SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 11, No. 4, (2025), pp. 3548-3557
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19397092

EVALUATION OF SOCIOECONOMIC AND HEALTH IMPACTS OF RURAL-TO-URBAN MIGRATION IN CHINA

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Received: 01/08/2025
Accepted: 20/10/2025

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examined the socio-economic and health outcomes of rural-to-urban migration in China through a review analysis of recent empirical literature published between the years 2022 to 2025. Examining how migration via the process of rural-to-urban migration affects income, wellbeing, health outcomes and social integration, will occur within the context of urbanisation, and the institutional frameworks of China. The review revealed that although rural-to-urban migration provides additional opportunities for income generation and contributes towards the development of urban economies, these benefits are not equally distributed and are often limited by structural barriers. These barriers include the 'hukou' system which restricts access to healthcare, education and social welfare for migrants. Analysing the data from the studies reviewed, the majority of the studies indicated a significant disparity between the physical and mental health outcomes of migrants. This included occupational risk associated with the employment that migrants tend to undertake, restricted access to healthcare from service providers, and long-term health implications resulting from their migration experiences. The inequality of opportunity was further supported by the continuing existence of the phenomenon of "high-income poverty," where despite having a greater level of income the standard of living experienced by many migrants does not improve. This study demonstrated that rural-to-urban migration is characterised by a complex relationship between economic opportunity and exclusion through institutional barriers. Consequently, this study advocated for comprehensive policy reforms to provide equitable access to services and social integration and to promote sustainable urban development.

KEYWORDS: socioeconomic impact, health impacts, rural-to-urban migration, hukou and China

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1. INTRODUCTION

The massive movement of rural people to cities in China is one of the biggest migrations of people within a country ever. This vast migration has occurred as a result of China's industrial growth and change in how the economy operates that began in the late 1970's. It has also changed the way China's population is organised, as well as how jobs are set up and how people live in terms of social equality and opportunity. Many of those who have moved from rural areas to urban areas have done so to find better jobs, make more money, and improve living conditions. So, while rural-to-urban migration has helped bolster the nation's economy as a whole, there are also many complicated problems, such as social or economic inequalities, as well as some problems relating to health care, as a result of this movement (Chen et al., 2024). An important issue that affects how people migrate from rural to urban areas is known as the hukou system. This system regulates people's access to government services based on where they come from. Without a hukou that lets them live in the city, rural-to-urban migrants are often denied access to important government services that urban residents receive, such as health care, education and social security; therefore, creating inequalities between the two groups. As a result, rural-to-urban migrants in cities tend to be in a very disadvantaged situation by having unstable employment opportunities, no permanent home and no social security net to protect them from poverty (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025).

From a health perspective, migration introduces both opportunities and risks. While urban areas generally offer better healthcare infrastructure, migrants often encounter barriers to accessing these services, leading to unmet medical needs. Additionally, the nature of migrant labour—often involving physically demanding and hazardous occupations—exposes individuals to heightened health risks. Psychological stress, social isolation, and discrimination further compound these issues (Pan et al., 2022). This study seeks to critically evaluate the socioeconomic and health impacts of rural-to-urban migration in China, examining how structural, institutional, and environmental factors interact to shape migrant experiences. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of migration as both a driver of development and a source of inequality, with implications for policy reform and sustainable urbanisation.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

After the initiation of economic reform in 1978, rural to urban migration in China became an increasingly pronounced phenomenon (Liu et al., 2024). Economic reforms resulted in the end of a centrally planned economy, which had inhibited economic growth, and the beginning of the shift to a market-oriented economy. The reforms ended collective farming and increased the pace of industrial development, particularly in urban coastal areas. Accordingly, the agricultural surplus of rural workers began to move more frequently to cities, resulting in increasing amounts of migration from rural to urban areas as a result (Kan & Chen, 2022).

Prior to economic reform, internal migration in China was heavily controlled by an internal migration and social stability policy called the "hukou system" established by government policies controlling internal migration in the 1950s. Even though there have been numerous modifications to the hukou system since the implementation of the economic reforms, it still creates a "dual system" separating urban from rural residents and limiting the full rights to citizenship in urban areas to migrants, referred to as the "floating population," limiting their access to essential services (Lu et al., 2025).

Economic inequality between rural and urban areas has been the major driver for migration from rural to urban areas. Wages in urban areas are significantly higher than in rural areas; urban areas have more diversified employment than rural areas, and urban areas have much better infrastructure than rural areas. Conversely, rural areas have much lower income levels, much less industrial development, and significantly less access to public goods compared to urban areas. Therefore, migration from rural to urban areas is

often used as a tool for income diversification and poverty reduction among households living in rural areas (Wu et al., 2023).

Although there is an abundance of financial opportunities, the act of migration comes with a number of socio-economic hurdles. Low-skilled workers will frequently find employment in industries like construction; manufacturing; and service-related tasks. The above industries are frequently characterised as having low incomes with long hours and little to no labour protection. The conditions in which migrants live also suffering from overcrowding and poor-quality resources compounds the vulnerability of these people (Cheng & Huang, 2025).

A number of various societal inequities exist between migrant worker populations and the general population regarding physical health; such as limited access to medical care, occupational hazards; exposure to environmental factors contribute to greater risk of developing serious health problems. Mental health of these populations is frequently negatively impacted due to widespread social exclusion; separation from family members; and the pressures associated with living in a highly populated urban area (Sun et al., 2024).

There have been several initiatives undertaken by the Chinese government over the past few years to assist in integrating migrant workers into the urban population and to reduce the disparities faced by this group. Reforms to the hukou system and the expansion of social welfare benefits for migrants have begun to take place; however there continue to be significant differences between migrant workers and those in the general population related to access and quality of health care and other social services (Tian et al., 2022). From this context, this study seeks to understand how all of the aforementioned factors collectively impact migratory work through the lens of how socio-economic factors influence health for migrants within China's governing framework.

3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This project is a study to analyse the impacts of migration from rural areas to cities on health and on the economy in China since it is going through such rapid change. This study wants to gain knowledge on how migration affects the upward movement of people from rural to urban areas and whether any new inequities are being created because of this migration. In particular, this study looked at how the hukou system affects migrants' ability to find employment, and get healthcare as well as social services in the cities they migrate to. Finally, it examined the health of migrant workers, including their physical and mental health, occupational risks, housing conditions, and access/use of health services. The project also incorporated both socioeconomic and health aspects of the lives of migrants in order to create a more complete picture of their experiences as migrants and to develop recommendations to help support equitable urban integration and sustainable development in China.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive and interdisciplinary research has been conducted on rural-urban migration within China involving literature from various fields including economics, sociology, public health, and development studies. Migration has been widely accepted as an important contributor to China’s economic transformation and has also contributed to the emergence of new types of inequality (Guo, 2023). Migration has been the focus of most economic literature, with an emphasis on the way migration improves labour market efficiency and promotes economic growth. Economists have indicated that migration allows for labour to be transferred from low productivity agriculture to high productivity urban industries, while also noting how the industrialisation process in China has relied substantially on this transition in structure. They have also pointed out that due to the segmented nature of the urban labour market, migrants tend to do most of their work in areas that are unskilled and informal (He et al., 2023).

Many sociologists have studied the different institutional and social barriers that rural-urban migrants face in their new urban environments, including the barriers related to the hukou system. The hukou system is often mentioned in

sociological studies as being a major cause of social stratification and limiting access to public services for migrants, all while maintaining the marginalisation of migrants. Thus, many of the studies highlight that with the hukou system in place, migrants experience a form of "internal exclusion" where they are physically present in the cities, but they continue to experience social and institutional exclusion (Yu, 2022).

The previous literature also revealed that there are many differences between the health outcomes of migrants and those of their urban counterparts. The evidence from public health studies supports that migrants use inadequate amounts of health care services despite having higher levels of exposure to health risks. The barriers that contribute to these inequities include the costs associated with accessing health care, lack of health insurance coverage, and restrictions imposed by institutions on the ability of migrants to access health care services. Research on occupational health is also showing high levels of workplace injuries and chronic health conditions among migrant workers (Chen et al., 2023).

Investigations into mental health are also becoming increasingly important, with multiple studies documenting high levels of psychological distress among migrants due to social isolation, discrimination, and family separation. However, there are also studies documenting the resilience and coping strategies of migrants, including the establishment of social networks and community support systems to address these issues. In the past two decades, there has been a substantial amount of research focused on evaluating policies and reforms aimed at improving the health outcomes for migrants. Researchers are assessing the effectiveness of reforms to the hukou system and the expansion of social welfare programmes to include migrant families with some gains made but still have some areas that have yet to see sufficient improvement. As some cities implement policies that are more inclusive of migrant families, there are still wide variations in how the reforms are being implemented across different regions (Huang & Ren, 2022). Overall, the current literature examining migration in China demonstrates that migration is both a cause of great economic growth and another source of health and social inequities throughout China.

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To assess socioeconomic and health impacts due to rural-to-urban migration in China.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Study Selection

This research used the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA) to ensure a clear and systematic methodology for literature selection for the assessment of socioeconomic and health effects of rural-to-urban migration in China. The first search used Google Scholar and focused on research concerning the health effects and socio-economic situations associated with rural-to-urban migration in China. The inquiry included many combinations of principal keywords, such as "health impacts," "socio-economic impacts," "rural-to-urban migration," and "China." The first search identified 323 articles; however, the elimination of identical databases, duplicates, non-academic research, and irrelevant publications reduced the total to 8 throughout the filtering phase. The researcher first found 323 databases, which were then narrowed to 268 registered databases during the search using main keywords. The total number of registered databases was decreased to 154 after the elimination of 44 duplicate entries, 51 databases deemed unsuitable by automated techniques, and 19 records eliminated for various other reasons. Subsequently, 79 records were eliminated, resulting in a total of 75 reports available for retrieval. Subsequently, 27 records were not obtained, indicating that 48 reports were evaluated for eligibility. Ultimately, 17 studies were dismissed owing to the unavailability of full-text PDFs, 12 reports were discarded because of insufficient empirical evidence, and 11 databases were omitted since they did not concentrate on

rural-to-urban migration. This has culminated in a total of eight studies included in the review. The included articles for the purpose of the review analysis were Zhang & Zhou (2022), Zhao et al., (2024), Li et al., (2024), Guan & Guan (2024), Gao (2025), Seeberg (2024), Lu et al., (2025), and Yang & Chan (2025).

6.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To be able to verify the accuracy and credibility of the chosen articles an inclusion/exclusion criterion was created based on the objective of this research. All articles that fit into the inclusion criteria must be (1) peer-reviewed; (2) original research published in English; (3) full-text published between 2021 and 2023 (4) the migration from rural to urban areas in China. Additionally, studies that provide empirical or analytic analyses of the socioeconomic and health effects of rural-to-urban migration were prioritised as being of much value. Of high significance were studies within the context of the institutional framework of the hukou system as this has played a major role in the development of rural-to-urban migration.

Excluded from the study were (1) All studies published prior to 2021; (2) Studies that are not available in full-text format; (3) Studies not available in English; (4) Studies that did not focus on China; (5) Studies looking at international (as opposed to internal) migration; and (6) Studies that did not look at socioeconomic or health-related effects for the purpose of consistency and ensuring rigour in the research process. All opinion pieces, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded to meet the academic requirement of rigour. Moreover, utilisation of these criteria has helped the research to guarantee the inclusion of relevant, contemporary, and methodologically sound literature, while improving reliability as well as validity of the research findings on assessment of health and socio-economic effects of rural-to-city migration activities in China.

6.3 Data Extraction

Once the eight selected articles were chosen for inclusion in the review, a systematic data extraction process was carried out in order to extract the most relevant information from each article and record it systematically. All extracted data, including author names, years of publication, research objectives, methodologies, findings, and conclusions, were reviewed and documented accordingly. Particular significance was given to how each article approached rural-to-urban migration in China, specifically in regard to its socioeconomic and health-related consequences. Some of the identified variables include income, employment conditions, social integration, access to health care, well-being, and education outcomes. In addition, there was particular emphasis on identifying the role of institutional factors (specifically the hukou system) in influencing migration experiences and access to resources. The extracted data were systematically organised into a form that allowed for easy identification of themes, patterns, or variations among the studies selected for inclusion in the review. The nature of this process enabled a critical comparison of the findings of the studies in the review, while also allowing for the identification of trends, inconsistencies, or gaps within the reviewed literature. Therefore, the synthesised structure allowed for a holistic and coherent summary of the existing academic discourse related to the implications of rural-to-urban migration in China regarding socioeconomic and health consequences.

6.4 Study Quality Assessment

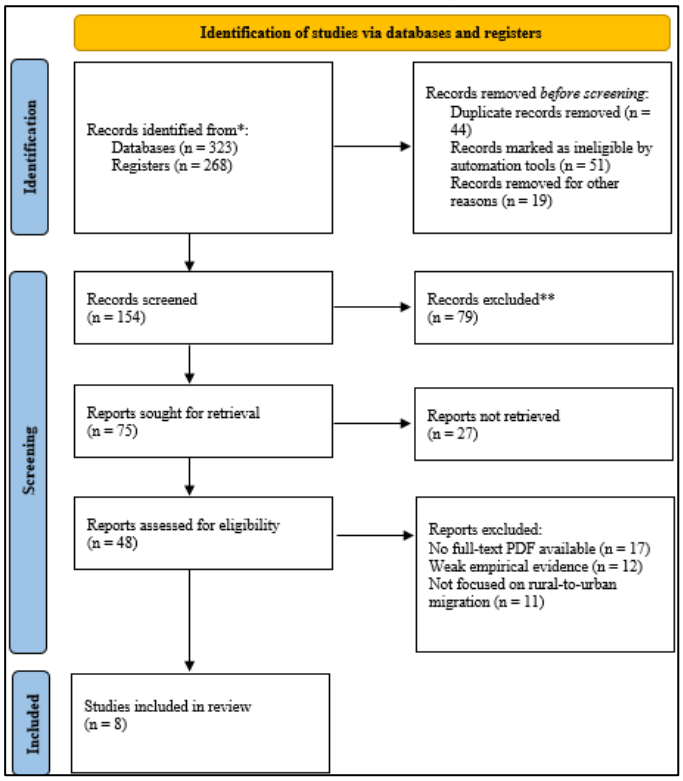
This quality assessment of the literature included systematic evaluations of the individual studies included in this review to ascertain the credibility, reliability, and objectivity of each included study. The evaluations included assessing the following criteria in each study: 1) Research design; 2) Methodological Rigour; 3) Clear objectives; 4) Relevance to the topic of interest for the research; and 5) Validity of the findings produced from the research. In addition to the above criteria used for evaluating the individual studies included in this review, empirical studies that have used robust analytic methods and well defined (i.e., clearly articulated) theoretical and conceptual frameworks

were prioritised, with a focus on empirical studies examining the effects of different socio-economic and health outcomes associated with rural-urban migration.

Studies that provided evidence of strong methodological transparency; used appropriate methods of data collection and analysis; and that were consistent with the study objectives, were rated as having higher quality. In addition, studies were evaluated according to how well they addressed the primary themes explored in the studies (i.e., inequalities, access to healthcare, well-being, and institutional factors such as the hukou system). Peer-reviewed academic publications were given priority (i.e., articles appearing in peer-reviewed journals have undergone extensive editorial and scholarly review).

Where applicable, methodology clarity and the relevance of the study's findings were also included in evaluating the contribution to the overall study of each of the studies included in the review. This quality assessment process provided a basis for establishing the methodological robustness, credibility and contextual relevance of each study, thus providing an increased degree of reliability and academic integrity to the systematic review of rural-urban migration in China.

Table 1: Study Selection through PRISMA



7. RESULT

Researchers have analysed studies of research performed in China to assess social and economic impacts related to the migration of individuals from rural to urban areas. Of the eight articles reviewed, all concluded that migrants of both rural and urban backgrounds have generally experienced higher levels of incomes and greater opportunity in cities.

However, the researchers also concluded that these gains have been uneven, primarily due to structural constraints associated with the Chinese hukou system.

Previous studies such as Zhang & Zhou (2022) have illustrated increasing satisfaction with life could be attributed to the higher levels of employment and income earned by migrants.

In a similar note, Guan & Guan (2024) provided an analysis of urban residential conditions in Chinese cities which revealed that well-being amongst migrants to urban settings is extensively affected by how migrants are situated within their residential communities, e.g. proximity to co-migrants, housing conditions, and quality of dwelling. Migrants who lived in informal or otherwise marginalised urban disposable communities had lower well-being levels than urban residents who live in higher quality neighbourhoods, thereby illustrating that spatial inequity is embedded within the fabric of all Chinese cities.

Migrants in China face both structural and social barriers related to how their overall health is impacted by those barriers. Research by Zhao et al., (2024) indicated that access to the health care system is uneven for all, but especially for minority, rural migrants as a result of restrictions based on their hukou status. This limited access has affected their ability to integrate into urban settings. Li et al., (2024) illustrated that there are long-term effects on adult health from childhood migration experiences in China, as cumulative health impacts span across the migrants' entire lifetime and accumulate from their migration experience and their interactions with urban areas.

Socioeconomic inequalities have been explored by Gao (2025), who identified the concept of "high-income poverty" among rural-to-urban migrants in China. While rural-to-urban migrants make a higher income than if they had remained in the rural areas, they remain at risk of being in economic distress due to the following reasons: They pay higher costs of living in urban areas; they do not receive access to social welfare benefits; and they experience instability in their employment. This finding is particularly important in China due to the rapidly expanding urban centres and the fact that urbanisation has not been accompanied by social protections and forms of inclusion for all people in the urban areas.

Education inequality is another major issue. Seeberg (2024) illustrated the impediments that child migrants face in accessing urban educational opportunities due to institutional barriers and disparities between the schools that rural and urban students attend. Thus, the long-term effects of these barriers compound upon each other and perpetuate intergenerational inequality, as children of rural-to-urban migrants will not be able to fully realise the urban opportunities available to all children in those urban settings.

Other research by Lu et al. (2025) found strong evidence linking access to China's urban social welfare system with migrants' hukou (household registration) status, which directly impacts migrant choice with respect to place of permanent residence and mobility. As such, they found that the hukou system is a key institutional mechanism shaping migration outcomes. In a related analysis, Yang & Chan (2025) discuss the migration regime in China as being deliberately restrictive, limiting the pathways available for permanent urban residence, and continuing to segment the labour market. They found that most migrants work in relatively low-skilled, unstable jobs, reinforcing their position as marginalised people within the urban economy.

All studies reviewed consistently demonstrated that migrants in China experience both opportunities and constraints associated with rural-to-urban migration. While they significantly contribute to urban economic growth, institutional and structural conditions unique to China continue to limit their access to resources, service provision, and long-term viability as urban residents.

8. DISCUSSION

The rural-to-urban migration process in China should not be seen as a purely economic progression but rather through the lens of a structural process restricted by the hukou system. All eight studies included in the literature synthesis document the continued influence of the hukou system in regulating welfare, healthcare, education,

and employment access for rural migrants. Although rural-to-urban migration has been a major driver of China's economic transition, the migration benefits vary significantly. While Zhang & Zhou (2022) provided a relatively optimistic assessment of increased life satisfaction among migrants, this is contrasted by Gao (2025) demonstrating that increased income does not necessarily lead to increased economic stability due to high levels of high-income poverty (HIPC) in some regions of quickly growing urban areas throughout China, where poor access to social welfare combined with rising living costs offsets potential income gains.

In addition, the health consequences of migration further demonstrate the limitations of this strategy as a method for development. Zhao et al. (2024), for instance, provide evidence suggesting that institutional barriers prevent access to the healthcare systems in China, particularly for vulnerable populations, whereas Li et al. (2024) demonstrate that the health impacts of rural-to-urban migration persist inter-generationally. Consequently, these studies challenge the assumption that urbanisation inherently improves people's health but rather expose the structural barriers that contribute to social disparity between urban and rural populations within China's urban system shape health outcomes.

Social integration can be identified another major challenge. Guan & Guan (2024) identified that migrants' experience of the attribution of belongingness in Chinese urban areas is shaped the type of accommodation in which they live; however, this lack of access to spatially independent areas as well as limited social integration indicates that, while contributing economically, the structures that separate migrants from residents have led to persistent marginalisation of migrants from socio-cultural perspectives. Seeberg (2024) also identified that marginalisation is also exacerbated by the fact that migrant children face significant barriers to educational achievement, thereby reinforcing the socio-economic division between migrants and residents.

The work of Lu et al. (2025) and Yang & Chan (2025) provided crucial institutional analysis of this phenomenon and offers insight into the ways that China's migration system has been constructed to both promote economic engagement while simultaneously prohibiting full integration into the social fabric of Chinese society. This dual approach allows the continued economic success of China to occur in conjunction with a continued existence of significant social inequities; therefore, this dual system illustrates that social stratification is a hallmark characteristic of China's development model.

While the studies included in the review have many strengths, there are still limitations to the literature. One of the limitations is that there has not been much focus on the role of rural sending areas and labour exploitation in migration from rural areas to urban areas in China. In addition, many of the studies used cross-sectional data which limits their ability to measure long-term changes in an environment of rapid social and economic transformation. In summary, the literature suggested that rural to urban migration in China is characterised by a tension between economic opportunities, and structural inequities resulting from institutional constraints, such as the hukou system. Although migrants play an important role in urban development in China, their experiences are impacted by these institutional constraints, which restrict their access to resources and opportunities. Addressing the challenges that migrants face will require targeted policy reform efforts aimed at promoting inclusive urbanisation, equitable access to services and long-term social integration within China.

9. CONCLUSION

This study provided an in-depth analysis of the economic and social consequences of moving from one part of China to another, revealing that migration is associated with both economic growth and continued inequality. The findings from the literature corroborate previous findings that migration helps rural residents earn higher wages and participate in the economic activity of cities. Yet, the fact is that rural-to-urban migrants do not receive equal benefits from migration and,

therefore, are not guaranteed lasting contentment and economic advancement through migration. The findings show that the hukou registration system limits the ability of migrants to access critical social services (e.g., healthcare, education, and social welfare), and this continues to contribute to the dual citizenship system in China. Therefore, migrants are often in a marginalised socioeconomic position in urban environments, resulting in limited job security, little social interaction with others, and a lack of access to resources.

Additionally, there are considerable health differences between migrant and non-migrant populations. While occupants of urban communities have better access to healthcare services, they often face barriers to receiving care, resulting in significant unmet healthcare needs and negative health outcomes. Poor housing, high risk of injury at work, and mental stress associated with migration compound these unmet needs. Moreover, if the high-income poverty within socio-economic inequality highlights that only limited development success can be shown based on simply using income indicators, then migration would not necessarily lead to improved standards of living, especially without inclusive policy and social protection efforts in effect. In conclusion, rural-to-urban migration is representative of the complex interaction of opportunities and limitations; thus, although it serves as the primary vehicle for achieving China's overall development objectives, only by implementing comprehensive policy reform that eliminates institutional barriers and promotes access to services on a fair basis can its maximum potential be realised through promoting socially inclusive and sustainable urban integration.

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