

Fertility Behaviors of Rural-to-urban Migrants in China

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Abstract

This study investigates fertility behaviors of migrant population, especially rural-to-urban migrants, in China. In the past three decades, while China has experienced a rapid fertility decline largely due to its well-established family planning programs, it has also been going through many other changes in the process of its economic reforms. One of the consequences of the reforms is an increasing number of migrants, especially from rural to urban areas. The success of China's family planning program was based upon the strictly monitored administrative system, especially through the grassroots family planning offices that reach everywhere in the country. The family planning programs were also built upon such administrative systems as the Household Registration System, or *hukou*. The emergence in recent decades of massive population migration has seen fertility rate increase in certain regions and among certain populations. Previous studies and reports about migrants' fertility in China have yielded different, sometimes controversial, conclusions. Some suggested that rural to urban migrants tended to have a higher fertility, as they are physically free from control by the family planning officials at their home villages. Some others indicated that rural migrants tended to have a lower fertility compared with their rural counterparts because of their mobile life style and high cost of having children. For China's family planning policy-makers, one of the most significant issues that need to be addressed is how to effectively enforce the practice of family planning policies among migrant population. There has also been some confusion in the public and media. Rural migrants sometimes are stereotyped as the "Groups of Guerrilla" who moved around to avoid penalty by family planning officials. The thorough understanding about fertility behaviours of migrants in China, especially rural to urban migrants, has not been adequate so far.

This study, based on a year-long fieldwork in China in 1998, examines fertility behaviors of rural-to-urban migrants from an institutional point of view. The fieldwork was carried out both in migrants' current community in a large Chinese city, Beijing, and in one of migrants' home villages in Henan province. Henan has been one of the major migrant-exporting provinces in China.

The migrant community in Beijing resided 316 migrant households at the time of study and many of them came from Henan province. Intensive interviews, participation observations and focus-group study methods were used to obtain data from both sending and receiving communities. Data obtained from the fieldwork at community level included: demographic structure of the community, occupational structure and economic activities of the residents, relationship among residents,

family structure of residents, and fertility level and behaviours of migrants in the community. In order to better understand fertility attitudes and behaviours of these migrants, this study has paid special attention on various relationships: relationship among the migrants in the community, relationship between migrants and local Beijing residents, and relationship between migrants and their relatives and family members at home villages. The continuity of migrants' culture and behaviours rooted from their native rural areas is analysed. Influences of urban society on the members of migrant community are also investigated. Of particular interest is the practice of family planning policies to the migrant women in the community.

This study aims to answer such questions as whether rural migrants have changed their norms and behaviours, particularly fertility behaviours; to what extent that the act of migration *per se* have affected their changes in attitudes and behaviours; and what are the major factors affecting their fertility behaviour.

Major findings from this study include:

- Fertility level of rural to urban migrants is slightly lower than that of their rural counterparts in their home villages and considerably higher than that of urban local residents. This finding is consistent with a number of previous quantitative studies using data from censuses and surveys;
- Migrants in the community are concentrated in a segregated group of occupations. Although economically a part of the urban society, migrants are socially regarded as insignificant in the urban society. In other words, rural migrants are economically accepted by the urban society but socially alienated at the same time;
- There are very limited social interactions between migrants and local urban residents in the community. The physical closeness, through tenants and landlord relationship, do not generate many social interactions between the two groups of people. Migrants' knowledge and experience of urban lifestyle is limited and artificial. Major factors that result in a lower fertility among urban residents, such as enhanced role of females in the family and society, institutional elderly support, and better opportunities of receiving education and pursuing social mobility, are largely irrelevant for rural migrants. Consequently, migrants do not care much about what happened in the city. Urban residents are rarely considered as rural migrants' reference group in their daily life. "Urban culture and lifestyle" of others have very limited impacts on migrants' original fertility behaviours.
- Most rural migrants in this community interact with their fellow migrants, especially those from the same villages or neighbouring villages, at a daily basis. They also keep a very close tie with their relatives and other members of family at their native villages. They exchange information about job markets, but more frequently, information that related to their home villages. There is a clear line of continuity in their behaviours from their rural background.
- Although physically resided in Beijing, far away from their home villages, many migrant women in this community were regularly monitored by the family planning officials from their home province. A bi-monthly physical check-up

system have substantially decreased these women's chances of having out-of-quota pregnancies, but at the same time, constantly reminded them of their rural roots.

- Under current social conditions in China, it is unrealistic to expect any drastic fertility behavioural changes of migrant population. When the major factors that have determined a lower fertility of urban residents, such as elderly support, opportunity of employment, chance of social mobility, and enhanced role of women, are not relevant to migrant population, their fertility behaviours will remain more or less the same as their rural counterparts. Therefore, the act of migration *per se* on their fertility behaviours and fertility level has not been significant.