistical significance test in multivariate analysis that is conducted shortly.

There is a good reason why we will need to conduct multivariate analysis for testing the group differences in job placements and wage income. As shown in Table 1, respondents across the six status groups differ significantly in personal attributes. From studies of China’s social stratification (see review by Bian 2002), we have learned that gender, age, and marital status are associated with individuals’ labor market opportunities and outcomes, and the differential distributions of respondents by these variables across the six status groups may generate what Wu (2008) refer to as the problem of “selection bias.” Also important are the facts that members of the six status groups significantly differ in the localities (first-tier vs. second-tier cities) as well as family background (measured by parental economic status at respondent’s age of 14).

What follows is a series of M-logic regression models in which job placements to four sectors are compared among the six status groups, with statistical controls for personal attributes. We use collective enterprises as a reference group and exclude the coefficients of the five control variables from presentation for simplicity.

Table2 M-logit Regressions for *Hukou* status on Sector

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Independent variables |  | Full sample model | Less-educated sample model |
| **Government organization VS Collective enterprise** | | | |
| *Hukou* status |  |  |  |
| Educated urbanites |  | *Reference* |  |
| Educated transfers |  | 0.246 |  |
| Educated non-transfers |  | -0.923 |  |
| Less-educated transfers |  | -0.968\*\*\* | 0.0252 |
| Less-educated non-transfers |  | -1.947\*\*\* | -0.902\*\* |
| Less-educated urbanites |  | -1.022\*\*\* | *Reference* |
| *Five personal attribute variables* |  | *Controlled* | *Controlled* |
| Constant |  | -0.0687 | -1.055 |
| **State-owned enterprise VS Collective enterprise** | | | |
| *Hukou* status |  |  |  |
| Educated urbanites |  | *Reference* |  |
| Educated transfers |  | -0.027 |  |
| Educated non-transfers |  | -1.268\*\* |  |
| Less-educated transfers |  | -0.743\*\*\* | -0.324 |
| Less-educated non-transfers |  | -1.088\*\*\* | -0.647\*\* |
| Less-educated urbanites |  | -0.394 | *Reference* |
| *Five personal attribute variables* |  | *Controlled* | *Controlled* |
| Constant |  | 2.214\*\*\* | 2.421\*\*\* |
| **Private enterprise VS Collective enterprise** | | | |
| *Hukou* status |  |  |  |
| Educated urbanites |  | *Reference* |  |
| Educated transfers |  | -0.276 |  |
| Educated non-transfers |  | 0.256 |  |
| Less-educated transfers |  | 0.993\*\*\* | 0.0613 |
| Less-educated non-transfers |  | 1.919\*\*\* | 0.969\*\*\* |
| Less-educated urbanites |  | 0.838\*\*\* | *Reference* |
| *Five personal attribute variables* |  | *Controlled* | *Controlled* |
| Constant |  | 3.350\*\*\* | 4.487\*\*\* |
| N |  | 3796 | 2697 |
| LR Chi2 |  | 1022.31 | 328.67 |
| Pseudo R2 |  | 0.15 | 0.09 |

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

The full sample model shows that as compared to educated urbanites, both educated transfers and educated non-transfers are equally likely to have jobs in government organizations, and the three less-educated groups are significantly less likely to work in government organizations. In terms of opportunities of working in state-owned enterprises, there is no difference between educated urbanites and educated transfers, but educated non-transfers are less likely to work in state-owned enterprises. Educated urbanites, educated transfers, and educated non-transfers have equal opportunity to work in private enterprise, but the less-educated non-transfers are most likely to work in private enterprises.

Since college education makes a significant difference in job placements, and because the college educated urbanites are used as a reference group in the full sample model, we replicate the model with the subsample of less-educated for a direct comparison between the three less educated groups. It shows two sets of consistent results. First, when rural migrants have transferred their status to an urban *hukou*, their opportunities of sectorial placements are about the same as urbanites. Second, when rural migrants have not transferred their *hukou* status, they are consistently less likely to work in government organizations, state-owned enterprise, and significantly more likely to work in the least desirable private enterprises. It is not so much about their past birthplace but their present *hukou* status that make rural migrants vulnerable for labor market discrimination.

Table 3 Comparison of Annual Wage Income by Education and *Hukou* (Scheffe Test)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Row mean –  Column mean | Educated urbanites | Educated transfers | Educated non-transfers | Less-educated urbanites | Less-educated transfers |
| Educated transfers | 0.92 |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Educated non-transfers | 1.00 | 0.98 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Less-educated urbanites | **0.00** | **0.00** | **0.03** |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Less-educated transfers | **0.00** | **0.00** | **0.05** | 1.00 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Less-educated non-transfers | **0.00** | **0.00** | **0.00** | 0.53 | 0.40 |
|  |  |  |  |  |

Does this kind of discrimination by hukou status exist and affect wage attainment? We conduct two sets of analysis. Table 3 presents a group-by-group comparison for mean wage annual income across the six status groups (entries are two-tailed levels of significance from t-tests). Two patterns emerge. First, there are significant wage differentials between the college educated and the less educated (entries in bold face). This is clear evidence for the important role of college education in wage attainment. Second, among either the college educated or the less educated, neither birthplace nor *hukou* status makes a difference in level of wage attained. Do these results survive statistical significance test in multivariate analysis in which personal attributes are controlled for? Table 4 presents the results from OLS regression models estimated to test the conditional effects of education and *hukou* status on wage attainment after controlling for personal attributes and sectorial job placements.

Table 4 OLS Regressions for *Hukou* status on (Ln) Wage

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Independent variables | Full sample model | Less-educated sample model |
| *Hukou* status |  |  |
| Educated urbanites | *Reference* |  |
| Educated transfers | 0.056 |  |
| Educated non-transfers | -0.199\*\* |  |
| Less-educated transfers | -0.567\*\*\* | 0.001 |
| Less-educated non-transfers | -0.660\*\*\* | -0.100\*\* |
| Less-educated urbanites | -0.570\*\*\* | *Reference* |
|  |  |  |
| Gender (female) | 0.398\*\*\* | 0.459\*\*\* |
| Age | 0.055\*\*\* | 0.038\*\*\* |
| Age square/100 | -0.078\*\*\* | -0.062\*\*\* |
| Marital (unmarried) | 0.085\*\* | 0.083 |
| Location (non-first-tier cities) | 0.532\*\*\* | 0.429\*\*\* |
| Family economic status (14-year-old) | 0.047\*\*\* | 0.055\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Sector (collective enterprise as reference) | |  |
| Government organization | 0.010 | 0.056 |
| State-owned enterprise | 0.049 | 0.098 |
| Private enterprise | -0.034 | -0.077 |
|  |  |  |
| Constant | 8.853\*\*\* | 8.701\*\*\* |
| N | 3796 | 2697 |
| Adj R-squared | 0.28 | 0.14 |

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

The full sample model of Table 4 shows no wage differential between college educated urbanites and college educated transfers, but the educated non-transfers earn a lower wage. The three less educated groups on average earn significantly lower wages than the educated urbanites, with the non-transfers earning least. The less educated subsample model, moreover, shows that compared to urbanites the *hukou* transfers earn about the same but the non-transfers earn significantly less. These results replicate the general pattern observed in the job placement models: discrimination is nonexistent between groups of rural and urban origins, but indeed exist between those who have transferred their *hukou* status and those who have not.

**Conclusion**

China is in a transition period of urbanization, and rural-burn people have increasingly transferred their *hukou* from rural to urban status. The results of this paper imply that this status transfer is a critical form of social and institutional change. We find that it is not very much about their rural birthplace or rural background but their *hukou* non-transfer status that makes rural migrants truly vulnerable for possible discrimination in job placements and wage attainments in urban labor markets. Both measures of job placement and wage income are necessary, because the wage models show that the *hukou* non-transfers earn significantly lower wages than urbanites, whether they are college educated or not, than urbanites even after job placements, as well as personal attributes, are controlled for. This means that rural *hukou* non-transfers face a two-step discrimination: they suffer from placement discrimination in external labor markets, and they tend suffer from wage discrimination within employed organization. For *hukou* transferred individuals with or without college education, they are free of these kinds of discrimination in the cities.

The above pattern of results are found through an innovative six-category classification of China’s urban labor force. This classification jointly considers one’s birthplace, *hukou*, and college education. The analysis of CGSS2010 dataset shows that (1) when rural-born individuals gain both urban *hukou* and college education, they begin to enjoy an equal treatment in the attainment of workplace, and wage statuses as the college educated urbanites; (2) when a rural-to-urban *hukou* transfer does not occur, the rural-born college educated experience fewer chances on working in the state-owned enterprise than the college educated urbanites, and earn lower wage than the college urbanites; (3) among the non-college educated, people who have no urban *hukou* are not only having the least chance to work in good sectors, but also earning least.

Results of our analyses suggest that rural migrants can succeed in urban labor markets once they achieve college education and overcome the institutional hurdles of *hukou* transfer. For most rural-born people, attainment of college is constrained by structural and individual factors, whose analyses are beyond the score of this paper. But for *hukou* transfer to occur in massive numbers, this is to call for drastic institutional transformation. The good news is that Chinese government under the Xi and Li administration has seriously planned such an institutional transformation. Future researchers should play close attention to this transformation and how it will change the social structures of opportunities and outcomes in China’s urban labor markets.

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