

Leaving the countryside: rural to urban migration decisions in China

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The migration of rural labor to urban areas in China since the mid-1980s has created the largest labor flow in world history. A commonly cited figure puts the number of rural migrants residing in urban areas at 50 million in the mid-1990s. Seemingly, Chinese rural people are fully responding to the relaxation of long-standing controls over rural-to-urban migration. However, I will show in this paper that in spite of the incentive and ability to migration, many rural people choose not to migrate. A major reason is because of the existing arrangement of land management.

Due to the Chinese government's long-standing policy of restricting population migration from rural to urban areas, a large urban-rural income gap developed. There have been several estimates of this gap. For example, using national statistics, Sheng and Sun (1994) estimated that the per capita income in urban areas was three times that of rural areas (adjusted to include subsidies to urban residents). Zhao (forthcoming) finds the gap to be about the same using regression analysis on marginal returns to migration and local work in Sichuan. These studies suggest that by shifting the entire resources of an average household from rural to urban activities, households will earn higher incomes.

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
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