



Does ethnic identity influence migrants' settlement intentions? Evidence from three cities in Gansu Province, Northwest China[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The debate concerning the determinants of rural-urban migration in China has thus far paid little attention to migrants with different ethnic backgrounds. The present article investigates the determinants of settlement intentions using survey data for three cities in Northwest China. Under four strategies: Settling in the city (as the baseline); Returning home; Moving to other cities, and Undecided, we analyse migrants' intentions through a multi-nominal logit approach, in conjunction with in-depth interviews and participant observations. The results demonstrate a range of determinants that include human capital, migration characteristics, employment, network, and local factors. Findings indicate in particular that types of contract and job training strongly influence migrant settlement in all models. The implication of these findings is that migrants will have to learn practical skills if they plan to settle down. It may be attractive for local authorities to invest in vocational schools and to regulate the labour market and contracts if they are willing to accommodate these migrants. As expected, ethnic identity and cultural characteristics of the cities also play important roles in determining migrants' decisions to settle. Worth to notice that minority migrants tend to stay in cities where there is higher cultural homogeneity, thus lower demand for integration. They are less likely to resort to migration for a better livelihood compared to the Han majority. We advocate that the creation of more equal and inclusive socio-cultural contexts may promote minority migrants' mobility, thereby improving their livelihoods through migration.

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1. Introduction

In China, the rapid growth of urbanisation has triggered massive rural-urban migration since the late 1980s. Millions of migrants have flocked from rural areas to cities in response to the high demand for labours. A major question has arisen as to whether these migrants will decide to settle in their destination cities. In fact, concern has grown about settlement intentions over the past few years (among others, Yang, 2000; Zhu, 2007; Yue, Li, Feldman, & Du, 2010; Fan, 2011; Shen, 2012; Cao, Li, Ma, & Tao, 2015). A noteworthy omission in the literature is the analysis of differences relating to the ethnic backgrounds of migrants in multi-ethnic regions in China. Possible reasons for such neglect could be that

Chinese ethnic issues and policies continue to be sensitive, official data is often disputable and/or lacking, and scholars have low accessibility to these regions.

This article attempts to enrich the research on settlement intentions by paying close attention to the ethnic identities of migrants in China's multi-ethnic regions. The phrase "multi-ethnic migration" immediately conveys the idea that our migrants in question comprise different ethnic backgrounds. Migration to and settlement in cities has constantly been the escape route from poverty and the quest for better livelihoods, especially for minority migrants who are more likely to depart from economically depressed regions. Minorities are, however, generally vulnerable in the job market and are less prepared than their Han counterparts to compete for employment (Zang, 2008). Moreover, they face formidable challenges during the settlement process because not only do migrants need to overcome rural-urban disparities but they also have to manage the barriers raised by heterogeneous ethnicity such as culture adaptations. Local and regional governments may also witness incidents of tension among different groups during the

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multi-ethnic migration process.

We specifically target three typical ethnic groups in Gansu province: Han, Muslims, and Tibetans in three cities, namely Lanzhou, Linxia, and Gannan in Northwest China (NWC). The Gansu province, situated in the buffer zone between the Tibetan and Loess Plateaus and the ancient Silk Road, is one of the most ethnic heterogeneous regions in NWC where mainly the Han Chinese, Central Asians, Arabic, Mongols, and Tibetans were frequently acculturated and commercially favoured to each other. We choose these three groups not only because they are the most influential ones in terms of the local socioeconomic development. Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu province, attracts many migrants (mainly Muslims) of different ethnic backgrounds. In Linxia, the Muslim population (59.2%, *The Sixth National Census, 2010*) is larger than the national majority Han. The prevalence of Muslim cultural practice and tradition in the city has made it renowned as the “Little Mecca” of China. Whereas Gannan, which is more populated by Tibetans (56.4%, *The Sixth National Census, 2010*) with diverse Tibetan cultural backgrounds, is the homeland of traditional Tibetan nomads. It is safe to say that the targeted groups and cities are representative for ethnic-oriented studies. We tackle the following questions: 1.) What are the determinants influencing migrants' settlement intentions in NWC? and 2.) How do migrants' ethnic identities influence their settlement intentions in different cultural contexts in different cities? The research presented here not only provides signals for future trends of population mobility but it also gives strong evidence to policy-makers and city managers as they formulate urban plans for future socioeconomic development and, more precisely, in their aim to better accommodate incoming migrants in this region.

2. To stay or to go? framing the settlement intentions in NWC

Both international and internal migration can be seen as human movement between geographical locations which is determined by a multitude of factors (*Mangalam, 2015*). In general, economic factors are among the most conspicuous in relation to migration behaviours. From the perspective of Neoclassical Economics (NE), the impetus for migration comes from a cost-benefit calculation, on the part of individuals, between destination and place of origin (*Hagen-Zanker, 2008*). Specifically, migration decision making is based on the calculation of “the material costs of travelling, the costs of maintenance while moving and looking for work, the effort involved in learning a new language and culture, the difficulty experienced in adapting to a new labour market, and the psychological costs of cutting old ties and forging new ones” (*Massey et al., 1993*, p. 434). Under this assumption, migrants seek higher wages and better employment opportunities. The whole migration process is regarded as an investment of individuals' human capital for the purpose of maximising their own utility (*Bauer & Zimmermann, 1999*). The theory of NE therefore assumes that maximising one's utility will promote migrants' settlement at their targeted destinations (*Constant & Massey, 2002*).

In a strict NE paradigm, migration decision-making is arbitrarily based on the rational choice of individual migrants. NE fails, however, to explain why, despite migrants earning a higher wage and successfully managing their employment, a large proportion of them still return home after years of working in the host society (c.f. *Dustmann, 1996*). The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) comes as a more nuanced approach to “shift the focus of migration theory from individual independence (optimisation against nature) to mutual interdependence (optimisation against one another)” because “migration decisions are often made jointly by the migrants and by some groups of non-migrants” (*Stark & Bloom, 1985*, pp. 174–175). In fact, migration is not exclusively maximisation of

the individual's utility but also includes minimisation of household risks in response to a failed market at home (*De Haas, 2010*). The NELM treats migration as merely a temporary action because migration, in this scheme, is regarded as a household livelihood strategy; the allocation of family members highlights the different ways to avoid risk as well as spread risk. Moreover, the migrants are seen as “target earners only seek short-term access to paid labour”. Logically, once migrants have earned enough money, they prefer to return to their place of origin (*Constant & Massey, 2002*, p. 11; *De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015*).

Although economic approaches are largely able to explain the impetus for migration, sociological approaches show more potential for explaining the continuation of migration. From the social network perspective, migrant networks are regarded as the paramount form of capital; these can provide access to information and resources and hence influence migrants' decision to stay or leave (*Reynolds, 2010*). When migrants move to the city, they tend to establish and expand their networks in order to generate social capital (*Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008*). To clarify the concept “social capital”, we can interpret it as group-based resources and information embedded in and generated by migrants' social networks when they arrive at destinations (*Lancee, 2012*). On the one hand, the mere forming of networks and their extensions suggests the capacity to consistently decrease migration costs by creating a social support system in the host society (*Massey & España, 1987*). On the other hand, the social structures created by migrants tend to encourage migratory behaviour (*Massey, 1990*). This process is known as cumulative causation, which leads to the spatial aggregation of the population (*Massey et al., 1993*). One result of cumulative causation is the socio-spatial aggregation of the population, in other words, the formation of communities.

As in social network theory, NELM also contends that building networks is the most important aspect of migration. The assumption of NELM is that the whole family is an enveloped unit and gives emphasis to the influence among family members. Whilst family is no longer a geographically enveloped unit; instead, the family members are open and linked with outsiders through the complex social networks (*Ryan, 2011*). Whereas social network theory takes a broader view and sees migratory behaviour as facilitated and guided by migrant networks. The networks are characterised by “sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (*Massey et al., 1993*, p. 448). These complicated social networks can be seen as resources that may positively or negatively influence migrants' settlement intentions. The main argument for making distinctions among Han, Muslim and Tibetan in the current research is because ethnic identity can be seen as a type of special social capital which is only achieved through one's own ethnic membership. In other words, ethnic identity reveals the embodiment of social capital through migrants' cultural backgrounds. In fact, both social capital and ethnic identity highlight the importance of networks. Migrants' ethnic identity offers them easy and reliable access to information and resources through the ethnic ties and networks, and in so doing, contributes to the formation of different ethnic communities (*Li, 2004*).

Ethnic identity not only relates to ethnic members, groups and communities; it also links to the cultural context of the receiving society (*Rosenthal & Feldman, 1992*). Some research finds that migrants' ethnic identity can be salient in one cultural context while being less pronounced in another (*Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Philip, 2007*). In fact, the settlement intentions of migrants are influenced by their cultural integration in the host society (*De Haas & Fokkema, 2011*), indicating that the interactions between ethnic identity and cultural contexts of the destinations may either

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