

Environment, Health and Migration

Towards a More Integrated Analysis

Jennifer Holdaway

Migration and Health in China

A joint project of

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Sun Yat-sen Center for Migrant Health Policy

Working Paper 2014–3

March 2014



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UNRISD, Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland; Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020; Fax: +41 (0)22 9170650; info@unrisd.org; www.unrisd.org



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Sun Yat-sen Center for Migrant Health Policy, Sun Yat-sen University, #74, Zhongshan Road II, Guangzhou City 510080, P.R. China; Tel: +86 20 8733 5524; Fax: +86 20 8733 5524; cmhp@mail.sysu.edu.cn; <http://cmhp.sysu.edu.cn/>

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Introduction to Working Papers on Migration and Health in China

This paper is part of a series of outputs from the research project on [Migration and Health in China](#).

China is confronted by major challenges posed by the massive population movement over the past three decades. In 2009, approximately 230 million rural inhabitants moved temporarily or permanently to cities in search of employment and better livelihoods. Such large-scale mobility has huge implications for the pattern and transmission of diseases; for China's health care system and related policies; and for health of the Chinese population in both receiving and sending areas. The health and social issues associated with population movement on such an unprecedented scale have been inadequately addressed by public policy and largely neglected by researchers. Based on interdisciplinary research across the health, social science and policy fields, this project constitutes a major effort to fill research and policy gaps. Collectively, the papers and commentaries in this series aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the health and public policy implications of rural to urban migration in China, to inform policy and to identify future research directions.

This project is a collaboration between UNRISD and the Center for Migrant Health Policy, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China, and funded by the China Medical Board.

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Abstract

Many of the health risks faced by rural-urban migrants in China relate to environmental factors, including exposure to occupational hazards, unhealthy living conditions and environmental pollution. This commentary reviews some of the major trends in recent research on migration, environment and health, and discusses some of its limitations and challenges. It argues that, while a focus on the health problems facing existing migrants remains important, it is also necessary to consider the interaction between environment, health and migration in the context of long-term processes of urbanization, agricultural intensification and industrialization. These processes have generated very particular patterns of migration and also of environmental impacts and health risks, and they will continue to do so as China enters a new period in which rapid urbanization is accompanied by industrial restructuring. Situating analysis within this broader context has the potential to provide the basis for more forward-looking and locally appropriate health and environmental protection policy.

Acknowledgements

This commentary was prepared as part of the project on 'Migration and Health in China', implemented by Sun Yat-sen Center for Migrant Health Policy and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and funded by the China Medical Board (Grant No. 10-009: Phase II Supplementary Grant: Institutional Development of the Sun Yat-sen Center for Migrant Health Policy—Building Capacity for Research on Migrant Health in China"). The author is a Program Director and China Representative at the Social Science Research Council (holdaway@ssrc.org). Many thanks to Sarah Cook, Bettina Gransow-van Treeck and Hein Mallee for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Jennifer Holdaway is Program Director, China Environment and Health Initiative at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), United States.

Introduction

This commentary is part of a series of papers that considers the challenges that rural-urban migration in China presents for health policy. Several of the contributions begin with a listing of the factors that put migrants' health at risk and many of these relate to "the environment." They include exposure to a range of physical, chemical or biological hazards in the home and workplace as well as psychological stresses related to the social environment. The first part of this paper discusses the ways in which environmental factors can affect health, reviews the main trends in research on this topic in the China context and discusses some of its limitations and challenges. In particular, it points to the fact that to date most research has focused on assessing existing health outcomes and risks, and has paid little attention to their drivers. This severely limits the usefulness of these studies in anticipating future shifts in the burden of disease and informing policies to address them.

The second part of the paper expands the frame of the analysis and argues more broadly for grounding research on environment, migration and health in analysis of the spatial distribution of economic activities and population which shape locally specific constellations of environment and health problems. This broader perspective is especially necessary at a time when industrial restructuring, agricultural intensification and urbanization are redefining China's physical and social landscapes.

Framing Environment, Health and Migration Interactions

Environment, migration and health can each be defined in a number of ways that open up different lines of enquiry. Some of the analysis below could also be extended to changes in social environments and their implications for health, to psychological as well as physical health impacts, and also to other types of migration. This paper, however, is concerned primarily with the physical environment, both natural and man-made, with physical health, and with labour migration across administrative boundaries that have implications for access to employment opportunities and to public goods and services.¹

Interactions between these phenomena have been approached from a number of different directions. In addition to research that investigates the role of environmental factors in determining health discussed below, a largely separate literature considers the impact of migration on the environment and its implications for human and ecosystem health. A third and growing body of work is concerned with the role of environmental degradation and related health risks as a driver of migration.² Given the focus of this collection, this paper is concerned primarily with the first of these clusters of research, but I suggest that the broader framing has the potential for integrating the other two dimensions in contexts where they are relevant.

Even with this limited focus, analysis of environmental impacts on health is not a simple matter, as these can be direct or indirect, localized or broad in scope, and immediate or delayed, as well as acting independently or in complex interaction with

¹ This discussion refers to domestic jurisdictions, but the analysis could also be applied to the growing numbers of African and other international migrants to China.

² A review of this literature is beyond the scope of the commentary. Hugo 2011, 2008; and White 2008 provide introductions.

genetic and behavioural factors. However, there is a growing consensus among both public health and development experts that understanding and addressing environmental determinants is crucial to advancing public health and well-being. This emphasis is apparent in the Health Synthesis of the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (WHO 2005), the International Development Research Centre's EcoHealth Program (Forget and Lebel 2001) the One Health Program (Kaplan et al. 2009), the GeoHealth Program (UNEP 2009), and the Urbanization, Environment and Health program of the International Council for Science (ICSU 2011) among others (OECD 2007; Prüss-Üstün and Corvalán 2006). Realizing the potential of this approach will entail understanding the different ways in which environmental factors affect health in particular locations and the way in which they interact with other dimensions of social change to influence the burden of disease and needs for health care. In China, the massive scale of rural-urban migration and its crucial role in development in the post-reform period clearly make this an important issue for consideration.

Research on Migrants' Environmental Health in China: Scope and Limitations

The largest body of literature on environment, health and migration interactions in China, and that to which this series of papers contributes, is part of the broader research on migrants' health. This research considers the factors that affect the health in particular of low-skilled labour migrants during the period in which they are treated as temporary residents of urban areas because of their rural household registration status (*hukou*). It also considers the implications of migration for the provision of healthcare services.³ A smaller body of work looks at the health of migrants returning to rural areas and at the economic burden of occupational injury and disease,⁴ or at the health of the children of migrants and of elderly parents left in the countryside (for example, Ye 2008).

In disciplinary terms this research has been conducted predominantly by three groups of scholars. Epidemiologists and public health experts are concerned with migrants because it is assumed that they are at high risk and/or potential vectors of communicable diseases such as SARS, avian flu, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.⁵ Migrants also draw the attention of health policy experts because their mobility itself presents challenges for the provision of health care services in the Chinese system which has for many decades provided separate and unequal services to rural and urban populations.⁶ In addition, social scientists—primarily demographers, economists, sociologists and anthropologists specializing in migration and in social stratification more generally—are interested in

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