

**The “Difference Between Heaven and Earth”:  
Rural-urban Disparities in Health and Well-being in China**

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Although China is a rapidly developing nation, rural-urban disparities in health and well-being remain large, and perhaps have become larger than in the early years of the Communist period because the urban sector has benefitted from China’s transition to a market economy much more than has the rural sector. Alternatively, perhaps rural-urban disparities have been reduced through the infusion of income into the rural sector as a result of massive labor migration and resulting remittances. Economic disparities are exacerbated by institutional arrangements that have created a two-class society with sharp rural-urban distinctions in the public provision of schooling, health care, housing, and retirement benefits. Indeed, it is fair to say that China built an urban welfare state on the backs of the peasants. However, there has been a great deal of geographic mobility in recent years, resulting in a current “floating population” (people living other than where they are registered) of as many as 150 million people. Many of these are rural-to-urban migrants and others are their children, born in urban areas but lacking urban registration. Thus, two distinct factors may affect rural-urban differences: institutional discrimination favoring those with urban residence rights; and differences in the nature of city vs. village life, which may differentiate villagers from their neighbors who have migrated to cities or to peri-urban factory enclaves.

Taking account of both sorts of factors, my paper will describe rural-urban disparities in health, well-being, and related behavior and will analyze whether, to what extent, and in what

ways such disparities have changed over time. I also will consider to what extent changes over the life course in health and well-being reflect geographical and social mobility, which has been massive: fully 40% of the formal urban population in 2008—the population with urban registration— changed from rural to urban registration between age 14 and the time they were surveyed, many if not most because their change in registration status accompanied marked upward mobility. (Note that the proportion of the current rural-origin population able to acquire urban status is quite small, about 13%, but because the rural population was far larger than the urban population, the small fraction of successful rural-origin hukou-changers constitutes a much larger fraction of the registered urban population.) Moreover, of the *de facto* urban population in 2008 (which is about half of the total population of China), nearly 60 per cent were peasants (that is, those lacking urban registration). Thus, a comparison of the settled rural population, the rural-to-urban migrant population, and the settled urban population should yield substantial insight into the role of institutional distinctions vs. experiential differences.

To carry out this analysis, I will exploit two national probability sample surveys I and colleagues carried out in China, one in 1996 and one in 2008. These data sets will be supplemented by selective data from the 2005 and 2006 rounds of the Chinese General Social Survey; the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS), a panel survey conducted in eight provinces; three waves of the China Household Income Project (CHIP), a repeated cross-section; and the 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2005 national population censuses of China. The 2008 survey, which over-sampled high in-migration areas and focused on the determinants, dynamics, and consequences of internal migration, is a particularly rich source of information for the present

analysis since it included extensive health histories and biometric measurements in addition to detailed education, migration, work, and family histories.