Upward Job Mobility of Rural Migrants with High School Education In China

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Stories of rural migrants traveling to urban cities in China, in hope to provide better living conditions for their families are all too common. There are an estimated number of 262 million rural migrants in China; many of them serve as a source of cheap labor for industries such as manufacturing, construction and other services (Migrant, 2013). These migrants like many others in society, want to strive for a better job and pay, but there are several limiting factors that act as a barrier to their ideal goal. One barricade is the hukuo system, which serves as an internal passport that restrict migrant’s mobility and as an “invisible wall” and segregates the urban and rural regions of the country (Cheng, Selden 1994). Another hurdle is the migrant’s education and social status in society. Many rural migrants are given jobs that are considered undesirable for urban hukuo workers and often marginalized.

In Li’s research (2004), it was found that rural migrant workers do experience upward occupational mobility, moving from an agricultural worker to an industrial worker. But it would be difficult for migrants to experience further upward job mobility to a higher job position in urban industries (Li, 2004). Many migrant workers also ended up returning to their hometown after several years living in cities, largely due to social exclusion (Han et al., 2011). This paper will seek to review the upward job mobility of high school educated\(^1\) rural migrants in urban China, and how migrants’ upward job mobility\(^2\) is affected by one’s education level, status attainment and class stratification in addition to the hukuo system.

\(^1\) High school educated refers to rural migrants of senior high school education
\(^2\) Upward job mobility in this article refers to the conversion from manual to non-manual jobs
The Hukuo Institution

The hukuo system, instilled by Mao Zedong in 1958, was a way of address the booming population in China. In this multi-faceted hukuo system, many benefited as a result, but the people affected negatively were far greater than the beneficiaries (Cheng & Selden, 1994). Social inequality is arguably one of them most significant outcome of the policy, largely falling on the agricultural hukuo who are restricted to the rural areas, many seek to find better job opportunities elsewhere, often in large urban cities. Often, these migrants are not provided with the same welfare benefits received by non-agricultural holders. Benefits such as housing, health care, children’s education and job securities are not provided to the migrant worker by the state. Unlike their non-agricultural counterparts that benefits from the hukuo system, not having an urban hukuo serves as an extra burden for them working in urban cities. Migrants are subjected to lower pay, poor living condition and high expenses such as children’s educational cost (Wong et al, 2007).

Education Attainment and Work Opportunities

Using 2005 one-percent population survey, it was found that out of the 119,675 adults between the aged of 16 and 60, 61 percent of the migrants are from rural area and 95 percent of migrants from rural area had rural hukuo (Zhuang & Wu, 2013). It was also found that only 18.5 percent of rural migrants received senior high school education as compared to 66.2 percent of urban locals. Job distribution for rural migrants was also clearly segregated with only 8.4 percent of rural migrant being employed as managers, professional and clerks as compared to 45.5 percent of urban locals. In work units, only 1.5 percent of rural migrants were employed in work units as to 61.8 percent of urban locals (Zhuang & Wu, 2013). As we can see here, the percentage of rural migrants having high school education is only a fraction of the urban hukuo holder. This shows that the upward job mobility of these rural migrants is lesser as compared those of urban hukuo workers (Wong et al, 2007). These findings are also
consistent with other study (Wu & Treiman 2004) that shows that increase in education level does help migrants to attain higher job positions and salary in addition to party membership, especially for State-Owned Enterprises (SOE). There was also a strong consistency as mentioned Treiman and Zhang (2011) that attainment of high school education or equivalent is associated with conversion to urban hukuo, and chances of conversion is also 11 times higher than those with below high school education. With the ability to convert to urban hukuo, this also provides rural migrants with the chance to shift to no-manual jobs with higher pay. In line with the human capital theory, employers are more likely to hire workers with higher education and work experience in order to increase efficiency (Xie & Yu, 2003). In the interviews conducted by Han et al (2011), one of the themes identified was the upward mobility of migrant workers achieving high economic status by making their way up to the occupation ladder. In one of the interview, it was described how a migrant peasant with high school degree moved from performing manual jobs to non-manual job within the same organization (Han et al, 2011, p 208). In another interview one rural migrant with only elementary school education, chose to return back to his village as he was unable to be move up occupation ladder (p.207). Education here seems to be the key factor that determines one’s job mobility. In a study conducted on generational perspectives of rural migrants, it was also found that education was more likely to affect their work prospect, with high education, the higher the likely hood to disassociate from manual based jobs (Yue, Li, Feldman, & Du, 2010). Despite there being only a handful of rural migrants that managed to climb up the corporate ladder, it is still important to consider how they achieve status attainment in urban environment.
Socioeconomic Characteristics and Inequalities

The socioeconomic characteristics of rural migrants are often different from urban hukuo holders; therefore, many are not entitled to state benefits and opportunities. Most of these migrants are illegal or hold temporary urban residency status and many are in non-state sectors. As compared to those in state sectors (dangwei), these non-hukuo migrants do not receive subsidies housings, and migrants tend to be seasonal or semi-permanent workers. According to Chan et al. (2009), 95% of the non-hukuo migrants had occupation at the clerical level or lower. Some of the common jobs of non-hukuo migrants also consist of manufacturing frontline workers, construction workers, nannies, and sales and service workers (Yang, 1994). As reported in the 2000 census, most of rural migrants are normally young; with above average education as compared to fellow migrants from their hometowns, generally there are more males than female (State Statistical Bureau, 2001). Many hold “dual occupations” where many would leave to work in cities during low season of harvest (Hu, Wang & Zou, 2002).

In addition to job opportunity discrimination, there are also other factors that act as barrier to their upward mobility in society, such as deferment of salary, steep housing rent and high education cost for their children. As discussed by Wong et al. (2007), many of the migrant workers are not paid in full monthly; some migrants do not even get paid after months of work. On average, workers are paid 300-600 Yuan. Workers are also expected to stay in lacks proper sanitation. Educational cost for children of migrant workers is also often beyond the earnings of migrants workers. Because rural hukuo children are not covered under state’s free education scheme, many rural migrants cannot afford to enroll children in local schools (Wong et al, 2007). Some of the methods of to attain social status is through either family member’s attainment of university placement or individual wealth. Based on the current situations of rural migrant workers as mentioned, it would be almost impossible for migrants
to achieve upward mobility with little earnings, which directly affects their children’s chances of receiving better education, and jeopardizing their chances of better job opportunities in the future. When measuring upward job mobility, higher education increases the desire to change jobs within migrant pool, while working in private sector reduces the desire to change job. Results suggest that private sectors are preferred over state jobs, with private sectors having significant higher pay (Treiman & Zhang, 2011).

**Class Stratification**

The segregation of rural and urban hukuo created two different working class systems in China; on one hand is the privileged *hukuo* worker and another is the agricultural based worker. The privileged *hukuo* workers are often protected by their “iron rice bowl”, which is guaranteed under their state work unit (*dang wei*). These work units provides life-long work protection, which also includes other benefits such as insurance, and welfares that are not available to collective workers or the agricultural *hukuo* holders (Bian, 2002). As mentioned earlier, most rural migrants are unable to move upwards, past the industrial sector jobs, this is largely due to the social exclusion of rural migrants in urban cities (Li, 2004). This phenomenon is not entire new in china. As early as the 1980s, Beijing government managed to deported thousands of rural migrants (Beijing Labor Bureau, 1992, p.58). Social class distinction between urban city dwellers and rural migrants has created a gap between them. This has created a hierarchy between them, resulting in social exclusion of the rural migrants and also preventing migrants from attaining urban status (Han el at, 2011).

Using Weber’s theory of social stratification, we can seek to understand rural migrant’s social position in relation to society. According to the theory, an individual’s social status is affected by a number of factors such as class, status, and power. Weber delineates that status groups tend to enclose themselves in order to maintain their social hierarchy (Weber, 1964). By highlighting Weber’s theory of social stratification, we can see a co-relation between rural
migrant’s upward job mobility and urban social status. In order for the urban hukuo holders to maintain their privileged status, they would have to exclude migrants from getting jobs that would jeopardize their current situation.

**Status Attainment**

Conversion of *hukuo* status, though difficult, is not entirely impossible. There are two main ways of conversion. First is through individual conversion, such as through personal or due to family attributes, for example, getting into universities or landing a government job. The other way is through collective conversion, whereby the whole village gets drawn gets integrated into towns or cities (Treiman & Zhang, 2011). The political party of the government mainly determines status attainment in Communist China, as compared to Capitalist states where standard status attainment is attribute to one’s achievement and inheritance. Even in today’s context, an individual’s status is closely tied to family origin, State party’s evaluation of personal achievements, and state distributed resources through collective organizations and hierarchy of state (Bian, 1991).

In a large scale representative-sampling survey conducted in Chinese Cities from 1985 onwards by US-based Sociologists in Tianjin, it was found that work unit was used as a status maker of attained status, and that there was a strong relation between father-son link in work unit and strong sector-to work link within the generation (Lin and Bian, 1991). This brings our attention to the state job assignments of jobs after graduation from university, where youth will be employed by state to maintain the hierarchically system. In the other Tianjin surveys conducted, showed that education and Communist Party membership have a strong influence on an individual’s chances of getting a state assigned job (Bian, 2002). Through this analysis, we can see that education acts as a basis for attaining status, and in order to obtain a job in a work unit, party membership is also important.
Status attainment though can be archived through personal achievement or through allocation of jobs by the state, it is still largely restricted to the urban hukuo holders. Even for migrants with high school education seeking for jobs in urban cities, it is still difficult to rise through the ranks to achieve privilege status and be recognized as a city dweller.

**Conclusion**

While there are ways of achieving upward job mobility for China’s rural migrants with high school education, it is still difficult for them to all move towards the ideal social status like urban hukuo holders. Institutionalized hukuo system, of all, seems to be the greatest barrier for rural migrants to climb up the corporate ladder. Other forms of barriers also include social discrimination against rural migrants, and class difference between rural and urban hukuo workers. In addition, wage received by rural migrant workers also does not help to alleviate the situation; with high cost of expenses, it is difficult for migrants to achieve social mobility. Education also seems to be the deciding factor whether if rural migrants had a better chance at succeeding in urban industries. As compared to rural migrants with pre-tertiary education, high school educated migrants exhibit higher chance of switching from manual to non-manual jobs.


