

Making Modernity in China: Employment and Entrepreneurship among the New Generation of Peasant Workers

LU ZHENG , XIAOBIN HE, LIKUN CAO and HONGZHI XU

Abstract: China is experiencing urbanization and modernization at the largest scale in human history. An army of over 280 million “peasant workers” are an integral part of this great transformation to modernity. Drawing on different data sources, including national representative random samples and the authors’ first-hand survey data, we provide systematic comparisons between the older and the younger generation of peasant workers and between young peasant entrepreneurs in cities and young returnee entrepreneurs. We found that, compared with the older generation, the younger generation of peasant workers is better educated, holds more stable jobs, has a higher income, lives a happier life and is more optimistic about the future. Our analysis of the two types of peasant entrepreneurs shows that they are the elites among peasant workers, running successful business and making handsome profits. We also note that discrimination and institutional obstacles, especially the *hukou* system, remain to be overcome in the peasant workers’ transition to modernity.

Keywords: modernity, new generation of peasant workers, China

Introduction

The attempt to modernize China started in the latter half of the 19th century when the Qing Dynasty started to manufacture military equipment. The intention was to salvage the decaying dynasty from the incessant bullying and invasion from then the big world powers¹ that had successfully industrialized decades previously. Although the Qing Dynasty and the ensuing Republic of China made great efforts to build up China’s industrial system, substantial progress was never made. Battered by the Japanese invasion and the civil war, it was not until the late 1950s that China established the primary form of a modern industrial system. During the 1960s, Chairman Mao

proposed that the new socialist country was to achieve modernization in industry, agriculture, science, and national security which was known as the four modernizations. This new vision ushered Chinese people onto the path to a modern society. However, the progress towards modernization was suspended during the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976). Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening up policies afterwards reignited Chinese people’s passion for a modern society. After almost four decades of catching up, China’s GDP is ranked No. 2 in the world and it is believed that it will surpass that of the USA in the near future. Not only have Chinese people finally produced enough to eat and wear but they have more freedom to

decide whom to marry, where to reside, and what to do for a living.

As China is undertaking perhaps the largest scale of urbanization in human history so far, its army of over 280 million “peasant workers” are an integral part of this process. When China embarked on its trajectory of reform and opening up in 1978, fewer than one of five Chinese lived in cities. Since then, every year more than 10 million rural villagers have become urban residents, largely due to rural-to-urban migration and partially due to the expansion of urban boundaries. The year 2011 witnesses a watershed in China’s urbanization process in that for the first time the number of people living in cities exceeded that of rural areas. Urban residents in China made up 57% of the population at the end of 2016 (see Fig. 1), and the figure is projected to be over 70% by 2030.

Workers of rural origin are called 农民工 in Chinese, literally translated as peasant workers. This often sounds odd to people outside China. Since they are already employees working in modern manufacturing or service industries, why a prefix used to signify their previous occupation? To the younger generation (born after 1980s), many of whom were born and raised up in cities, the label seems especially out of place. But the persistence of this label has an institutional root. The prefix “peasant” indicates the group’s household registration status (*hukou*). As long as they still retain the *hukou* status of rural household registration, they are still considered peasants.² The second part of the term 工 refers to their occupation as a worker. Therefore, the term peasant workers is a combination and reflection of both their *hukou* status and occupation³ (see Table 1).

The significance of peasant workers for understanding modernity in China cannot be exaggerated. First of all, in terms of magnitude, there are estimated to be about 170 million rural migrant workers in China who have left their rural village home and

Table 1. Classification of social groups by occupation and *hukou* status

Occupation	Urban <i>hukou</i>	Rural <i>hukou</i>
Agricultural work	Almost none	Rural citizens
Non-agricultural work	Urban citizens	Peasant workers

come to live and work in the cities.⁴ Second, their life trajectories constitute and reflect the very large-scale social changes of China’s modernization process, from traditional rural communities to cosmopolitan urban cities and from being peasants working on small family farms to being workers in modern industries.

In this article, we examine the extent to which the experiences and life trajectories of peasant workers reflect the modernity of China as a society. We pay special attention to the younger generations of peasant workers who grow up in China’s reform era. How different are they from their parents’ generation? If they ever aspire to become self-employed or even private entrepreneurs, as the government encourages them to be, how do they fare, and what obstacles do they face? To answer these questions, the rest of the article is structured as follows. We first review the literature on modernity, provide a brief overview of China’s path towards modernization, and discuss how peasant workers’ unique life experiences have changed their characteristics of individual modernity. Then their life conditions and social activities are described and analyzed. Further comparisons are made between the older generation of peasant workers and the younger ones, and between those who are employed and those who run their own business. For the latter groups, we draw on a recent survey we conducted to compare migrant private entrepreneurs who live in cities and those who have returned and are running a business in their home village. The last section summarizes the main

findings and discusses the theoretical implications of the peasant worker research on modernity in Chinese society in general.

Literature Review

The modernization process and the resultant modernity of a society are topics often mentioned in the writings of great masters in sociology. Weber (Calhoun *et al.*, 2012: 244) claimed that rational conduct was one of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism. Tonnies distinguished between modern society and traditional community and regraded them as two different ways of human organizations, with the community based on family life and society based on city life (Tonnies, 1957: 231). Parsons argued modern societies provided people with more alternatives, more autonomy but at the same time more feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Kim, 2012: 49). Giddens (1990: 1) referred to modernity as the institutions and modes of social life and organization which appeared first around the 17th century of Europe and thereafter had a worldwide impact. Later modernity theorists argued that contemporary modern society

was a radical version of classical modern society. In these societies, people experience increasing feelings of uncertainty and flow through them like tourists, changing jobs, places, spouses, and values, and even sexual orientation, characterized as “liquid modernity” by Bauman (2000).

Most of these theorists gauged modern societies from a structural and macro perspective whereas Inkeles (1975) approached the topic of modernity from a micro perspective by focusing on the effects of modernization on individual personalities and psychology. He found that individuals in modern society had the similar qualities of personality and behavior regardless of their countries, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. These characteristics of the modern personality included optimism and aspiration, and the modern person aimed at efficiency and acquiring technical skills. These personality traits were found to be closely associated to certain forms of behavior, such as showing an interest in politics, being committed to work, and being informed of the media. These personalities and patterns of behavior were prevalent in the six developing countries (Argentina, Chile, East Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and Israel) in his study.

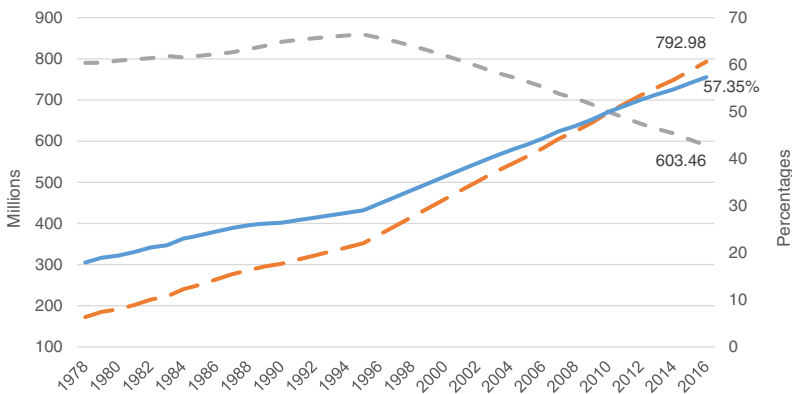


Figure 1. Urban versus rural population and China's urbanization rate (1978–2016).
 (—) Urban population in millions, (---) rural population in millions, and (—) Urbanization rate (%).

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

Chinese society has been deeply rooted in a culture of valorizing land (Fei, 1985: 1–7). The ancestors of modern Chinese settled in this wide and plentiful land thousands of years ago and have developed a culture that elevates agriculture but belittles business. For Chinese peasants, the most trustworthy social relationships are based on their families and clans. When China relaxed the control of migration in the late 1970s, the opportunity to move from villages to cities opened a door to modernity for Chinese peasants whose lives were no longer tied to the land (Zhou, 1998). This group of peasant workers plays a very important role in China’s entry into the rank of modern industrialized societies. Like the middle class in western countries, Chinese rural migrant workers are a product of the modernization process, and at the same time accelerate the progress of modernization.

Urbanization brings a much wider contact with modernity for peasant workers in urban cities, even though they remain to be found in the bottom strata of urban society. The opportunity of working in cities liberates them from relying on the land as the only source of subsistence. They can observe and imitate the urban life style from their urban counterparts. When peasant workers return to village where they were born, they often carry an urban way of life as well as modern consumer goods. This has a contagious influence even on those who have never left the villages. Thus, peasant workers have played a pivotal role in transforming traditional ways of life in rural areas as they move back and forth between cities and villages. This gradually changes the traditional way of life, thinking, and behaviors of their fellow villagers. As agents of change for modernity, what are this group’s characteristics? How do they earn a living in cities? Are there any differences between the older and younger generation of migrant workers? We turn next to these questions.

Peasant Workers as Agents of Modernity

The rural to urban migration has been largely driven by the industrialization process in China. Among many things, the structural changes in the Chinese economy have provided the push and pull factors for rapid urbanization. For instance, the agricultural sector’s contribution to China’s overall GDP has decreased from over 30% in 1980 to a mere 8.6% in 2016 (see Fig. 2). Surplus laborers in rural areas are pushed out to find non-agricultural jobs. Due to its rapidly growing manufacturing capacity, China gained a reputation as the world’s factory, which has created tens of millions of job opportunities along China’s coastal cities. In addition, the service sector has achieved momentum in recent years, signaling that China’s economic structure is moving towards that of other industrialized countries. The proportion of China’s GDP contributed by the service sector surpassed that of the manufacturing sector in 2013 (46.1 vs 43.9%). The service sector now accounts for more than half of China’s GDP, standing at 51.6% in 2016. The service industry tends to demand more labor than manufacturing. As the fertility rate in cities declines, many of the job vacancies have been filled with migrant workers from inland rural villages, who are attracted by the higher wage level in cities.

According to a latest report, 281 million laborers in China who are registered as rural residents have worked in non-agricultural jobs for more than 6 months. Of these, 40% work in non-agricultural jobs in their home town, where they are registered as rural residents. They are categorized as local peasant workers. The other 60% leave their home town to take up job opportunities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). Based on the Chinese General Social Survey conducted in 2015 (National Survey Research Center, 2015), we distinguished two generations of peasant workers; namely, those who

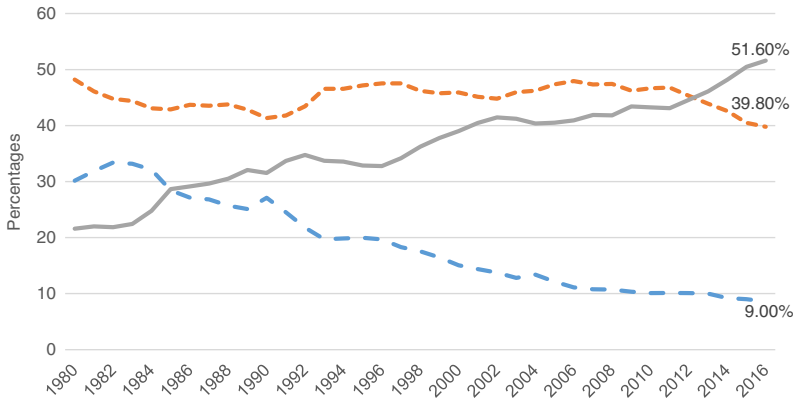


Figure 2. Sectorial composition of China's GDP 1980–2016.
 (---) Agriculture, (---) Manufacturing, and (—) Service.
 Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

were born before 1980 and those born after 1980. We found that the younger generation accounted for 40% of the total. Comparing the two generations of peasant workers, there were 8% more men than women in the older generation (54 vs 46%), but more women than men in the younger generation (53 vs 47%, see Fig. 3). This is a remarkable contrast. In the traditional rural division of labor, man usually went out to work while woman stayed home. This shift in the gender composition of peasant

workers suggests that rural women in the younger generation are much less bounded by traditional gender roles as far as working in non-agricultural jobs is concerned. It may also be the case that an economic structure shifting toward service industry provides more job opportunities for young women.

The younger generation also exhibits a high level of geographical mobility. In total, 70% of the older generation remain within the boundary of the township which their

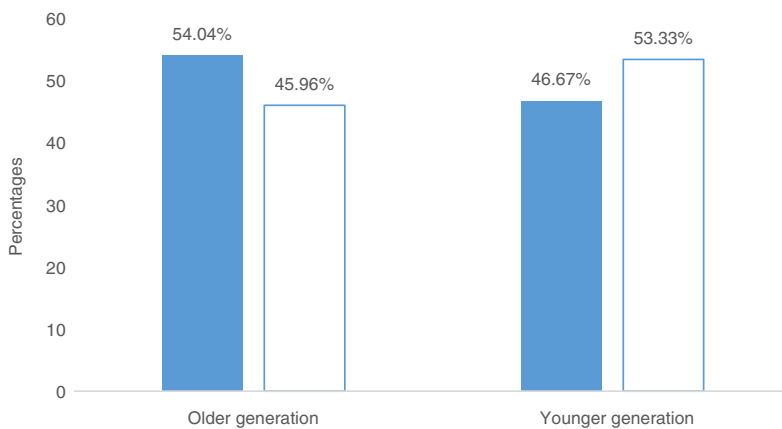


Figure 3. Gender composition of two generations of peasant workers.
 (■) Male and (□) Female.
 Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, N = 2407.

village is located to take on non-agricultural jobs and only 30% leave the township. In contrast, 42.8% of the younger generation move away to find jobs. This difference to some extent reflects locational preferences of the two generations, as the older generation would rather stay close to home. It may also be the case that the younger generation is more competitive in the urban labor markets, thanks to their younger age and better education (see Fig. 4).

Work and Employment among the Two Generations

The younger generation is not only better educated and more willing to look for jobs further away from hometown, but it is also better at making money. Our analysis shows that despite having less work experience, the younger generation has an average annual income of almost 30 000 *yuan*, which is about 10% more than what the older generation makes on average. Although the average income level of peasant workers is lower than that of urban residents, our analysis of the 2015 Chinese General Social

Survey data shows that most of them think they are fairly paid (67% for the older generation and 64% for the younger generation).

Part of the reason why the younger generation on average is making more money is due to the fact that they are more likely to hold full-time positions, which in general tend to be more stable and better paid. Specifically, over 88% of the younger generation of peasant workers have full-time jobs compared with 78% of the older generation (see Fig. 5). This also fits well with the industries in which they work. The data show those working in construction, which has been perhaps the most important driver of the Chinese economy for the past three decades, tend to be from the older generation. Construction jobs are more likely to be seasonal and project-based, and therefore are less stable. In contrast, the younger generation is more likely to be found in factories, which require more technical training and are more secure.

Although most peasant workers have full-time jobs, they are not well protected by the labor law, which has yet to be fully enforced by their employers and by the government as well. For example, although every full-time job by law requires a labor

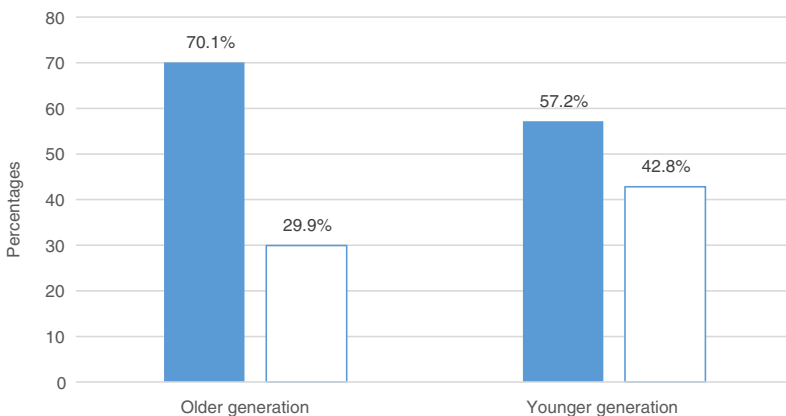


Figure 4. Geographical locations of peasant workers by generation.

■ Local and □ Non-local.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, *N* = 2407.

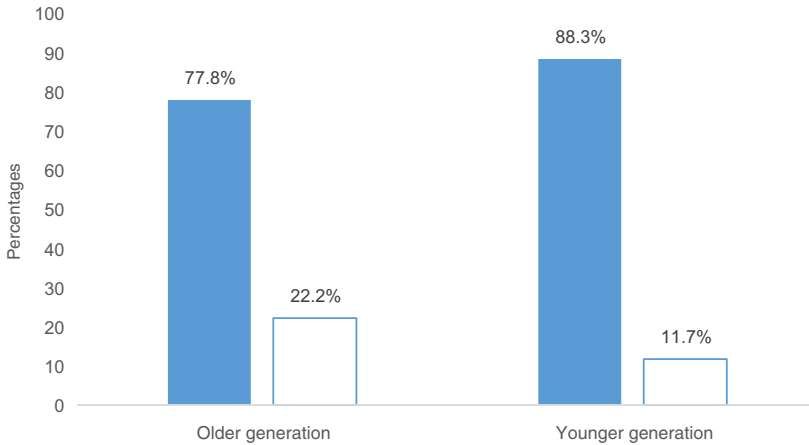


Figure 5. Full-time versus part-time positions by generation.

(■) Full-time and (□) Part-time.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, $N = 1209$.

contract signed by both parties, we found that 58.6% of the younger generation of peasant workers have not signed labor contracts with their employers. For the older generation the figure is as high as 76% (see Fig. 6). This means that the younger generation is better protected by the labor law due to the characteristics of their employers or the nature of their jobs. It reflects the fact that the younger generation is better informed and more able to protect their own rights compared with the older generation. Nevertheless, lack of a labor contract for most peasant workers speaks volumes about the state of the rule of law in China in general.

Previous studies have shown that peasant workers often suffer from workplace discrimination and maltreatment from coworkers. When asked whether or not they were treated unfairly in hiring, being given a salary rise, or a promotion in the previous 5 years, two of five replied they had. As far as violent infringement is concerned, one out of five peasant workers reported that they had had such an experience in the previous 5 years. This finding applies to both generations (see Fig. 7). Further research is needed to compare the incidence rates between peasant

workers and their urban counterparts. A higher incidence rate would imply that peasant workers have inferior status in workplace.

Internet Use, Social Interaction, and Outlook

The mass media plays an important role in transforming peasant workers. We found a generational gap exists as far as using the Internet is concerned. The analysis shows that whereas 76% of the younger generation of peasant workers reported that they used Internet frequently, only 21% of the older generation did so. In contrast, 69% of the older generation seldom use the Internet in their daily life (see Fig. 8). Relatedly, when asked about their primary source of information, 78% of the older generation rely on TV and 16% of them get information from the Internet compared with only 27% and 69%, respectively, of the younger generation.

Mobility emancipates migrant workers from the reliance on the land, broadens their vision, breaks down conservatism and closedness, and increases their self-efficiency.

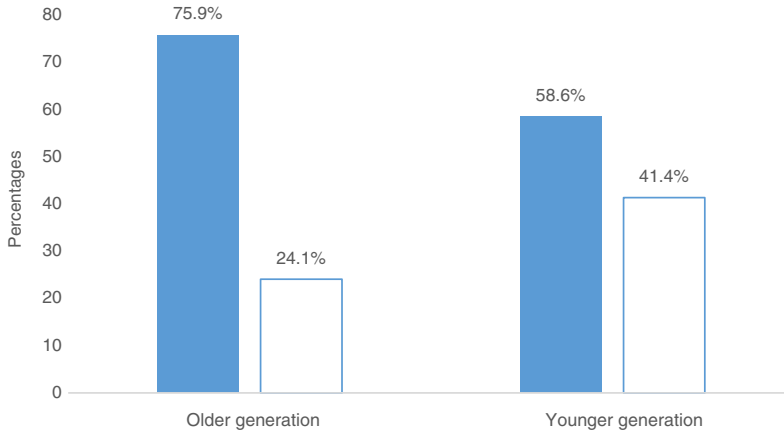


Figure 6. Whether or not having labor contract with the employer by generation.

(■) No contract and (□) With contract.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, $N = 1270$.

Living in cities helps them to build up new social networks. As far as social interaction is concerned, both generations are quite active. When asked how frequently they interacted with neighbors or friends, using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “almost never” and 5 being “very often,” the average score of the older generation was 4.7 and 4.2 for interacting with neighbors and friends, respectively. For the younger generation, the comparable average was 4.3 and 4.6, respectively. This

generational difference may reflect the different geographical scope of social interactions between the two generations. The older generation tends to move around where they live and get to know their neighbors and the younger generation prefers to spend more time with their friends.

The younger generation tends to be more positive in their outlook on life and feel happier and is less likely to feel depressed than the older generation. Despite all the

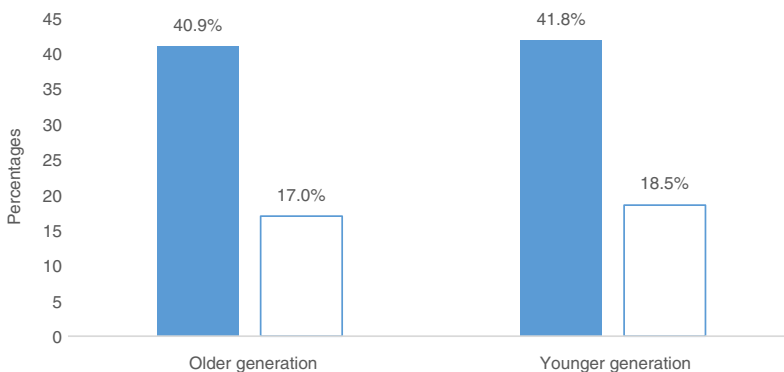


Figure 7. Unfair treatment or infringement in workplace by generation.

(■) In the past five years, have you ever been treated unfairly in hiring, salary raise or promotion? and (□) In the past five years, have you ever been violently infringed by a superior or colleague?

Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, $N = 1270$.

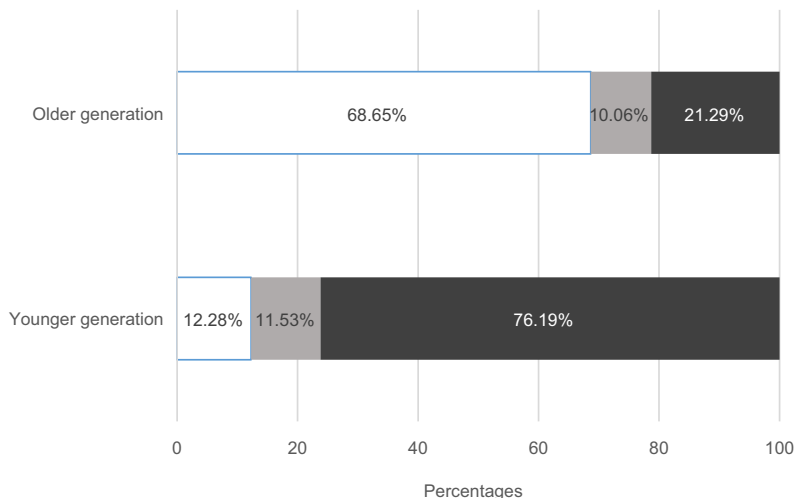


Figure 8. Use of the internet by generation.
 (□) Barely, (■) Sometimes, and (■) Frequently.
 Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, $N = 2406$.

difficulties they faced in their daily lives, about three-quarters of peasant workers believe they have a happy life in general. This is more so for the younger generation. Very few of the young generation of peasant workers (about 5%) think they are unhappy. The positive outlook of the younger generation probably reflects their relative upward mobility. About 44% of the younger generation reported that their socioeconomic status had improved compared with that of 3 years ago; 48% reported there had not been much change and only 7.6% thought their socioeconomic status had fallen in the previous 3 years. In contrast, 11.6% of the older generation reported downward mobility. Also, the proportion of the older generation who reported experiencing upward mobility is about 37.4%, which is 7% lower than that of the younger generation (see Fig. 9). It seems that modernization and urbanization in China bestow on both generations the opportunity for upward mobility, but more so for the younger people.

When asked where they expected themselves to be on the social ladder in a scale from one (the lowest) to ten (the highest) in

the next 10 years, the younger generation tended to have higher expectations (6.4) than the older generation (about 5.1). The younger generation of peasant workers is more optimistic about the future than the older generation, which is a good thing in general. But this high expectation could become a double-edged sword if the reality turns out to be less than they had hoped. If that were the case, their high expectations may instead bring about frustration and grievances.

Entrepreneurship among the Younger Generation of Peasant Workers

If taking a nonagricultural job constitutes a move towards modernity, becoming an entrepreneur can be considered a further stride towards modernity. Running a small business or startup in a modern society requires a broad understanding of the economy and market, and would bring more management

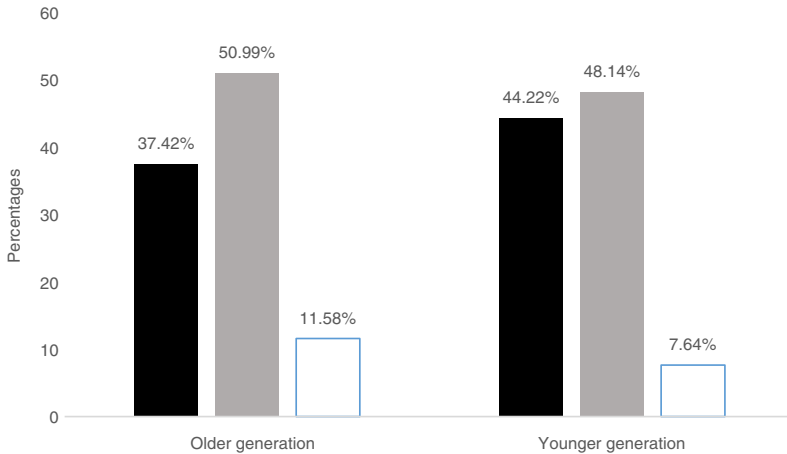


Figure 9. Self-evaluation of socioeconomic status compared with 2 years previously.
 (■) Upward, (■) Same, and (□) Downward.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey 2015, $N = 2401$.

skills to the undertaking. As early as 2007, against the backdrop of the global financial crisis, the central government encouraged migrant workers to return to their homes and start small business using the skills and money they had accumulated when they were working in the cities. According to an estimation issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2017), about 16.6% of peasant workers are either self-employed or running their own private business. As few systematic studies on entrepreneurship among the young generation of peasant workers existed, we carried out a survey research project and collected information from 270 young entrepreneurs in August and September, 2017. Like many such samples of small business or organizations, ours is a convenience sample. Nevertheless, bearing China's regional difference in mind, we drew our sample from many different places in China, including Sichuan, Hunan, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Gansu province.

Our data analysis offers us a first glimpse of the overall characteristics of the young generation of entrepreneurs among peasant workers. First of all, there are more male

than female entrepreneurs. Men make up two-thirds of all young entrepreneurs, although there are more women than men in the whole younger generation of peasant workers. In terms of marital status, two-thirds of the young entrepreneurs, who by definition were born in and after 1980, are already married. About 15% of them are members of the Chinese Communist Party. This figure is much higher than that for this generation of migrant workers as a whole, which is less than 5%. Education also helps peasant workers to develop their characteristics of modernity and entrepreneurial spirit. The group tends to be well educated in that more than 40% of them have had at least 2 years of college education (compared with about 9% for peasant workers as a whole).

We can further distinguish two types of entrepreneurs among young peasant workers, namely the migrant private entrepreneurs who live in cities and those who have returned and are running a business at home. For simplicity, we refer the former group as young urban entrepreneurs and the latter as young returnee entrepreneurs. A comparison between the two groups reveals

many interesting findings. The first is the gender composition. Although men constitute the majority in both groups, female entrepreneurs are more common among those living in cities than those who have returned to their home town. Overall, 47% of the urban entrepreneurs are women, compared with only 19% women among the returnee entrepreneurs (see Fig. 10). This suggests that urban culture is more conducive for women to start a business. The diverse economic structure in cities may also offer more business opportunities for women.

In terms of marital status, although most of the young generation of entrepreneurs are married in both groups, there is a higher proportion of unmarried entrepreneurs in the urban group than that among the returnees (40 vs 23%). Part of the reason for this is that those who are relatively young prefer to stay in cities to run their private business and therefore they are more likely to be single. Another reason may be that living in cities has changed the norms about the proper age for marrying, which tends to be younger in rural areas than that in cities. Yet another reason could be that the very fact of being married may affect an entrepreneur's choice

of where to run their business. Married people may prefer a more stable lifestyle, which would make their hometown a better choice.

Our analysis shows that the entrepreneurs constitute the elite of young peasant workers. We found that, in terms of political capital, a very high proportion of young returnee entrepreneurs are Party members. Whereas fewer than 5% of peasant workers are Party members, the figure is 23% among the young returnee entrepreneurs and 7% for the young urban entrepreneurs. The correlation between Party membership and entrepreneurship may go both ways. On the one hand, Party members, as the elite in rural villages, are more capable of finding job opportunities outside agriculture or starting their own business. On the other hand, entrepreneurs, especially those who have returned and been running a successful business in a rural village or town, tend to be depicted as role models in local communities. As this accords well with the Party's call to bring home skills and money and to help develop their home town, they become ideal candidates and almost the first choice for Party recruitment in the rural villages. Some of the returnee entrepreneurs may choose to

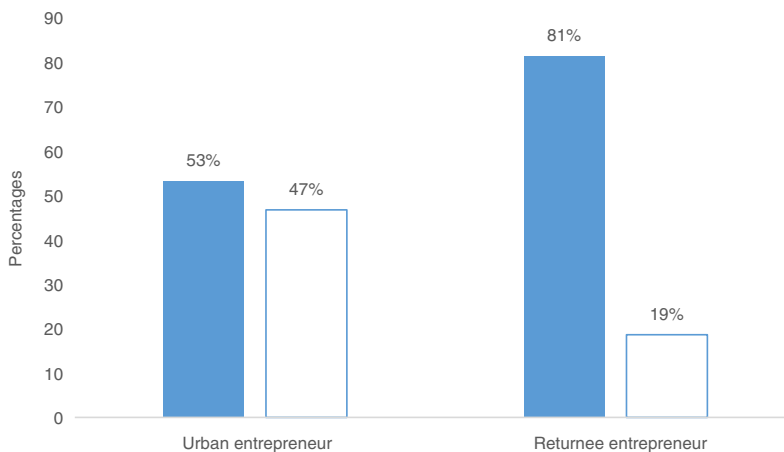


Figure 10. Gender composition of the two types of entrepreneurs.

(■) Male and (□) Female.

Source: Young Generation of Peasant Entrepreneurs Survey 2017, $N = 270$.

join the Party for instrumental purposes. Being a Party member helps them to extend their local network and make them more likely to receive government subsidies or bank loans beneficial to their business.

Whereas the returnee entrepreneurs may have more political capital than those who run their business in cities, the latter group excels in human capital. Among the urban entrepreneurs, 48% have a college or above education, compared with only 37% of the returnee entrepreneurs. Both figures are much higher than the 10% figure for the peasant workers as a whole. This suggests that peasant workers who are better educated have a greater chance of becoming entrepreneurs. Moreover, only 10% of the young entrepreneurs are self-employed. In other words, 90% of the private entrepreneurs have reached a certain scale of operation and have some employees.

Business Situation of the Young Peasant Entrepreneurs

The analysis shows that the private entrepreneurs in cities are better off than those at home. On average those in cities hire five full-time employees while the latter have three. The average annual revenue in 2016 was 755 thousand *yuan* for the urban entrepreneurs, while the returnees on average earn 515 thousand *yuan*. The former is 1.5 times higher than the latter. As far as the profitability of their businesses is concerned, the urban entrepreneurs made on average almost double that of the returnees (164 thousand *yuan* in the year of 2016 vs 85 thousand *yuan*). Although we may think that competition is more intense in cities, it seems that cities may also provide a larger and more profitable marketplace for the young generation of peasant entrepreneurs.

We found that financing is the biggest obstacle faced by both types of young

entrepreneurs. And it is the same for both startups and for those in developmental stages. Two-thirds of the entrepreneurs reported that they did not have channels for financing in the early stage of their business. Therefore, 90% of them relied on their own savings and money borrowed from family members. Only 20% of them were able to get bank loans. Even for businesses at developmental stages, almost the same proportion, 72%, to be precise, face the problem of financing. This implies that the financial markets in China are insufficiently developed to support the entrepreneurial activities of peasant workers. When asked what types of assistance they hoped the government would help them with, “providing startup money” was the most popular choice (chosen by more than 60% of the young peasant entrepreneurs). Moreover, “providing workshop floor or office space” and “cutting down red tape” were on the wish list of one-third of the entrepreneurs (see Fig. 11).

One thing that the government has done well is training for entrepreneurial skills, which is offered to returnee entrepreneurs. About half of them reported having participated in government-sponsored training sessions on business skills. In contrast, only 16% of the urban entrepreneurs have done so. Although living and running business in cities, the latter group, lacking an urban *hukou*, are not targeted for such government-provided training, which is mainly given to those with an urban *hukou*. Instead, about one-third of them had to receive training in private institutions and pay out of their own pockets. In total, about half the urban entrepreneurs have received some type of training on entrepreneurial skills, while 85% of the returnee entrepreneurs have received such a training. This suggests that the society as a whole is keen on entrepreneurship. Both government and private institutions offer help to nurture fledging entrepreneurs. Although the returnee entrepreneurs were in a relatively disadvantaged position

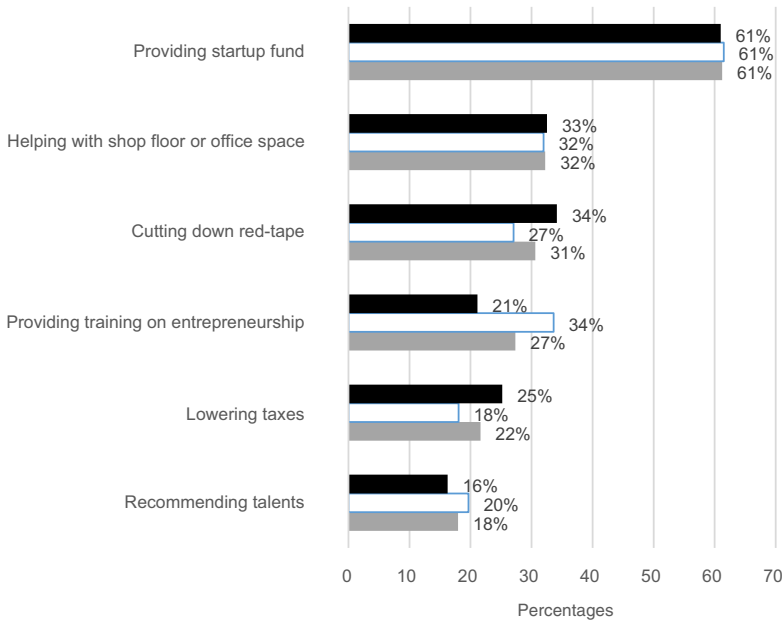


Figure 11. Types of assistance that entrepreneurs would like the government to offer.
 (■) Urban entrepreneur, (□) Returnee entrepreneur, and (▒) The whole group.
 Source: Young Generation of Peasant Entrepreneurs Survey 2017, $N = 270$.

compared with their urban cousins in terms of formal education and levels of profitability, they are taking advantage of every learning opportunity and eager to catch up.

Discussion and Conclusion

As China undergoes its great transformation of industrialization and urbanization, close to three hundred million peasant workers have left traditional household agriculture and become industrial workers or private entrepreneurs. More than half of them did so by leaving their home town and in many cases travelled hundreds of miles away looking for a better life. They are the agents of modernity in China. In this article, we have provided an overall picture of the peasant workers, especially of the younger generation (i.e., those born after 1980) compared with the older generation. We found the younger generations are better educated,

tend to hold more stable jobs and make more money, have a better sense of protecting their labor rights, enjoy more opportunities for upward mobility, and therefore live a happier life and are more optimistic about their future. We also conducted an original analysis of the elites of the young generation of peasant workers, the young generation of peasant entrepreneurs. They are the most educated and capable group of young peasant workers. They have also distinguished themselves from the rest of the peasant workers by having more political and social capital, and by making way much more money. As we classified them into those who ran their business in cities and those who returned to their home towns, we found that the former group can be regarded as the elite of the elite, in a sense that they hire more employees, run a bigger business and make more profit than the returnee entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, as our analysis of our first-hand survey data shows, the returnees are better rewarded

with political recognition by being recruited into the Party and enjoy more financial and educational assistance from the local governments. Moreover, they are free of the *hukou*-based discrimination and exclusion that their urban counterparts experience daily in cities. Despite all this, mobility helps rural migrant workers to expand their vision of the world, change their way of life, and place more emphasis on their children’s education. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that women breathe more fresh and free air in cities. Female peasant workers enjoy more freedom to join the urban labor force or start their own business. Young peasant workers in cities are delaying marriage and childbirth, for better or worse. They are more eager to live a city life and to have equal access to the resources and opportunities only available in cities.

China’s transition into a modern society is not without pain. Besides the deteriorating air quality and the increasing inequality of income and wealth, institutionalized shackles such as the *hukou* system remain a stumbling block to peasant workers. Peasants were allowed to make a living in cities about four decades ago but it is still very hard for them to purchase an apartment or send their children to public schools in cities, especially in the top-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, under the tight regulation of the *hukou* system. The system blocks to a great extent peasants’ access to important resources and social services in cities. Their marginalized social status, their concentration in manufacturing and construction work, and other institutionalized exclusions restrict most peasant workers to a small world of themselves, blocking them from building up close connections with local urban citizens and therefore circumscribe their development of modernity. When many in Western developed societies are talking about and experiencing a post-modern society, Chinese peasant workers are still in the process of moving from pre-modernity to modernity. This is modernity in the making.

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Notes

- 1 These big powers included Britain, France, Russia, Spain, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the USA.
- 2 During the 1950s the newly socialist China launched a set of regulations and policies that restricted mobility between urban and rural areas. A household registration (*hukou*) system divided the whole population into two groups: urban and rural citizens. Strict enforcement of the *hukou* system combined with the utilization of ration coupons made it almost impossible for peasants to find a job or make a living in cities. Not until the end of 1970s were Chinese peasants allowed to run small businesses or work in the manufacturing, construction, transportation and other service sectors in cities.
- 3 Fortunately, reforms breaking down this urban/rural segregation by *hukou* have been carried out in many cities in China since 2014.
- 4 City here refers to the county-level (*xian*) jurisdiction in China. The population of a county in China is usually between 200 000 and one million people. In China, the lowest government jurisdiction is the town (*zhen*) which is right below the county. The population of a town is usually from 10 000 to 30 000 people. Most rural people live in villages under the jurisdiction of the town.

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