

RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION AND LABOR MARKETS IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY IN A NORTHEASTERN PROVINCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

FEW issues can attract as much policy concern as large-scale internal migration from rural areas to urban centers in China during the past decade. As rural-urban migration began in the mid-1980s and accelerated to a significant extent in the early 1990s, a massive literature has been accumulating on internal migration (Li 1996; Yan 1997). Numerous surveys and research projects have been conducted to identify the magnitude of the “floating population” and the causes and consequences of the “tidal wave of migrant labor.” Since the surge of internal migration has come so suddenly, however, the attention of research has so far been concentrated largely on grasping the reality of rural-urban migration and its immediate consequences. In particular, the literature keeps strange silence as to how the issue of internal migration in China is to be understood in terms of economic models of internal migration that have been developed, and debated fiercely, for understanding the incidence of migration and urbanization in developing countries in the world.¹ This is strange because large-scale rural-urban migration and pathological urban growth have been a common feature of developing countries, and the phenomena are by no means unique to China.

Controversies over internal migration in developing countries have revolved around the Todaro model which assumes that the urban informal sector is the pool where rural-to-urban migrants first seek employment and where they remain underemployed or unemployed while waiting for job opportunities in the urban formal sector (Todaro 1969; Harris and Todaro 1970). The model fit well with such stylized facts in the urban labor market as the large rural-urban wage gap, high unemployment rate, and rapidly growing informal sector, and it became widely accepted as conventional wisdom and induced a vast number of migration studies (Todaro

¹ One exception to this is a recent article by Hare (1999), which has come to our notice after this paper has been written up.

1997, chap. 8). The model provided a theoretical background for migration policies that were implemented in some countries in the 1970s to restrict the flow of rural migrants into urban centers and to support attempts to repatriate rural immigrants in urban centers back to their home villages.

As micro-level research on urban and rural labor markets in developing countries advanced, however, some doubts began to be cast on the empirical foundations of the Todaro model. In particular, the structure and workings of urban labor markets and the role of the urban informal sector have been major subjects of criticism (Yap 1977; Kannappan 1985; Williamson 1988).² Critics argue that neither urban labor markets nor rural-urban migrants are homogeneous. The urban formal sector consists of various labor markets in which the wage rigidity and high and rising unemployment are not as evident as conceived by the conventional wisdom. The labor force found in the rural-urban migration flow is of diverse attributes in terms of human capital; it is not necessarily rural surplus labor. They also argue that the urban informal sector is not a mere pool for rural-urban migrants, or a “residual” labor market, but the place where a wide variety of productive economic activities are performed, providing considerable labor demand in flexible labor markets. Wages and earnings in the urban informal sectors are not necessarily lower than in the urban formal sector, and at the margin the distinction between the two sectors is not clear, invalidating the formal-informal dichotomy in the Todaro model. Viewing the urban informal sector in this way leads the critics to a positive evaluation of urbanization, and therefore to policy prescriptions for rural-urban migration very different from those derived from the Todaro model.³

The fact that even after reforms in 1978 China adopted policies to restrict rural-urban migration, as some other developing countries did in earlier decades, may imply that the premises of the Todaro model frame the policymakers’ perception about internal migration. Also implicit in the migration literature in China is a strong obsession about rural surplus labor, as was the case in Japan and other developing countries in Asia at their earlier stage of development. China shares typical dual-economy characteristics: e.g., a large share of the population in the rural sector and large income differentials between the rural and urban sectors. Scholars as well as policymakers in China may hold the Lewisian type of dual-economy model for their economy (Lewis 1954). The commune economy prior to the 1978 reforms would have made rural communities in China more commensurate to the rural (or traditional) sector envisaged in the Lewisian model. At the same time, the centrally planned economy before 1978 suffocated not only interregional migration but also labor markets altogether. One can also question whether during the two decades

² Todaro (1997, chap. 8) is silent about these criticisms while duly citing these articles.

³ One important prescription is common to the Todaro school and its critics, that is, the need to increase rural employment through agricultural and rural development.

since the reforms the labor markets have come to work as smoothly as conceived by the critics of the Todaro model. All these are empirical questions that need to be answered if the process of internal migration in China is to be understood and if appropriate migration policies are to be implemented.

The basic question in this paper is whether the labor markets exist in China, and if they do, how they function. In addressing these issues, we would like to examine whether the Todaro or the anti-Todaro models better fit the incidence of rural-urban migration in China. We approach these issues through examining the nature and performance of labor markets that are involved in the rural-urban migration in and around the Harbin area in Heilongjiang Province. In the next section, we will explain how relevant data were collected; in Section III we will present the extent and characteristics of rural-to-urban migration; Section IV will examine the characteristics of rural immigrants in the urban informal sector and the nature of urban labor markets in the informal as well as formal sectors; and Section V will examine the performance of labor markets by comparing the wage rates in various labor markets. The final section will summarize our findings in this study.

II. DATA COLLECTION

In order to collect primary micro-level data, a series of interview surveys were conducted in the Harbin area of Heilongjiang Province in July–August 1998. The province is situated in the northeastern region which is away from the eastern and southeastern parts of the country where more than 90 per cent of China's population lives and which have been receiving a huge amount of the "floating population" from the rest of the country in the past decade. Being the provincial capital of Heilongjiang Province and one of the ten largest cities in China, however, Harbin has a high concentration of rural-urban migrants.

To identify migration flows between rural and urban areas and wage rates in the labor markets involved in the rural-urban continuum, data collection was made in rural villages as well as in Harbin City. Considering the dualistic nature of the urban labor markets, two separate surveys were conducted in Harbin City, one in the informal sector (urban informal sector survey) and the other in the formal sector (urban formal sector survey). Interviews in the urban informal sector survey, using open-ended questionnaires, were conducted with 130 individual workers engaging in such typical informal sector jobs as construction work, street vending, petty retail trade and services, sewing in small garment stores, working as a housemaid, and also job-seekers.⁴ Since the size of the working population in the informal sector is unknown, it is impossible to know in the statistical sense how random our sampling was. However, our sampling was random in the sense that workers were

⁴ The definition of a job-seeker will be given in a later section.

selected randomly at their places of work, in the places they were living, or at the places they were seeking employment such as at living quarters (bunk houses) beside construction sites, parks where job-seekers wait for employers, or at recruiter offices.⁵

In the urban formal sector survey, the managers of fourteen modern firms in Harbin City, including state-owned, joint-venture, and private firms, were interviewed to collect information on wages and salaries paid to employees having differing qualifications. The selection of sample firms was random in the similar sense as in the urban informal sector survey; we visited firms in the city randomly whenever they came into our sight.⁶

The information on rural-urban migration dealing with source of this migration was collected in two genuinely rural villages in the province, one village growing corn (dubbed “Corn Village”) and another growing rice (“Rice Village”). We first selected the Corn Village based on information obtained in the urban informal sector survey; the village has sent many migrants to Harbin City. The sample Rice Village, situated in a rice-growing area adjacent to the Corn Village, was selected to collect supplementary information on migration in a different rural setting. In these two sample villages, sample households were drawn randomly, with the sampling ratio being 40 per cent for Corn Village and 11 per cent for Rice Village.⁷

III. MIGRATION FROM RURAL AREAS

A. *Village Profile*

The two villages where the rural surveys were conducted are situated in Mulan County, about two hundred kilometers northeast of Harbin City. Because of the poor condition of the road and transportation infrastructure, it takes seven hours by bus to travel between the county and Harbin City making the trip far more than a daily commuting distance.⁸ The county is purely agricultural, and being in the northern most province bordering on Siberian Russia in the north and east, the area in and around the county has been a frontier with a relatively recent history of agricultural development. Most of farmers in the county settled in the area during the 1960s and 1970s, migrating from densely populated provinces in central China,

⁵ There is a public recruiter office in Harbin City run by the city government.

⁶ The fact that more than fifty firms refused to provide us information may cause some bias in our modern firm sample. It is perhaps revealing that no such refusals occurred in the informal sector survey or in the village surveys.

⁷ Our surveys in the sample villages were seriously hampered by the heavy flood that hit Heilongjiang Province in August–September 1998.

⁸ The one-way bus fare from Mulan County to Harbin City is at least 25 yuan. As will be explained in a later section, the agricultural wage rates in the area are less than 20 yuan per day. This means the economic distance between the county and Harbin City is also very far.

most notably Shandong Province. As in other parts of Heilongjiang Province, corn had been the major crop grown by farmers throughout the county until the mid-1980s, but the major crop has switched to rice in some parts of the county where irrigation has been made available by a dam constructed by the local government.

Corn Village is small with only 125 registered households. All the households engage in corn and soybean farming. They cultivate a total area of 240 hectares, of which 73 per cent are devoted to corn and soybean production. The corn yield is about 4 metric tons per hectare, nearly 2 metric tons lower than the average unit yield of Heilongjiang Province. Such a low productivity explains why this village is one of the poorest in the province.

Rice Village, with 510 registered households, used to be a typical village in the county growing corn and soybean until the mid-1980s when the local government began to convert farmland gradually into paddy fields. Of the 667 hectares of cultivated land in the village, less than half was paddy fields in 1984. At present, virtually 100 per cent of the land is planted in rice, and the village is recognized as one of the most productive rice-growing villages in all of China. Rice yield per hectare in 1997 was 8.79 metric tons, which was 3 metric tons higher than the average yield in Heilongjiang Province. The high productivity of rice farming enables the farmers in this village to enjoy much higher incomes than their counterparts in Corn Village.⁹

Though the level of household income is significantly different, both sample villages are predominantly agricultural with few nonagricultural economic activities within the village. In the 1980s, two small-scale village and township enterprises, one a chopstick factory and the other a brick factory, were established in Rice Village, but they lasted only a few years. At present, employment opportunities in and around the villages are limited largely to agriculture, and farming in both villages is carried out under the household responsibility system by individual households that are mostly nuclear families.

In the sample villages the first land allocation to individual households under the household responsibility system was completed in 1984 with a secured tenure for fifteen years. The land allocation was repeated as scheduled in 1998 with a tenure period of thirty years. Land is allocated to registered households, and only villagers with local registration are entitled to cultivate land in the two villages. If they lose their household registration in the village, they also forfeit their right to the land. But migrating out of the village, even on a permanent basis, does not bring

⁹ The significant difference in income between Corn Village and Rice Village is well represented by the difference in the quality of village housing; houses in Rice Village are equal to or even better in quality than houses found in urban residential areas in Harbin City, whereas the houses in Corn Village are like those found in poor rural areas throughout China.

TABLE I
MIGRATION FROM THE SAMPLE VILLAGES BETWEEN 1984 AND 1998

	Corn Village	Rice Village
Total number of households ^a	125	510
Total population ^a	545	2,404
Number of households surveyed	51	56
Number of migrations reported	64	68
Number of migrants involved	110	171
Total number of migrations from the village ^b	157	619
Total number of migrants involved ^b	270	1,557
Rate of migration (%):		
Migrations/households	125	121
Migrants/population	49	65

^a Numbers registered at the village office.

^b Estimated by applying the sampling ratio.

deregistration, and migrant families, without exception, retain their cultivation rights, and let relatives farm their land.¹⁰

B. *Characteristics of Migrants from the Sample Villages*

The information on migrants leaving the villages was collected from fifty-one and fifty-six sample households in Corn Village and Rice Village, respectively. We asked the sample households if someone in their households or in relatives'/neighbors' households had ever migrated outside the villages for employment.¹¹ The second land allocation carried out in 1998, for which migrants living or staying outside their villages had to return at least once for registration, helped us ascertain the migration history of those who were absent from their villages. A person is counted as a migrant if he/she left his/her village for more than three months. If he/she repeated migration, he/she is counted as a migrant each time. Migration is further classified into seasonal migration if the duration is three to ten months, and permanent migration if it is more than ten months.

As expected, the degree of migration from the villages has been substantial (Table I). In Corn Village, 64 cases of job-related migration involving 110 persons have been recorded for the decade and a half since 1984. These figures, applied at the village level, indicate that the rate of migration is 125 per cent on a household basis

¹⁰ The same tendency can be observed in various rural areas of the country (Kojima 1988; Roberts 1997). In the study area, leasehold rent for rented land is 1,200 to 1,500 yuan per hectare in Rice Village and 1,000 yuan per hectare in Corn Village. In the study area, the local government does not interfere in land-leasing transactions among villagers.

¹¹ Migration for marriage and other noneconomic reasons is recorded in the surveys, but not included in the analysis in this section.

and 49 per cent in terms of population. An average household in the village has experienced migration more than once, and nearly 50 per cent of the village population has joined the “floating population.” In Rice Village the rate of migration on a household basis is at about the same level as in Corn Village, but it has lost as much as 65 per cent of its population over the last ten years.¹² Such high rates of migration from the villages seem to be sufficient to warrant the use of the term “tidal waves of rural migrant labor” (*mingongchao*) for describing the internal migration from rural to urban areas that China has been experiencing in recent years.¹³

Some characteristics of migration from the sample villages are summarized in Table II. The incidence of migration out of the villages began in the mid-1980s and has increased dramatically since the early 1990s. Corn Village recorded its first case of migration in 1985 while that for Rice Village was in 1988.¹⁴ Migration has accelerated particularly since 1993. These trends in the sample villages are consistent with changes in the central government’s policies related to internal migration.

In 1984 and 1985 the government relaxed some long-standing restrictions prohibiting internal migration. The most important was the amendment of the household registration system which allowed people with rural domicile registration to migrate to towns (*jizhen*) and then to cities (*chengshi*) after going through certain registration procedures (Ma 1994, p. 252).¹⁵ This policy relaxation triggered the massive movement of the rural labor force into urban industrial areas. The real intention of these policy revisions in the mid-1980s was to mobilize rural surplus labor for the development of rural industries/enterprises at the county and township levels, and the government continued to regard long-distance rural-urban migration as undesirable.

The abolition of the food ration system in 1992–93 significantly accelerated internal migration.¹⁶ In 1993 the Department of Labor, the Department of Rural Enterprise Management, and the State Council jointly promulgated a program to open the labor markets in designated towns and cities to migrants from rural areas. These

¹² It should be noted that our estimate of the incidence of migration is a “lower-bound” estimate. Since our data on migration are obtained through the migration histories of sample households based on our interview survey in 1998, it is quite possible that we missed cases of migration that occurred in earlier years, in spite of our efforts to minimize this. Considering that “circular migration” is a characteristic of rural-urban migration in China (Roberts 1997), the incidence of migration may be underestimated particularly for earlier years.

¹³ The oft-cited figure for the “floating population” in China as a whole is 80 million (Roberts 1997). Given a total rural population of about 800 million, that would mean a “floating population” of roughly only 10 per cent, compared with 50–65 per cent in the sample villages.

¹⁴ No case of migration was reported before 1985. Instead, the two sample villages, being frontier villages, had been receiving migrants from outside until the late 1970s or even the early 1980s.

¹⁵ It should be noted that it is still extremely difficult to change the domicile registration itself from rural to urban.

¹⁶ Regarding the recent changes in the food marketing system in China, see Yamamoto (2000).

TABLE II
CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANTS FROM THE SAMPLE VILLAGES, 1984-98

	Corn Village		Rice Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
Total migrations reported	64	100	68	100
Year migrated:				
1984-86	2	3	0	0
1987-89	2	3	1	1
1990-92	4	6	8	12
1993-95	19	30	24	35
1996-98	37	58	35	51
Age: ^a				
15-19	3	5	7	10
20-29	28	44	18	26
30-39	17	27	16	24
40-49	13	20	23	34
50-59	3	5	4	6
Sex: ^a				
Male	53	83	52	76
Female	11	17	16	24
Marital status: ^a				
Married	52	81	46	68
Single	12	19	22	32
Type of migration:				
Individual	35	55	34	50
Family	29	45	34	50
Seasonal	23	36	15	22
Permanent	41	64	53	78
Source of information on job opportunities:				
Villager/friend	24	38	13	20
Relative	29	45	31	48
Himself/herself	8	13	10	16
Recruiter	3	5	14	22

^a Age, sex, and marital status for family migrations are those for the family head.

policy changes indicated that the government was moving toward the virtual liberalization of internal migration¹⁷ which has fueled the nationwide movement of rural people to urban areas since 1993. The trends in migration from the two sample villages reflect these policy changes at the national level.

The migrants from the sample villages share many common characteristics with rural migrants from other regions of the country (Croll and Huang 1997; Li 1996; Roberts 1997; Yan 1997). The migrants from the villages are generally young (Table

¹⁷ The change in terminology from "blind migration" (*mangliu*) to "tidal waves of rural migrant labor" (*mingongchao*), which denote the same thing, i.e., massive rural-urban migration, may symbolize the changing milieu surrounding it.

II). This is particularly so for Corn Village where more than 70 per cent of the migrants were less than forty years old. They were predominantly male; men made up more than 70 per cent of the total number of migrants from both sample villages. Many households in the villages tend to keep females at home to engage in housework, childcare, and farm work. A finding we thought unusual was that married rather than unmarried migrants predominated; more than 80 per cent of the migrants from Corn Village and about 70 per cent from Rice Village were married persons who migrated to find employment. Another notable characteristic was that about 50 per cent of the cases in both villages were ones where families migrated, and around 70 per cent of these were permanent migrations. There is a clear tendency for families to migrate permanently from both villages. There were circular migrants who migrated seasonally, engaging in agriculture in their village and in some employment outside, but they did not predominate in the pattern of migration in the sample villages.

As in other regions in China (Ōshima 1990; Roberts 1997; Yan 1997) and in other developing countries (Yap 1977; Kikuchi and Opeña 1983; Williamson 1988), the migrants from the two villages largely obtained their information on employment through informal networks among relatives and fellow villagers (Table II). As pointed out by Roberts (1997), “native place identity” (*tongxiang*) is of critical importance for Chinese in general, and it was the same for the villagers in the sample villages. In order to maintain their links with family and village, even permanent migrants usually return to their village during the nationwide Spring Festival. Villagers make decisions to migrate based on the information obtained through their networks. Contrary to a basic assumption in the Todaro model, villagers do not migrate under ordinary circumstances without sure information about their destination (Hayami and Kikuchi 2000).

C. *Migration Flows Emanating from the Sample Villages*

The destinations and types of jobs for the migrants are summarized in Table III. There is a sharp contrast between Corn Village and Rice Village. The majority of migrants from both villages stayed within Heilongjiang Province, but the percentage of in-province migrants was significantly higher for Corn Village than for Rice Village. For the migrants from Corn Village, Harbin City and other medium-sized cities and towns in Heilongjiang Province were the major destinations, whereas the majority from Rice Village migrated to rural destination within the province or left the province for far-off destinations like Beijing, Shanghai, and even Guangdong Province in the south.

As for the jobs they took, the great majority of the migrants from Corn Village engaged in such typical informal sector jobs as construction work, hawking/street vending, working as waiters/waitresses in small restaurants, and working as household servants. Most of them engaged in these jobs in Harbin City and cities/towns

TABLE III
DESTINATIONS AND TYPES OF JOBS FOR MIGRANTS FROM THE SAMPLE VILLAGES, 1984-98

	Corn Village		Rice Village	
	No.	%	No.	%
Total migrations reported	64	100	68	100
Destination:				
Within province	53	83	43	63
Outside province	11	17	25	37
Metropolitan areas ^a	0	0	7	10
Harbin City	21	33	2	3
Coastal industrial cities	7	11	4	6
Medium-sized cities and towns ^b	32	50	24	35
Rural areas	4	6	31	46
Type of job at destination:				
Agriculture, forestry, fishery worker	4	6	31	46
Construction worker	28	44	15	22
Mine worker	8	13	0	0
Commerce, transportation, service worker	18	28	17	25
Modern factory worker	6	9	4	6
Government officer	0	0	1	1
By migration flow:				
Rural to rural	4	6	31	46
Rural to urban informal sector	52	81	32	47
Rural to urban formal sector	8	13	5	7

^a Beijing and Shanghai.

^b Towns include the urban sections of counties.

within Heilongjiang Province. About 10 per cent of the migrants from Corn Village went to work in the coal mines in the province. Since these coal mines are run by large state firms, coal mining is considered to be a formal sector job. However, being a coal miner is one of the “difficult, dirty, and dangerous” urban jobs that urban workers detest,¹⁸ and as a result, rural migrants have been rapidly replacing urban workers in these jobs. Being in fact a very dangerous job, coal mining has become a job for rural migrants. In this sense, coal mining has taken on the nature of an informal sector job for rural migrants, and therefore it has been categorized as such in this study.

In contrast, more than 40 per cent of the migrants from Rice Village engaged in agricultural jobs. There were migrants who took informal sector jobs, but many of them migrated to metropolitan and industrial areas outside Heilongjiang Province. Most of migrants who took agricultural jobs migrated to the Sanjiang Plateau in Heilongjiang Province where the government has developed large tracts of paddy

¹⁸ Typical jobs of this nature are public lavatory cleaning and garbage collecting (Li 1996).

fields since the early 1990s.¹⁹ In recruiting people for settlement in this newly developed area, the government has adopted a policy of selecting farmers who have experience in rice farming. Having the highest average rice yield per hectare in the country, many farmers from Rice Village have been recruited as new settlers on the Sanjiang Plateau.

One thing common for the migrants of both sample villages is that very few of them got jobs in the formal sector. Some of them found employment opportunities in modern factories, modern firms in the service sector, and in the government service, but they accounted for only about 10 per cent of the total migrants from both villages.

Table III presents the pattern of migration from the sample villages by grouping migrants into migration flows running from both villages to outside sectors. For Corn Village a broad migration flow runs from the village to the urban informal sector (rural to urban informal sector). Migrants found in this flow are those who find informal sector jobs in Harbin City or in other urban areas within the province. Another migration flow connects this village with the urban formal sector (rural to urban formal sector), but this flow is narrow. The third migration flow between this village and other rural areas (rural to rural) is virtually nonexistent.

The pattern of migration from Rice Village is characterized by a broad rural-to-rural migration flow consisting of rice farmers settling in the newly developed rice areas in the province. The rural-to-urban-informal-sector migration flow contains a considerable number of migrants, but for the most part this flow runs to far-off metropolitan cities and industrial areas outside the province rather than to the urban centers in the province. The type of jobs the migrants take in these cities and industrial areas are more or less the same as those taken by the migrants from Corn Village in the urban centers in the province. But as will be shown later, the wages the Rice Village migrants receive in those far-off developed areas are far higher than those received by Corn Village migrants who stay within the province. Rice Village also exhibits a narrow rural-to-urban-formal-sector migration flow.

The migrants' average level of education is different for each of the migration flows (Table IV). Migrants in the migration flow running from both sample villages to the urban formal sector have more years of education than those in the flow running to the urban informal sector. For migrants from Rice Village, the years of education for those in the rural-to-rural migration flow are lower than for those migrating to the urban informal sector. In contrast, the migrants in the flow running to the urban sector have more years of education than those found in the rural-to-rural migration flow or those who remain in the village. This is particularly distinct in the rural-to-urban-formal-sector migration flow. It is also important to notice that

¹⁹ The area under rice cultivation in Heilongjiang Province has increased by more than 1 million hectares in the last decade, and is expected to increase by another 1 million in the near future because of the development of the Sanjiang Plateau. See Kako and Zhang (2000).

TABLE IV
AVERAGE YEARS OF SCHOOLING OF MIGRANTS FROM THE SAMPLE VILLAGES,
BY MIGRATION FLOW, 1984–98

	Corn Village	Rice Village
Rural to rural	5.3	4.4
Rural to urban informal sector	5.0	7.4
Rural to urban formal sector	7.5	9.8
Average	5.3	6.2

the average years of education are higher in Rice Village than in Corn Village not only for the overall average but also for the averages of the respective migration flows to the urban sector. This is another clear indication that the farmers in Rice Village are relatively more affluent than their counterparts in Corn Village. For both sample villages the rural-urban migration is not a homogeneous phenomenon; different migration flows with migrants having different attributes run from rural areas with different income levels to different urban areas.²⁰

IV. MIGRANTS IN THE URBAN SECTOR

In order to obtain information on the extent and characteristics of migrants who come from rural areas to urban centers and on the structure of urban labor markets, we conducted surveys in the urban informal and formal sectors in Harbin City. The major findings of these surveys will be summarized in this section.

A. *The Urban Informal Sector*

The informal sector includes a wide variety of economic activities in the urban economy, from begging and hawking on streets to self-employment and employment in family firms, and from legal to illegal activities, typically with simple, labor-intensive technology. Although we can categorize typical informal sector jobs commonly observed in large cities in developing countries in Asia, at the margin the informal sector overlaps with the formal sector, making a distinction between them difficult.²¹ In the informal sector survey, we interviewed 131 workers who took “typical” informal sector jobs (Table V). Chosen as “typical” informal sector jobs were construction work, service sector work such as sidewalk vending and

²⁰ Heterogeneity in rural-urban migration is a common feature found in many micro-level studies in other developing countries (Williamson 1988; Hayami and Kikuchi 2000).

²¹ For instance, Cole and Sanders (1985, p. 486) argue that “a maid in a modern household is not considered a part of the modern labor force, nor is the force of grounds keepers at a modern manufacturing plant.”

TABLE V
OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN OF SAMPLE INFORMAL SECTOR WORKERS IN HARBIN CITY, 1998

	Number	%	Average School Year
Construction worker:			
Unskilled	26	20	6.1
Skilled	8	6	6.5
Contractor/foreman	3	2	5.3
Total	37	28	6.1
Garment sewer	37	28	9.0
Service sector:			
Working-class restaurant worker			
Unskilled	6	5	6.7
Skilled	5	4	8.0
Sidewalk vender	14	11	6.6
Small shop operator	9	7	7.7
Total	34	26	7.1
Job-seeker:			
Unskilled	9	7	3.8
Skilled	13	10	9.2
Total	22	17	7.0
Total	130	100	7.2

working as a waiter/waitress in working-class restaurants, working as a sewer in family garment stores, and job-seekers.

Of these jobs, job-seeker may require a special explanation, since this is a job unique to the informal sector in Chinese cities. The term “job-seeker” may sound like that assumed in the Todaro model, i.e., rural migrants in large cities waiting for job opportunities in the urban formal sector while staying in the urban informal sector. Job-seekers in Chinese cities share some similarity with Todaro’s, but the difference between them is also large. A job-seeker in this study is essentially the operator of a firm with no physical shop who sells a certain service, such as carpentry, plumbing, painting, gardening, or electric appliance repairing; he/she waits for customers at such place as main streets, railroad stations, or parks where many people gather.²² He/she is an independent entrepreneur rather than a job seeker in Todaro’s sense.

The four informal sector job groups are listed in Table V in the order of sample

²² Besides job-seekers who operate independently, there are many cases where a few job-seekers form groups to provide a service such as painting. In such cases the basis of the group is almost always “native place identity.”

TABLE VI
CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR IN HARBIN CITY, 1998

	Number	%		Number	%
Total sample worker	130	100	Marital status:		
Year immigrated/joined:			Married	61	47
Before 1984	3	2	Single	69	53
1984-86	5	4	Migration type: ^b		
1987-89	8	6	Seasonal	27	21
1990-92	10	8	Permanent	102	78
1993-95	38	29	Individual	98	75
1996-98	66 ^a	51	Family	31	24
Age:			Place of origin:		
15-19	16	12	Rural area	120	92
20-29	71	55	Urban area	10	8
30-39	23	18	Harbin City	2	2
40-49	12	9	In the province	102	78
50 and above	8	6	Outside the province	26	20
Sex:					
Male	88	68			
Female	42	32			

^a Including two who joined from the formal sector in Harbin.

^b For those who migrated in from outside.

size, from construction worker to job-seeker. It should be noted that the percentage shares of these groups by no means represent their shares in the total population. No accurate information is available on the size of the population in the urban informal sector. Our sampling is random in the sense explained earlier within each job group. Despite such limitations, we feel that our sample will give us clues about the characteristics of workers and the labor market structure in Harbin's informal sector.

Some characteristics of the sample workers in the urban informal sector in Harbin City are presented in Table VI. A quick glance shows that their characteristics are similar in many respects to those of the migrants from our sample villages shown in Table II. Looking first at the place of origin of the sample workers, except for two,²³ all the workers were migrants from outside Harbin City, and more than 90 per cent of them were of rural origin, indicating that migrants from rural areas make up an overwhelming majority of the labor force in the urban informal sector. About 80

²³ These two workers were from Harbin City and joined the informal sector after losing their jobs in state-owned enterprises in the city. Though they were the only two in our sample, it is important to note that the informal sector has workers not only of rural origin but also of urban origin. As of 1998, 70 per cent of the state-owned enterprises in Heilongjiang Province had been closed because of poor management. Some of the ex-employees of these enterprises have joined the labor force in the urban informal sector.

per cent of the workers came from rural areas in Heilongjiang Province. The informal sector in Harbin City is linked with rural areas in the province by a very large rural-to-urban-informal-sector migration flow. This finding confirms our earlier observation in Corn Village.

The distribution of the sample workers by the year of migration to Harbin shows the same time-series pattern as that for the migration from the sample villages. Although there were a few workers who joined the informal sector before 1984,²⁴ the number of migrants began to increase from 1984 and has been accelerating significantly since 1993. Since our data were obtained from the sample workers who were in the sector at the time of our survey, seasonal or circular migrant cases in earlier years might be underestimated.²⁵ However, it seems evident that the rural-to-urban migration flow to Harbin City has been expanding rapidly in line with the relaxation of restrictions on internal migration.

The age structure of the migrants is also similar to that of the migrants from our two sample villages, confirming the general observation that rural-urban migrants are generally young. Compared to the migrants from the two sample villages, the percentage of young people in our sample of the urban informal sector was even higher; more than 50 per cent of the migrants we sampled were in their twenties, and more than 10 per cent of them were teenagers. Males predominated as was the case for the migrants from the two sample villages. But the share of females was higher in our urban sample than was the case for our village samples. Such a difference may indicate that our informal sector sample was biased toward female dominated subsectors, such as sewers and restaurant workers.

Another similarity between the migrants from the sample villages and those in the urban informal sector was in the type of migration. About 80 per cent of them had migrated permanently. As mentioned earlier, permanent migration in this study is defined as migration lasting for more than ten months. The distribution of immigrants by year of immigration indicates that many permanent migrants are indeed permanent, lasting for years or even more than ten years in some cases. Like the permanent migrants from the sample villages, the permanent migrants we sampled in the urban informal sector retained their links with their home villages. In this sense they were "circular" migrants, nevertheless many migrants from villages stay in the urban informal sector for quite a long time.²⁶ This implies that the informal

²⁴ The earliest one came to Harbin in 1980.

²⁵ In our sample there were some seasonal migrants who migrated repeatedly between their villages and Harbin City for many years, in a few cases for more than ten years. Such cases are counted only once in Table VI in the year they came to Harbin for the first time.

²⁶ The relaxing of restrictions on internal migration in the early 1990s facilitated immigration from rural areas to the informal sector in Harbin City. The abolition of the food ration system was an important change in this respect. Another was a change in education entitlement; in 1994 Harbin City allowed children of migrants in the city to enter schools that used to be open only for those with urban registration, with some additional tuition.

sector provides rural immigrants with ample employment opportunities.

There were sharply different patterns in marital status between our village and urban samples (Table VI versus Table II). More than 50 per cent of the migrants in the informal sector were single, whereas the overwhelming majority of the migrants from the sample villages were married. A similar difference was found in the type of migration; individual migrants predominated in the informal sector, whereas the opposite was the case in our sample villages. Here the general observations on internal migration in China seem to be closer to the patterns we found for the migrants in Harbin City (Li 1996; Roberts 1997). The possible sampling biases in our informal sector survey mentioned above, however, make further investigations necessary.

The quality of the workers in the urban informal sector as measured by the years of schooling is shown by subsector in Table V. The overall average for the sample workers was 7.2 years of schooling. This is comparable to the average years of education of the migrants in the rural-to-urban-informal-sector migration flow from Rice Village but slightly higher than that from Corn Village shown in Table IV. The average years of schooling differ across different subsectors in the urban informal sector, but compared to the overall average, the differences are not so large, except for some job categories. This does not mean that the workers in the urban informal sector are homogeneous in quality. On the contrary, levels of education differ widely among them; some have no education and others are college graduates or have some college education. What this indicates is that educational attainment is not an entry barrier to the urban informal sector.

Indeed, free entry is a salient feature of many labor markets in the urban informal sector. For example, the labor market in the construction subsector requires neither education nor skill to perform the unskilled construction jobs. As in other spheres in Chinese societies, it is helpful when looking for a job in this subsector for a person to have some human connections, but no other requirements. Similarly, no qualifications are necessary for entering the service subsector to do such unskilled jobs as working as a housemaid or a waitress in a small restaurant. There are informal sector jobs that require some skill, such as carpentry in the construction subsector, or working as a restaurant cook in the service subsector, or sewing in the garment subsector, but it is not difficult to acquire these skills through on-the-job training or brief study in vocational school. To acquire sewing skills, for instance, either a few months study in vocational school or relevant working experience will provide the needed skills.

The labor market in the job-seeker subsector is slightly different. The people in this market generally have some skills, such as plumbing, carpentry, or painting. Almost without exception they first take some typical informal sector job, such as doing construction work, when they migrate to the city. The job-seeker labor market is therefore the one which new migrants in the urban informal sector climb up to

TABLE VII
 SAMPLE ENTERPRISES BY TYPE OF MANAGEMENT AND NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES

Industries	Type of Management			Number of Employees			Total
	State-Owned & Collective	Joint Venture	Private Firm	Below 50	50–100	100–500	
Manufacturing:							
Food	1		1		2		2
Textiles			1	1			1
Paper & printing	1	1		1	1		2
Machinery & metalware	1	1	1	1	1	1	3
Construction materials	1	1	3	3		2	5
Service:							
Entertainment		1				1	1
Total	4	4	6	6	4	4	14

after getting “on-the-job training” in one of the other “free-entry” labor markets. Since they usually work in groups based on their “native place identity,” it is often a requirement to have connections with someone already working in the subsector in order to secure a job.

Such service subsector jobs as sidewalk vending and operating a shop in the market place are free-entry labor markets in the sense that no formal qualifications are required at all. However, for running a business migrants need to have some capital, financial and/or physical assets, such as inventories of goods for sale and shop structures. If they wanted to operate a business in a location authorized either publicly or privately, they would need to have good personal connections which could be considered as a sort of human capital. In the construction subsector, an unskilled worker can transform himself into a skilled worker by acquiring some skill through on-the-job training, and even rise to foreman or contractor. In order to be a successful contractor, a migrant needs to have good connections with important people in and outside of the construction industry in the city.

B. *The Urban Formal Sector*

Managers at fourteen modern enterprises in Harbin City were interviewed to obtain information on the level of wages/salaries paid to workers in the urban formal sector. The sample establishments were selected from various manufacturing and service industries (Table VII). They include state-owned, collective, joint-venture, and private firms. All the joint-venture and private firms in the sample have been set up since the late 1980s, and they employ a relatively small number of employees. The government has been encouraging private enterprises recently, and they enjoy the same privileges as joint ventures. Many joint ventures and private businesses are scattered in the suburbs of Harbin City, and are playing an important

role in absorbing migrant workers coming to the city.

The household registration system has long been an obstacle to migrants trying to enter the urban labor markets. Employment in modern-sector enterprises has been limited to workers with urban registration, and even now workers with rural registration are hindered from entering white-collar jobs. The number of workers with rural registry employed in white-collar jobs in the urban formal sector is, if any, still small. However, for blue-collar jobs the social environment in this respect has been changing rapidly in recent years.

The bulk of the workers employed by our sample enterprises were migrants from the countryside. Virtually all of them were blue-collar, unskilled workers, and many were employed on a casual basis. We found them employed not only in newly set-up joint ventures and private enterprises but also in old large-scale state-owned enterprises. One state-owned enterprise in the metalware industry with 240 employees employed 136 migrant blue-collar workers; the rest were urban registered workers. A joint venture in the paper industry with 95 employees had hired 45 migrants as unskilled manual workers. A private enterprise in the machinery industry employed 148 workers, of whom 50 were blue-collar workers who had migrated from outside Harbin: 6 from other urban areas with urban registry and 44 from rural areas with rural registry.

Most of the sample enterprises recruited new employees through the labor department of the local governments or through job advertisements in local newspapers. For blue-collar workers, it is also quite popular for new enterprises to recruit new workers directly from the countryside. They are recruited either in their home villages by recruiters sent out by companies or through recommendations by fellow villagers or relatives who are working in the companies. Personal connections are thus important for them to obtain jobs in the urban formal sector.

Data on wages/salaries in the sample enterprises is shown in Table VIII by categories and skill/education levels. Payments in kind and fringe benefits for workers, such as welfare, medical care, and housing allowance (though very important in differentiating employment in the urban formal sector from the urban informal sector) are not included because of difficulty in obtaining accurate data. No systematic relationship was observed between the size of enterprise and the wage/salary level paid to employees. By type of enterprise, joint ventures consistently paid the highest wages/salaries for all types of workers, while state-owned enterprises paid the lowest except for unskilled blue-collar workers. Educational levels did not correlate with wage/salary levels for blue-collar workers, whereas a positive correlation could be seen for white-collar workers and managers. This means that the level of education is not a determinant of blue-collar wages nor is it a requirement for entry into this labor market; instead, skill and experience are the major determinants of wages, and good personal connections rather than education are more important for obtaining these jobs. In contrast, for white-collar workers, educational

TABLE VIII
ENTRY-LEVEL MONTHLY WAGES/SALARIES IN THE SAMPLE ENTERPRISES, 1998

	Blue-Collar			White-Collar	Managers
	Unskilled	Skilled	Team Heads		
Size:					
Below 50	417	650	950	850	1,300
50–100	355	713	925	796	1,533
100–500	450	757	988	759	1,400
Type of management:					
State-owned	400	613	800	679	1,000
Joint venture	434	767	1,050	927	1,825
Private	367	716	1,000	744	1,325
Educational level: ^a					
Elementary school	402	738	—	—	—
Junior high school	417	658	1,025	508	—
Senior high/vocational school	—	717	917	700	1,150
College	—	—	—	918	1,538
Average	406	696	960	791	1,392

^a Some sample enterprises are excluded because of the nonavailability of data.

level is of critical importance both as a determinant of salary level and as a condition for employment by modern enterprises in the formal sector.²⁷

V. WAGE DIFFERENTIALS, MIGRATION FLOWS, AND LABOR MARKETS

Daily wage rates or wage earnings per day worked are summarized in Table IX for the various labor markets dealt with in this study.

At the time of survey in 1998, the wage rate during the harvest season in Corn Village was 14 yuan per day, while the wage rate during the transplanting season in Rice Village was 19 yuan per day. The higher wage rate in Rice Village reflects the higher productivity of rice farming compared with corn farming. Despite such a large wage differential, there was hardly any labor migration from low-wage Corn Village to high-wage Rice Village. In fact no permanent migration between the two villages has taken place since 1984, except for a few cases involving marriage. Considering their geographical proximity, this is surprising. This fact suggests that rural labor markets in the study area are underdeveloped and segmented.

As indicated by the criteria for selecting rice farmers for settlement in the newly developed rice-growing areas on the Sanjiang Plateau, the need for rice-farming

²⁷ A micro-level account of rural migrants in urban enterprises is given by Knight, Song, and Jia (1999).

TABLE IX
DAILY WAGE RATES AND EARNINGS (YUAN PER DAY) IN DIFFERENT LABOR MARKETS
IN HEILONGJIANG PROVINCE, AS OF 1998

	Wage Rate	Entry Requirement
Rural:		
Agriculture sector:		
Corn village	14	Land title
Rice village	19	Land title, rice-farming experience
Urban:		
Informal sector:		
Construction:		
Unskilled worker	20	None
Skilled worker	34	Nil except skill
Contractor	300 ^a	Experience, capital, connections
Garment sewer	25	Nil except minimum skill
Service sector:		
Restaurant worker:		
Unskilled	19	None
Skilled	25	Nil except minimum skill
Sidewalk vender	30 ^a	Nil except capital
Small shop operator	53 ^a	Capital, connections
Job-seeker:		
Unskilled	44	Nil except connections
Skilled	49	Nil except skill and/or connections
Formal sector: ^b		
Unskilled worker	20	Nil except connections
Skilled worker	35	Nil except skill and/or connections
Team leader	48	Experience
White-collar worker	40	Senior high school or college experience
Manager	70	College graduate and/or experience

^a Returns to capital are included.

^b Cash wages/salaries only, not including payments in kind and fringe benefits.

skills may work as an effective entry barrier against migration to Rice Village. But a more basic factor for segmentation of rural labor markets seems to be the household responsibility system under which the right to cultivate farmland is strictly limited to those with household registration in a specific village. In other words, someone outside the village cannot acquire the right to cultivate land in the village. It seems that such institutional rigidity in the land allocation system has resulted in inactive land markets, which in turn has brought about the segmentation of rural labor markets.²⁸

²⁸ Land leasing is not prohibited under the household responsibility system, and a land rental market exists in the sample villages. However, land leasing is carried out within a small circle of close relatives and neighbors, and not extended to farmers outside the village. It was difficult for us to uncover factors that inhibit land leasing across villages. This issue of the land rental market will be an important future research topic.

Compared with the lack of migration between our two sample villages, there is a large number of migrants flowing from these two villages to the urban informal sector. However, as pointed out earlier, the direction of this outflow differs greatly for the two villages. For Corn Village the rural-to-urban-informal-sector migration flows mostly toward Harbin City and other urban areas in Heilongjiang Province, while for Rice Village this migration flows more toward the urban informal sector in faraway metropolitan and industrial areas to the south than toward the urban centers within the province.

In the urban informal sector in Harbin City, the wage rates per day in the free-entry labor markets are 20 yuan for unskilled construction workers and 19 yuan for unskilled service sector workers. These two categories are at the bottom of the urban informal sector and the wage rates are lowest among various urban labor markets.²⁹ However, these entry wages of the urban informal sector are higher by around 30 per cent than the agricultural wage rate in Corn Village. The large migration flow from Corn Village to the urban informal sector thus indicates that this wage differential is large enough to induce rural-urban migration. For Rice Village, on the other hand, there is no wage differential between the village and the urban informal sector in Harbin City. This can explain why the rural-to-urban-informal-sector migration flow from this village is directed not to Harbin City but to metropolitan and industrial areas in the south where the wage rates are higher than in Harbin City. The wages per day that migrants from Rice Village receive in the south are 33 yuan on average, more than 70 per cent higher than the wage rate in their village. Such facts strongly support the hypothesis that the labor market linking rural areas with the urban informal sector works reasonably well. Workers move smoothly from the low-wage rural areas to the high-wage urban areas.

Within the urban informal sector, daily wage rates in the different labor markets range from 19 yuan for unskilled service sector workers to 53 yuan for small shop operators to as high as 300 yuan for foremen and contractors in the construction subsector. Above the entry-level wage rate of about 20 yuan in the free-entry labor markets, there are labor markets for workers with minimum skills, such as garment sewers and cooks in working-class restaurants whose wage rates are about 25 yuan. Sidewalk venders, including such self-employed workers as street hawkers, shoes-repairers, and the like, earn 30 yuan per day on average, which includes returns on their capital/skills as is the case for small shop operators. The wage rate for skilled construction workers is comparable to the daily earnings of sidewalk venders and self-employed skilled job-seekers. Many of these skilled workers come from the construction subsector after acquiring certain skills, and can earn as much as 49 yuan per day for their skills and entrepreneurship.

²⁹ The minimum wage rate stipulated by the government in the study area is 200 yuan per month, which, when converted to a daily wage rate, is far less than the entry wages of these informal sector labor markets.

In the urban formal sector, the daily wage/salary rates range from 20 yuan for unskilled workers to 70 yuan for managers in modern factories. As pointed out earlier, the wages and salaries in the formal sector shown in Table IX do not include the payments in kind and fringe benefits that workers in this sector can enjoy. Since these benefits tend to increase disproportionately as the rank of a worker in a modern enterprise rises, the degree of underestimation will be larger for white-collar workers and managers. For unskilled workers the daily fringe benefit rate is about 5 yuan, usually consisting of only basic accommodations. Adding this amount to their cash wage rate, their total wages would be about 25 yuan per day. This cash wage rate is equivalent to the daily wage rate of an unskilled construction worker, and the total wage rate of an unskilled worker in the formal sector would be about that of a worker in the informal sector with minimum skills.

Barriers to entry into blue-collar labor markets in the formal sector are low. The barriers are as low as in the informal sector, however personal connections are more important. Barriers to the white-collar labor markets are clearly evident and mainly take the form of educational requirements. Since the educational level in poor villages is low, as suggested by the level of education of migrants from Corn Village, the minimum requirement of a senior high school education or above works as an effective entry barrier for most of rural-urban migrants.

A comparison of the daily wage rates in the urban informal sector indicates that entry jobs in this sector with no or minimum entry barriers pay almost the same level of wages. Such a finding is consistent with the hypothesis that the labor markets in the informal sector are well integrated into a single well-functioning labor market. Furthermore, the fact that the wage rate of unskilled blue-collar workers in the urban formal sector is about the same as the wage rate for new entrants into the urban informal sector suggests that these formal and informal sector labor markets are also integrated. The similar level of wages for skilled workers in the construction subsector and in the formal sector reinforces this contention. Indeed, the movement of blue-collar workers between the formal and informal sectors can be frequently observed.

Thus, the rural labor markets in areas of low agricultural productivity and the blue-collar labor markets in the urban informal as well as in the formal sectors are linked together. Rural-to-urban migrants can enter the blue-collar labor markets in the urban formal sector, either directly or via the urban informal sector, and by acquiring skills and experience they can move up to being skilled workers and further to becoming team leaders in the formal sector. However, the labor market for white-collar workers is out of reach for most rural-to-urban migrants who by and large have insufficient education.

As observed in Corn Village, the migration flow running from poor villages to the urban formal sector is far smaller than the one running to the urban informal sector. This difference suggests that the size of the urban informal sector is far

larger than that of the urban formal sector. In fact, the former encompasses a wide variety of economic activities in the urban economy and absorbs the bulk of the rural-to-urban migration. By acquiring skills and/or entrepreneurship (e.g., rising from unskilled to skilled construction worker, to self-employed job-seeker, and further to small shop operator or construction contractor), migrant workers in the urban informal sector can climb up to higher informal sector labor markets that provide them with higher wages, even higher than wages/salaries earned in the urban formal sector.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on micro-level data obtained in Harbin City and two rural villages, this paper examined rural-urban labor migration in Heilongjiang Province in order to gain an understanding of the nature and performance of labor markets. The degree of rural-urban migration in the study area has been considerable. In the two sample villages, between 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the population has migrated out to urban centers in the last decade and a half. However, rural-urban migration is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Different migration flows with migrants of different attributes run from rural areas of different income levels to different urban areas. Most rural-urban migrants find jobs in the urban informal sector. At the same time the overwhelming majority of workers in the urban informal sector, consisting of a wide spectrum of jobs, are migrants from rural areas. Migrants from the countryside are also found in the blue-collar labor markets of the urban formal sector. These labor markets in the urban sector where rural-urban migrants find employment are characterized by no or low entry barriers.

A significant wage differential between the rural labor markets and the entry labor markets in the urban informal sector can be seen as providing strong inducement for rural-urban migration. A comparison of the daily wages in the entry labor markets in the urban informal sector with the blue-collar labor markets in the urban formal sector supports the hypothesis that these labor markets are integrated into a single well-functioning labor market. Also the rural labor markets are linked together with the labor markets in the informal as well as in the formal sectors, and rural-urban migrants can enter the blue-collar labor markets in the formal sector, either directly or via the urban informal sector.

On the other hand, the labor market for white-collar jobs is clearly separated from the other labor markets due to educational qualifications and is out of reach for most rural-urban migrants because of their low education. Nevertheless, migrants into the urban informal sector can climb up, by acquiring skills and/or entrepreneurship, to higher informal sector labor markets that provide them with higher wages/earnings, even higher than those in the formal sector. The urban informal sector in China is an entity that gives rural-urban migrants ample opportunities, as

is the case in many other developing countries in the world (Hackenberg 1980).

Our case study in Heilongjiang Province thus provides evidence that favors the anti-Todaro school. Labor markets in urban areas exist and function well, though educational level and legal restrictions segment some labor markets in the urban as well as the rural sectors. Our data are admittedly crude, or even anecdotal; there is a definite need to substantiate our findings by further studies of a wider scale. At a minimum, however, we argue that it would be counterproductive to deal with the issue of internal migration in China without having firm knowledge on the nature and workings of labor markets along the rural-urban continuum.

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