

Migrant Workers' Community in China: Relationships among Social Networks, Life Satisfaction and Political Participation*

Comunidad de Trabajadores Emigrantes en China: Relaciones entre Redes Sociales, Satisfacción Vital y Participación Política

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Abstract. The millions of persons migrating from China's rural areas to urban spaces have contributed greatly to the country's decades-long economic growth, and the influx of migrants has changed the fabric of China's urban social and economic life. These internal migrants, similar to many international immigrants, depend heavily on their social networks, which are often developed in their rural villages, for jobs, housing, financial assistance, and social support both during and after migration. Consequently, migrants' networks function distinctly in well-being and behavior. Using data from the 2006 China General Social Survey, this article seeks to 1) investigate the existence of migrant sub-groups in China, 2) understand the characteristics of social networks among sub-groups, and 3) explore the relationships social networks hold to life satisfaction and political participation among China's migrant population. This article asserts that China's migrant population includes several sub-groups emerging on the basis of gender, education, age, and marital status, which in turn produce different patterns of ties and social interactions among their social networks. While this article finds very different employment patterns among migrant sub-groups, migrant networks do not appear to strongly influence perceptions and behaviors, such as life satisfaction and political participation. This article also argues that individual networks could facilitate the development of migrant communities in cities.

Keywords: chinese internal migration, cluster analysis, hukou, migrant workers, network analysis, rural-to-urban migration.

Resumen. Durante décadas, millones de personas han emigrado desde las áreas rurales de China hacia las ciudades, y realizado una importante contribución al desarrollo económico del país, cambiando el tejido social y económico de las ciudades. Estos emigrantes internos, al igual que los inmigrantes internacionales, dependen en gran medida de sus redes sociales para encontrar trabajo, vivienda, asistencia financiera, y apoyo social tanto durante como después de la migración, contribuyendo significativamente a su bienestar. A partir de los datos del Encuesta Social General de China del 2006, este artículo 1) describe los diferentes subgrupos de inmigración en China, 2) analiza las características de sus redes sociales, y 3) explora la contribución de éstas a su participación política y satisfacción vital. Este artículo propone clasificar la población emigrante china en subgrupos por razón de género, educación, edad y estado civil, los cuales producen diferentes patrones de conexiones e interacciones entre sus redes sociales. El presente estudio revela patrones de empleo muy diferenciados entre los distintos subgrupos de emigrantes, en cambio sus redes no parecen tener una importante contribución en sus percepciones y conductas, tales como su satisfacción vital y participación política. Este artículo también plantea que las redes personales podrían facilitar el desarrollo de las comunidades de emigrantes en las ciudades.

Palabras clave: análisis de cluster, análisis de red, emigración interna china, hukou, migración del campo a la ciudad, trabajadores emigrantes.

China's economic reforms, begun in 1978, have successfully transformed the country's economic system from a state-planned to a market-oriented economy. The infusion of foreign capital into China after its decision to

open its doors to overseas investment and a large store of cheap labor resulted in a surge of rural-to-urban migration in the early 1980s. This, in turn, stimulated an enormous growth in and transformation of the urban economy, greatly expanding the manufacturing sector and further increasing the need for cheap labor. These pull factors also occurred as increasing surpluses of agricultural labor and growing income gaps between urban factory and rural farm workers further disincentivised remaining in rural areas (Fan, 2001; Meng 2000).

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These economic transformations led to the central government's issuing of Ten Policies for Rural Economic Development in the early 1980s, which loosened its decades-long control over population movement through its household registration (*hukou*) system. Since this time, people with rural residence (i.e., rural *hukou*) have been permitted to work and stay in China's growing towns and cities with "temporary residence permits." This labor force liberalization plan paid off. In 1978, about 28.27 million rural-to-urban migrants found work in Chinese cities; three decades later, at the end of 2008, the number had grown nearly eightfold, to 225 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009).

China's rural-to-urban migrants, similar to many international immigrants, depend heavily on their social networks, which are often developed in their rural villages, for jobs, housing, financial assistance, and social support both during and after their migration (Zhao, 2003). Consequently, migrant networks function distinctly in well-being and behavior. The extent to which network-based human interactions lead to a readily defined migrant community (or communities) must be questioned, however. Historically, the concept of "community" in China is best understood as a kinship network in which extended family members live within a geographic area and care for each other, particularly in times of need. Under the socialist regime, however, from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, the employment units (*dan wei*) functioned as urban people's communities (Ruf, 1998). China's far-reaching social and economic reforms, massive migration, and rapid urban transformation have blurred the traditional urban-rural division, however, and profoundly changed the composition of both rural and urban communities. Even though socio-geographic-bounded migrant communities appear to exist in China's cities (Qian & Chen, 2003; Tang & Feng, 2000), a lack of empirical research leaves an unclear picture of the urban migrant community's characteristics and functions. Meanwhile, large-scale urbanization and aggressive commercial housing projects during the last two decades have gradually pushed these socio-geographic bounded migrant communities out of people's sight (Li, 2002).

This study, in response, seeks to investigate the existence of migrant sub-groups in China, and understand the characteristics of social networks among sub-groups. Furthermore, because these networks are thought to be important to community functioning, this study examines their role in migrants' life satisfaction and political participation, as higher life satisfaction and political participation are associated with greater community belongingness and shared identity.

Literature Review

Migrant networks, life satisfaction and political participation. Studies of international migration and

immigrants help situate the role of social networks in China's internal migration and its rural-to-urban migrants. Social networks, one commonly identified component of social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993), refer to the cognitive and structural bonds that people have with other individuals and groups, which can be employed for increased access to information and other resources, theoretically helping some people overcome disadvantages in human and financial capital. Among immigrants, social networks function in a number of ways. Networks have been found to increase the likelihood and facilitate the process of migration by providing migrants with temporary housing and financial assistance, access to credit in entrepreneurship, and help in locating jobs (Aguilera, 2003; Bashi, 2007; Palloni et al., 2001; Portes, 1998). On the other hand, these networks can be fragmented or maladaptive if they constrict and trap immigrants in marginal sectors of the economy and hinder immigrants' efforts of establishing new ties in the destination community (Aguilera, 2003; Li, 2004; Menjivar, 2000; Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Waldinger, 1997).

Besides facilitating migration itself and serving as conduits for valuable resources, immigrant networks shape collective life perceptions and behavior. In theory, as social connections and interactions appear to be more available to immigrants within their immigrant communities than in broader society (Breton, 2003), migrant networks provide a familiar environment within which to construct ethnic, cultural, and class identities. Ethnic migrant communities provide common obligations and more understanding support, and members' similar experiences in relation to a host culture help create common understandings of their group and each other (Fennema & Tillie, 2001) that aid in identity formation (Bankston & Zhou, 1995). These contexts, in turn, influence how immigrants perceive their new lives, as well as the behaviors in which they engage in their new settings.

Empirical studies indicate that over time relationships in the host society can alleviate immigrants' feelings of isolation and improve their life satisfaction (Ullman & Tatar, 2001), even though traditional social networks may only be partially reconstructed in the destination (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). The value of social networks on immigrants' life satisfaction appears to be dependent on particular network characteristics and the specific immigrant group in question. For example, network size may be unrelated to life satisfaction among Latino immigrants with mental illness (Ribas & Lam, 2010), and network composition (i.e., network diversity) may be unrelated to older immigrants' life satisfaction in the U.S. and Israel (Diwan, 2008; Litwin & Leshem, 2008). On the other hand, support network size has been shown to contribute to Korean immigrants' life satisfaction (Kim, 1999); and among Chinese immigrants in the U.S., friend support

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