

The Pursuit of Happiness? Accessing the Effects of Being Internal Migrants on Subjective Well-being in China

In China, as elsewhere, the primary engine of internal migration, particularly migration from the countryside into the cities, is the desire to improve one's financial situation (Nong 2002). The rapidly growing national economy in China during the past three decades has made this a realistic possibility, as past research has documented, by providing a large number of urban jobs that in general pay better than rural jobs (Zhao 1999). Little is known about another question, which in the eyes of many is an equally important one: does migration improve happiness? The answer to this question is, however, less obvious than it may first appear. First of all, the theory of happiness is under-developed, at least outside of economics. In particular, the extent to which the pursuit of happiness drives life course decisions, specifically in this case the decision to migrate, is an unsettled question. Second, it is probable that there are offsetting effects of migration on happiness. On the positive side, we might expect an improvement in one's financial situation, escape from laborious agricultural work and a harsh rural environment, and the satisfaction of sending remittances home all to promote happiness. On the negative side, factors undercutting the happiness of migrants include their difficult working conditions, lack of social support, and discrimination and stigmatization of migrants by urban residents. How all these factors combine and what their net outcome is for the subjective well-being of migrants is not only of scholarly interest but also of great policy relevance. In fact, many ancient Chinese dynasties were overthrown by "unhappy" migrants (Huang 1988).

We use data from a just-completed national probability sample of 3,000 adult Chinese respondents (The Survey of Migration and Health in China), which includes an oversample of

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internal migrants, to ensure valid comparisons between migrants and nonmigrants. We have collected rich sociodemographic information, including education, income, occupation, and migration and job histories, as well as extensive health information, including subjective health assessments, medical histories, biometric measurements, and biomarkers. With this rich data set, it is possible to study the social, psychological, and biomedical pathways to happiness simultaneously and to disentangle potentially complicated interactions among these different pathways. The dependent variable, happiness, is the widely used three-category ordinal variable: “very happy,” “pretty happy,” and “not too happy.” The core independent variable is migration status, which is coded “1” for migrants and “0” for nonmigrants. In this analysis, we focus on people with rural registration, and contrast those are current migrants and those who have never migrated. Since we use observational data in which migration status is not (and cannot be) randomly assigned to respondents, commonly used regression models might yield biased estimates due to the correlation between migration status and other covariates that are predictive of migration status. To handle this problem, we utilize an analytical strategy that mixes nonparametric matching methods and parametric regression models in the present study (Ho et al. 2007). To be more specific, we first preprocess the raw data using various matching techniques (exact matching, subclassifications, nearest neighbor matching, optimal matching, and coarsened exact matching) to break the linkage between migration status and other covariates and make sure that our comparisons between rural nonmigrants and migrants are restricted to individuals who are similar in respects other than their migration status. We then estimate average treatment effect (ATT) and average treatment effect on the treated (ATE) by estimating ordered logistic regression equations on the matched data. Compared to calculating simple means in predicted probability between the groups under comparison, as is usually done

in matching studies, estimating full parametric models can further reduce the bias in the estimated ATT and ATE due to any residue correlation between migration status and other covariates¹. In a sense, this mixed strategy represents a “doubly safe” strategy in estimating causal inference using observational data.

This study is the first study on happiness in China using a nationally representative sample; it is also the first study devoted to a comparison between migrants and nonmigrants regarding happiness.

References

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¹ Most nonparametric matching methods drastically reduce the association between treatment and pre-treatment characteristics but do not eliminate it, with the rare exception when exact matching is done.