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China's Domestic Migration and Crime: A Case Study of Shanghai

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Abstract: After more than 35 years of economic reforms, China's urbanization has been increased from 17.92% in 1978 to 51.27% in 2011. A large number of migrants have moved from rural areas to large metropolitan cities, especially cities on the East coast and Southeast coast of China such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, seeking employment and better lives. However, the massive increase in city size has brought many issues such as overpopulation, traffic congestion, and crime. It is commonly believed that the influx of rural migrants is associated with increased crime. However, very few comprehensive studies based on reliable crime records have been conducted in China. This paper investigates the available crime records in five districts of Shanghai between 2008 and 2012. It focuses on China's internal migration and associated crime rate using Shanghai as a case study. Analysis of China's historical, economic, social, and cultural factors is presented to interpret the outcomes of this investigation.

Keywords: Migration, Crime, Rural Migrants

Introduction

China started economic reforms in 1978. The reforms introduced capitalist principles to a totally planned economy. The government initially decollectivised agriculture and opened up the country to foreign investment. It then followed by privatising and contracting out many state-owned industries and the lifting of price controls, protectionist policies, and regulations. At the start of the reforms, China's urban population comprised 17.92% of the 962 million total mass on mainland China (Zhang & Song 2003, 388). The decollectivisation divided up the land that used to belong to the Peoples' Communes and allowed peasants to have long term leases. As a result, agriculture production became much more efficient, flexible and freed up surplus labour in rural areas. At the same time the control of population movement was relaxed allowing rural population to move to cities. Together with the attraction of high incomes and modern lifestyle in the cities, over the last three and half decades hundreds of millions people from rural regions have migrated to urban areas. China's urban population has increased from 17.92% in 1978 to 51.27% in 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012, 1.2).

Major cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou on the east coast and south east coast, attract the majority of rural migrants. The city size has increased enormously. For example, in 2010 Shanghai had approximately nine million permanent residents who migrated from other parts of China (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2012). This massive increase in city size has brought many issues such as overpopulation, traffic congestion and crime.

The elevated crime rate has been a pronounced problem in recent years in many parts of China. It has been recognized that modernisation is often associated with an increase in crime (Bennett 1991, cited in Liu 2005, 613). China is no exception. Liu's (2005, 624-26) research reported a faster increase in economically motivated crimes compared to violent crimes between 1978 and 2002. Liu's 2006 research also indicated that larceny had the fastest growth rate in all crimes during the reform years in China. Reasons were attributed to mainly modernisation which involved profound social transition from a socialist command economy to a market economy. In this process, it is believed that the rural-urban migration, relevant social disorganisation and weakening of social control were the main explanations for the crime increases (Liu 2006, 124-25).

In terms of the relationship between rural-urban migration and crime, many Chinese researchers believe rural migrants are the major source of crime. The rural migrants' low education, high unemployment rate, lack of knowledge on law and regulations, identity confusion and weakening control mechanisms are generally blamed as the reasons for the increase in crime (Li 2012; Jiang 2002, 31-33). However, most papers published do not include any clear evidence on the higher crime rate committed supposedly by rural migrants and the types of crime. It is apparent there is a lack of research and data on crime patterns in relation to offender's background. This may be attributed to a lack of transparency and the publication of outcomes in China's justice system in the past, especially in relation to court cases and sentencing. As a result data analysis on crime and migration had not been possible. However, in recent years, there has been progress on transparency in China's justice system. Shanghai and many metropolitan cities have now made crime records available online from 2012, at the same time uploading historical

crime data (from 2004) case by case online. The publication of the crime data provide this research with an opportunity to bridge the gap identified above.

Method

To address the paucity of statistical research concerning domestic migration and crimes in the past, this research randomly selected 1000 convicted offenders from 5 districts , namely Chongming, Pudong, Putuo, Songjiang and Xuhui in Shanghai, 200 each year between 2008 and 2012. These offenders have been convicted by the respective district courts. During the data collection each offender's available digital file from the website of the 5 district's courts was researched. The research recorded each offender's gender, origin, residential status, rural/urban backgrounds, employment status, education level and the nature of the offence - all coded by clustered identification numbers. In terms of the nature of the offence, there were 24 specific crimes. The 24 crimes were further categorized into four different groups, namely property crimes, violence crimes, property & violence crimes and others according to the criteria in the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 1997, 64-233).

This research focuses on migration and crime. Distinction between locals and migrants were made based on birth place, born in Shanghai (locals) or other places (migrants). Due to China's many years of strict control by the household registration system (Huko), a clear distinction between locals and migrants can be easily identified.

Further, offenders were also grouped into rural and non-rural categories, identified according to the household registration system (Huko). It is worth noting, in Shanghai region itself, there is also a distinction between rural and non-rural population. Those who live in the distant Shanghai suburbs are considered to be rural population according to the household registration system (Huko). The livelihood of those rural Shanghai people used to depend on agricultural activities.

The data was analysed via crosstabulation using SPSS statistical program. Chi-Square Tests were conducted to identify significant differences amongst different categorical variables.

Results and Discussion

In the 1000 convicted offenders, 70.3% were migrants and 29.7% were locals, 91.2% were males and 8.8% were females.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 provide the background statistics regarding the 1000 convicted offenders. It has been demonstrated that a much higher number of people from rural backgrounds were convicted than their urban (non-rural) counterparts. When comparing migration status, it would appear that the majority of the convicted offenders were migrants from rural areas. They are more likely to be unemployed. At the same time, their education levels are low, mainly at a primary or junior secondary school level.

Table 1: Background Information of the 1000 Convicted Offenders

	Rural		Non-Rural		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Locals	129	43.4	168	56.6	297

Migrants	610	86.8	93	13.2	703
Total	739/1000		261/1000		1000

Table 2: Employment Background of the 1000 Convicted Offenders

	Employed		Unemployed		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Locals	95	32	202	68	297
Migrants	135	19.2	568	80.8	703
Total	230/1000		770/1000		1000

Table 3: Education Levels of the 1000 Convicted Offenders

	Education						
	Illiterate	Primary	Junior Secondary	Senior Secondary	TAFE	Tertiary	Postgraduate
Locals	1.0%	10.1%	52.5%	15.5%	17.2%	3.0%	0.3%
Migrants	3.3%	28.9%	52.6%	6.5%	7.1%	1.6	0

Table 4 demonstrates the nature of the crimes the locals and migrants were convicted of and the percentage of crimes in relation to total crimes in its own migrant or local offenders' population. It would appear that the locals were more likely to be convicted for white collar crimes such as fraud and embezzlement. They also have been convicted more for dangerous driving and drug trafficking, probably because the locals have the capital to do so. The migrants are more likely to be convicted for property crimes such as larceny and violent crimes such as robbery by force, provocation, affray and making commercial transaction by force.

Table 4: Number and Nature of Convictions and Rates in Respective Local or Migrant Offender Populations

Type of crime	Locals (Total N = 297)		Migrants (Total N = 703)	
	N	%	N	%
Falsely making out special value added tax receipts	11	3.7	38	5.4
<i>Fraud</i>	47	15.8*	31	4.4*
Unlawful profit-making	1	0.3	3	0.4
<i>Embezzlement</i>	13	4.4*	11	1.6*
Intellectual property tort	0	0	1	0.1
Forging certificates	1	0.3	4	0.6
Illegal business operations	2	0.7	1	0.1
Operating illegal gambling dens	3	1	13	1.8
<i>Larceny</i>	64	21.5*	289	41.1*
<i>Dangerous driving</i>	42	14.1*	38	5.4*
<i>Drug trafficking</i>	57	19.2*	45	6.4*
Intentionally causing injury	17	5.7	44	6.3
<i>Provocation</i>	16	5.4*	55	7.8*

Obstructing an officer in discharge of duties	1	0.3	9	1.3
<i>Robbery (by force)</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0.3*</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>5.4*</i>
Rape	3	1	8	1.1
Spreading obscene objects	1	0.3	3	0.4
<i>Unlawful detention</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0.7*</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>1.6*</i>
Intrusion	1	0.3	2	0.3
<i>Affray</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0.3*</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>2.3*</i>
Organizing prostitution	10	3.4	17	2.4
Seizing	3	1	10	1.4
<i>Making commercial transaction by force</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0*</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>2.1*</i>
Fabrication and deliberate dissemination of false terrorist information	0	0	1	0.1

*Italic & ** A significant difference demonstrated.

When the convictions are further grouped by the type of the crime, e.g. property or violence or both, Table 5 provides further details. It would appear the majority of the local offender's convictions were more property related crimes, namely falsely making out special value added tax receipts, fraud, unlawful profit-making, embezzlement, forging certificates, illegal business operations, operating illegal gambling dens, larceny, seizing, drug trafficking, organizing prostitution etc. In contrast, migrants had much higher rates in relation to violent crimes such as intentionally causing injury, provocation, obstructing an officer in discharge of duties, rape and affray, or as in combination of both property and violent crimes such as robbery by force and making commercial transaction by force.

Table 5: Type of Convictions in Relation to Migrant and Local Offenders

	Property Crime		Violence		Property & Violence		Others		Total No of Crimes
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Locals	213	71.7	38	12.8	1	0.3	45	15.2	297
Migrants	477	67.9	132	18.8	38	5.4	56	8	703
Total No of Crimes	690		170		39		101		1000

The results demonstrate that more than 70% of the offenders in five districts of Shanghai were immigrants mostly from rural areas from other parts of China. When considering the composition of Shanghai's total population of 23 million permanent residents, the migrant population was 8.977 million (2010 census, Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2012). This equates to 39% of the total Shanghai population. Clearly, convicted migrants (70.3%) are statistically over represented here. There is a significantly higher number of convictions in the migrant population compared to the locals. Migrants are less than 40 percent of the population but represent more than 70% of the convictions in the five districts in Shanghai. To make sense of this result, some historical, socio economic and cultural factors need to be considered.

Historically, China's 1978 economic reforms have generated more economic freedom for rural and city people. The decollectivisation of rural farmland has generated surplus labour from rural China. Rural residents have continuously flooded into cities in the past three and half decades, especially into metropolitan cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou to make money. One of China's three famous "divides" has been a divide between urban and rural areas. This divide is reflected in almost every corner of an individual's life, including income, education, recreation, medical services and lifestyle etc. Instead of narrowing the gap, the 1978 economic reforms would appear to have further accelerated the divide. Although the reforms have relaxed control on Chinese people's mobility and allowed "peasant workers" from rural areas to move to cities seeking work, in reality these peasant workers have been mainly doing the so called "three D jobs – dirty, dangerous and difficult" that are unwanted by city residents. Their salaries are generally low, earning less than half to a third of their city counterpart's wage (Zhu 2002, 84). They have formed a new socio economic underclass and their lifestyles provide a huge contrast to that of city people.

Economically, rural migrant workers have earned a better income than working on their farmlands. But their incomes have been low and have grown at a much slower pace over the last three and half decades when compared to their city counterparts. According to Guo (2011, 124-25) and Jiang (2002, 31-34) this situation has created a huge disparity between the peasant workers' expectations and reality. When they were first lured to the city, they expected easy money and a higher living standard. Their families also expected these workers to send money home. In reality, their lack of skills and education resulted in this group being at the bottom of city society from a socio-economic perspective. The peasant workers generally live in very poor neighbourhoods, with appalling living conditions, eating low quality food and are deprived of positive leisure and recreation activities. They generally are attempting to save every yuan to send home to their rural villages. Past research has identified that 75.3% peasant workers sent money to their rural homes and more than 40% of the workers sent over 50% of their incomes (Zhu 2002, 84).

Economic deprivation theory indicates that conflict arises when the person lacking the resources becomes aware and begins to experience feelings of envy and injustice (Stiles, Liu, & Kaplan 2000, 66-67). This research shows that 41.1% of the crimes committed by migrant workers in Shanghai are larceny related crimes mainly via stealing from other people or an organisation's property. In addition, 80.8% of the crimes were committed by unemployed immigrants. It would appear that migrants' economically deprived situation contributed to their convictions. Lack of money and livelihood is certainly a factor for increased property related criminal activities. Internationally, research evidence also connects immigration and crimes. It is generally considered that immigrant groups that have poor labour market opportunities tend to be more associated with property crime (Bell & Machin, 2011, 2).

Socially it is evident that most migrants adapted poorly in cities (Zhu 2002, 83-87). The adjustment process for rural migrants is often painful and their communication skills are generally low. Their social interactions are mainly in their migrant circle. Like all migration phenomenon around the world, it is very difficult to break into the local middle class's social circle (Zhu 2002, 87).

In addition, the Chinese social and administration system further disadvantages the

rural migrants. As previously noted one of China's three great divides is the divide between city and rural areas. Historically a significant factor to this divide is the household registration system. All city people have been registered and managed by the relevant city governments. This administration system restricts people's mobility and made it easy to control by the different levels of government. It is an integral component of a Communist government - having great control over its people. This administration system greatly favours city people as most services are concentrated in cities. The favoured treatments of city people on all fronts have been reinforced for over six decades by the Communist government. For example, during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, due to the shortage of food, grain, meat, cooking oil and other basic living essentials, Chinese people had rations. City people were provided with ration tickets based on their household registration. Without the registration, it was impossible to survive. City people, especially in large metropolitan cities, had higher rations than the people living in small cities and rural areas.

Further, the household registration system is very rigid. It normally prevents rural migrants from obtaining city registration. Although people still move without household registration they have little right to city services. Citizens in big cities have much better access to education, medical and cultural services. The best schools, universities and hospitals are all located in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. As a result many city people have much better education and higher paid employment. These privileged treatments by the system have culturally nurtured a feeling of superiority on the part of city people. People from rural areas mostly have been perceived as backward looking, less educated, poor and dirty.

The rural migrants suffer discrimination in the city and are often treated as second class citizens. Inequality is obvious. Research has indicated that less than 10% of rural migrants have access to social security, only 20% have medical insurance and pension for retirement (Li 2012). Their children have difficulties to access good local schools. Poverty and systemic discrimination have pushed peasant workers to city fringe ghetto areas. The peasant workers form an underclass in all Chinese cities. Feelings of marginalisation on the part of rural immigrants and their children is inevitable.

In addition, it has been frequently reported that migrants' rights are often breached, such as not getting paid on time. In this kind of situation, they have little knowledge as to how to assert their own rights and often don't get enough support from government organisations and police. Corruption and unfair treatment cause resentment. Due to low levels of education, they have little idea about laws and regulations and have no money to access lawyers and relevant services. A lower level of control over their emotions was also identified (Wang 2002). As a result, some migrants take the law into their own hands. For example, when payment is long delayed, some migrants go to their employers to chase money using whatever means they can, including violence. This has been documented as "self-saving type crime" (Gu 2010, 126-28). The results of this research support the past findings via identifying a higher incidence and percentage of affray, provocation and making commercial transactions by force on the part of migrants compared to their local counterparts.

Migrant social identity is another issue. The younger generation of migrants often have trouble to identify their belonging in a city. Based on Wang and Zhu's (2012, 2-5)

research it would appear that there is a new generation of immigrants from rural areas committing crimes. The parents of this generation are the first wave of rural migrants coming to work in big cities after the economic reforms. They have largely settled in lower socio economic urban areas via continuing their “three D” work. Most of their children have initially endured separation from their parents. Due to the difficult situation at the time it was generally the case that the children of the migrants were prevented from moving to the city. When the parents settled in the city, many of the second generation of rural migrants came to the city to reunite as a family and obtain some education. These young people feel superior to their rural counterparts, but inferior to their city friends. They have learned the city way of living, but without the financial means. Because of the social and economic disadvantage of their parents’ generation and prolonged separation, it affects the quality of their schooling, psychological development and self-esteem. As a result, according to Wang and Zhu (2012, 3-5) these young people are often emotionally unstable, psychologically unbalanced and achieve poorly in their academic studies which become important contributing factors to their high crime rate. Many rural migrants, both old and young generations, experience an identity crisis as they feel they don’t belong to either their rural village or the city (Zhu 2002, 87).

The higher rates of violent crimes such as provocation, obstructing an officer in discharge of duties, robbery by force, affray and making commercial transaction by force committed on the part of migrants revealed in this research appear to be a consequence of this prolonged and cross-generational social and economic marginalisation. The evidence provided by this research that migrant offenders often have low education and a higher unemployment rate supports past research conducted by Wang and Zhu (2012, 3). In their research, crime offenders in Shanghai have the characteristics of “three lows” - low education, low employment rate and low/younger age. The higher unemployment rate may be a result of their low education levels which is one of the outcomes of the great divide between city and country areas. The younger age - identified from past research - could be attributed to the second generation of migrants who have partially grown up in the city, have not been well educated, suffer identity crises and have psychological and emotional development issues as outlined above.

Historically at the end of 19th century, Europe experienced similar major economic and social changes accompanied by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and increased crime. The dislocation of rural population caused the original externally constraining conscience collective to break down undermining the traditional social order and brought about anarchy and conflict. Durkheim called this ‘anomie’ (Johnson & Duberley 2010, 565-566). In the 21st century China is facing similar rapid economic and social change which makes Durkheim’s theory on anomie, social cohesion and crime all the more illuminating. For example, Durkheim believed that there was little to restrain the economically powerful from overwhelming the weaker (Johnson & Duberley 2010, 566). In Shanghai’s case this is illustrated by some of the economically powerful employers refusing to pay the weaker workers on time, which resulted in conflict and crime. Yet, today’s China is a very different society from that of the 19th century Europe. Confucianism and collectivism are deeply entrenched in Chinese society and cultural values. The government is promoting its Chinese style of social cohesion focusing on collective good, not a morality that was ‘freely’ willed and ‘freely’ accepted as Durkheim suggested (Durkheim 2002, 120). However, revisiting Durkheim’s literature would

provide Chinese scholars, administrators and alike a new way of interpreting migrant crime issues in China and may indeed provide fresh consideration of approaches to deal with the problem.

Conclusion

This research selected five districts in Shanghai as a case study to investigate China's domestic migration and crime issue. The research shows that migrants from rural areas have a significant higher level of crime conviction than their city counterparts. They are much more likely to be convicted for property related and violent crimes. Their higher rate of crime conviction could be attributed to poverty, low education and skills, lack of employment opportunities and discrimination, including by the system and city culture. The Chinese household registration system, together with the traditional great divide between city and rural areas, appears to have a negative impact on the economic and social wellbeing of migrants with a rural background. Considerable effort and a change in culture on the part of government leadership and city residents are required to improve the current situation.

This research has investigated some background information on convicted migrants to identify some of the problems associated with their higher crime rates. Further in-depth research investigating individual cases is needed to more fully understand the range of issues faced by rural migrants.

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