Gender Differences in College Migration

Zihan Hu

Hyejin Ku

Xinzheng Shi

Yizhi Wang

Ming-ang Zhang*

Version: March 21, 2026

Abstract

We examine gender differences in college migration—attending university outside one's hometown—using administrative data covering the universe of National College Entrance Examination takers in China. Conditional on exam performance, girls are 4.5 percentage points less likely than boys to enroll outside their home province. This gap is larger in areas with stronger traditional gender norms. A new survey we conducted shows that parents of high school girls are less supportive of college migration than parents of boys. This disparity appears to be driven primarily by lower perceived returns to migration, greater safety concerns, and stronger preferences for daughters to find a local spouse, whereas risk preferences, family background, and parents' elderly-care concerns contribute little. Using instrumental variables that exploit variation in university expansions and cross-province admission quotas, we estimate the causal migration premium and find it to be similar for boys and girls. Based on these estimates, closing the gender gap in college migration would reduce the gender gap in elite university attendance by 21% and the gender gap in wages by 11%.

Keywords: Gender gap, Internal migration, College choice

JEL classification: J16, J61, I23

*Zihan Hu: School of Economics, Singapore Management University. zihanhu@smu.edu.sg; Hyejin Ku: Department of Economics and CReAM, University College London. h.ku@ucl.ac.uk; Xinzheng Shi: School of Economics, Peking University. shixzh@pku.edu.cn; Yizhi Wang: School of Economics, Singapore Management University. yizhi.wang.2025@phdecons.smu.edu.sg Ming-ang Zhang: School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University. zhangmingang@tsinghua.edu.cn. We thank Joseph Altonji, Raj Chetty, Adeline Delavande, Christian Dustmann, John Friedman, Claudia Goldin, Christine Ho, Larry Katz, Lin Ma, Xin Meng, Claudia Olivetti, Jessica Pan, and conference and seminar participants for helpful discussions and comments. Ruijie Cai provided outstanding research assistance.