China's Urban Labor Market in Transition: New Findings from the Fifth Survey

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Abstract: *To gain an in-depth understanding of China's urban labor market, the Institute of Population and Labor Economics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IPLE-CASS) conducted the fifth wave of the China Urban Labor Survey in 2023, which covers eight major representative cities. The survey collected 9,122 household questionnaires and 26,145 individual questionnaires from 381 neighborhood committees. Based on this data, the report systematically analyzes employment, wages, educational attainment, and social security among China's urban workforce. Key findings include an inverted U-shaped age pattern of labor force participation, with a widening gender gap after childbearing age. Additionally, job search methods combine market-based channels with traditional social networks. Notably, the gender wage gap persists and widens over the life cycle, while employed women now have higher average years of schooling than men. Rural-to-urban migrants show higher labor force participation rates but remain disadvantaged in wages, education, and social security coverage. Thus, this survey provides a comprehensive picture of the structural characteristics and challenges of China's urban labor market, providing a solid data foundation for academic research and public policy design.*

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The China Urban Labor Survey (CULS) is a sampling survey of urban households organized and implemented by the Institute of Population and Labor Economics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IPLE-CASS). It aims to collect individual and household-level data to track changes in China's urban labor market, providing a solid foundation for academic research and public policy analysis.

The survey focuses on employment, work skills, education and training, income and expenditures,

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and social security among local households, migrant households, and their members. Its sample covers eight representative large cities across different regions of China: Shenyang, Shanghai, Fuzhou, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Guiyang, and Xi'an. The CULS has been conducted in five rounds, with surveys conducted in 2001, 2005, 2010, and 2016, and the fifth round in 2023.

1. Survey Implementation

1.1 Survey Questionnaires

The fifth round of the CULS (2023) used three questionnaires: the Neighborhood Committee Questionnaire, the Household Questionnaire, and the Individual Questionnaire. The *Neighborhood Committee Questionnaire* collected information on the neighborhood committee's public service facilities, including nurseries, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, medical institutions, senior daycare centers, and elder care facilities. The *Household Questionnaire* gathered basic details on household members and their children, housing conditions, monthly and annual expenditures, and income from transfers and properties. Furthermore, the *Individual Questionnaire* covered personal information, employment, education, social security, working hours, and life satisfaction. Special modules included "Skills Used at Work," "Impact of the Pandemic," "Early Childhood Education and Care," and "General Skills."

1.2 Survey Organization

The fifth round of the CULS ran from July 2022 to December 2023. In each city, the project team worked with local women's federations, youth organizations, neighborhood committees, and universities. In *Stage 1 - Sampling Frame and Residence Selection*, trained grassroots workers from selected neighborhood committees compiled a list of all buildings and the names of all residents in selected buildings using administrative records and site visits. Subsequently, these were used to construct the sampling frame, from which the project team drew residences. In Stage 2 - Household Interviews, interviewers, recruited from neighborhood committees and universities, were trained and tested before conducting in-person tablet-based interviews. Data was then uploaded in real time to a Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) system. Graduate students from the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (UCASS) were recruited to serve as supervisors and reviewers. Quality control included facial recognition, GPS verification, automated detection of paradata anomalies and questionnaire data outliers, and manual review.

1.3 Sampling Design

The fifth round adopted a three-stage probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling method in each city. The resulting samples are representative at the city level but not for China's urban labor market as a whole. In Stage 1 (Neighborhoods), we used PPS to select neighborhood committees based on permanent population, resulting in 55 committees each for Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu; 44 each for Shenyang, Fuzhou, Guiyang, and Xi'an; and 40 for Wuhan. In Stage 2 (Buildings), buildings within selected committees were stratified by migrant household share: (a) "high migrant" (≥10%) and (b) "low migrant" (<10%). PPS sampling was then applied within each stratum. In Stage 3 (Households), households within sampled buildings were stratified

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by type (local vs. migrant) and selected by simple random sampling. All members of sampled households were interviewed. In Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, 24 households per committee were selected (14 local, 10 migrant). In Shenyang, Fuzhou, Wuhan, Guiyang, and Xi'an, 25 households per committee were selected (15 local, 10 migrant).

The target sample size was 1,200 households in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, and 1,000 in each of the other five cities. Due to refusals, vacant homes, and incorrect addresses, the number of completed interviews fell short of the target. Thus, replacement household samples were utilized as necessary based on the initial sample's response rate, to reach the intended sample size.

1.4 Weights

1.4.1 Household weights

The final survey sample consists of both initial households and additional replacement households. Since the inclusion probability differs between the two groups, their household design weights are calculated separately.

(1) Initial Sample Household Design Weights. Since the survey in each city adopts a three-stage PPS sampling design, the design weight for a household in the initial sample is the product of the weights from all three stages. The calculation steps for the city c in each stage are as follows:

Stage 1: Neighborhood committees are selected using PPS. The design weight w_{ci}^{1} for a neighborhood committee i is calculated as:

$$w_{ci}^{1}=\frac{N_c}{m_c N_{ci}} \tag{1}$$

where N_c denotes the total number of permanent residents in city c; N_{ci} is the number of permanent residents in the sampled neighborhood committee in city c; and m_c is the number of sampled neighborhood committees in city c.

Stage 2: Within each sampled neighborhood committee, buildings are stratified into low and high proportions of migrant households and selected using PPS. The design weight w_{cil}^{2} for building l within stratum j of neighborhood committee i in city c is:

$$w_{cil}^{2}=\frac{N_{ci}^{j}}{m_{ci}^{j} N_{cil}^{j}} \tag{2}$$

where m_{ci}^{j} is the number of sampled buildings in stratum j of neighborhood committee i; N_{ci}^{j} is total number of households in stratum j of neighborhood committee i; and N_{cil}^{j} is the total number of households in building l in stratum j of neighborhood committee i.

Stage 3: Within sampled buildings, the household sampling frame is stratified by household type (local vs. migrant). Initial households are then selected by simple random sampling. The design weight for household k in the initial sample is:

$$w_{cik}^{3}=\frac{D_{ci}^{ht}}{d_{ci}^{ht}}\times\frac{d_{ci}^{ht}}{b_{ci}^{ht}}=\frac{D_{ci}^{ht}}{b_{ci}^{ht}} \tag{3}$$

where D_{ci}^{ht} is the household size from the sampling frame of household type ht in neighborhood committee i of city c, with the value of ht denoting either local or migrant household stratum; d_{ci}^{ht} is the sample size of the household type ht in neighborhood committee i of city c; and b_{ci}^{ht} is the initial

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sampled households of household type h*t* in neighborhood committee *i* of city *c*, drawn from d_{ci}^{ht} sample units.

The overall design weight for an initial household is therefore:

$$w_{cik}=w_{ci}^{1}\times w_{cil}^{2}\times w_{cik}^{3} \tag{4}$$

(2) Replacement Household Sample Design Weights. When non-response to the initial sample from the neighborhood committee *i* of city *c* occurs (e.g., refusals, vacant homes, or incorrect addresses), the project team supplements the initial sample with replacement households to ensure that the city's target sample size is achieved. The approximate probability of inclusion for a replacement household is calculated as:

$$\widehat{P}(I_{cik}^{2}=1)=p_{cik}^{1}+\frac{d_{ci}^{ht}-R_{ci}}{D_{ci}^{ht}-d_{ci}^{ht}}\times(1-p_{cik}^{1}) \tag{5}$$

where I_{cik}^{2} indicates whether the household *k* in neighborhood committee *i* of city *c* is selected as a replacement sample; p_{cik}^{1} is the probability of that household being selected in the initial sample, with $p_{cik}^{1}=1/w_{cik}$; and R_{ci} is the number of valid responses obtained from the initial sample in neighborhood committee *i*.

The corresponding design weight for a replacement household is:

$$w_{cik}=1/\widehat{P}(I_{cik}^{2}=1) \tag{6}$$

(3) Household Weight Adjustment. The final adequate sample in each city consists of valid responses from both initial and replacement households. Their design weights are computed using formulas (4) and (6), respectively. Before deriving the final household weights, a non-response adjustment is applied. Assuming the effective response rate for the household type *ht* in neighborhood *s* of city *c* is $resp_{cs}^{ht}$, the non-response-adjusted household weight w_{cik}^{resp} is calculated using equation (7). To reduce bias from non-response and under-coverage, and to improve estimation precision, the non-response-adjusted weights are further calibrated. Calibration benchmarks include the distribution of household sizes and the number of households with at least one member aged 60 or older. To avoid the problems caused by extreme weights, such as inflated standard errors or unrealistic estimates, the calibrated weights are capped at the 95th percentile. The resulting values constitute the final household weight (*wt_hh*).

$$w_{cik}^{resp}=w_{cik}/resp_{cs}^{ht} \tag{7}$$

1.4.2 Individual weights

Because all members of a sampled household were interviewed, the initial weight for each individual was set equal to the household's non-response-adjusted weight. To reduce potential non-response and under-coverage bias and to improve the precision of estimates, the project team calibrated the initial individual weights. The calibration variables used include the number of permanent residents in the city (broken down by sex, age group, and education level), as well as by local and non-local household registration (*hukou*). The resulting calibrated weights were then trimmed at the 95th percentile to prevent the influence of extreme values, yielding the final individual weights (*wt_ind*).

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1.5 Sample Distribution

This round of the survey covered 381 neighborhood committees in eight representative cities across China. A total of 9,122 household questionnaires and 26,145 individual questionnaires were collected. The sample distribution by city is detailed in Table 1. It is important to note that among the 26,145 individual questionnaires, 21,007 were completed by household members in the traditional sense, plus 5,138 completed by non-resident children of those household members. These extra questionnaires were included to more fully capture inter-generational issues, such as the transmission of education and economic interactions between households and their non-resident children. The average household size across all cities was approximately 2.29 people.

TABLE 1. Sample size across cities

City	Number of surveyed households	Number of surveyed individuals			Average household size (persons)
		Household members	Non-household members	Sum	
Shenyang	1088	2130	737	2867	2.09
Shanghai	1283	2625	768	3393	2.27
Fuzhou	1083	2751	581	3332	2.50
Wuhan	1003	2436	422	2858	2.35
Guangzhou	1293	2904	663	3567	2.09
Chengdu	1211	2893	808	3701	2.43
Guiyang	1071	2643	645	3288	2.52
Xi'an	1090	2625	514	3139	2.27
Sum	9122	21007	5138	26145	2.29

Notes: All statistics, except for the number of surveyed households and individuals, were calculated using sampling weights. This applies throughout the paper.
Source: Calculations are based on data from the fifth round of the *China Urban Labor Survey*. This also applies throughout the paper.

Table 2 presents the distribution of the sample by gender, age, educational attainment, and migration status. Gender: The sample consists of 50.72% males and 49.28% females. Age: Individuals aged 60 and older account for 19.89% of the surveyed population in these cities, which is similar to the national average of 21.10%. The population aged 0-15 makes up 13.20%, lower than the national average of 17.60%. Furthermore, the working-age population (16-59) comprises 66.91%, which is higher than the national average of 61.30%[1]. Education: The population with a college education or higher (including junior college) accounts for 34.67%, significantly above the national average. Migration: As large-scale labor migration is a key characteristic of China's urban labor markets (Meng & Zhang, 2001), migrants make up 31.92% of the sample. Of these migrants, 21.50% are rural-to-urban migrants, representing approximately two-thirds of the total migrant population.

[1] The national data comes from the *Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2023 National Economic and Social Development*, with numbers reported as of the end of 2023. See http://www.stats.gov.cn for more information.

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TABLE 2. Sample distribution (%)

Grouping	Male	Female	Total
Age group			
0-15 years	14.40	11.98	13.20
16-59 years	65.55	68.30	66.91
60 years and above	20.05	19.72	19.89
Including: 65 years and above	13.27	12.99	13.13
Level of education			
Junior secondary school and below	43.51	44.98	44.24
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	21.39	20.80	21.10
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	13.06	12.44	12.76
Bachelor's degree and above	22.03	21.78	21.91
Type of migrants			
Local residents	67.24	68.94	68.08
Inter-city migration	10.03	10.82	10.42
Rural-urban migration	22.73	20.25	21.50
Sum	100	100	100

Notes: All calculations use only the household member samples. Due to rounding, some totals may not equal 100%. This applies throughout.

2. Labor Force Participation and Labor Supply

2.1 Labor Force Participation Rate

Figure 1 illustrates the key features of labor force participation across different demographic groups, revealing a significant gender gap. The difference in participation rates between men and women is relatively small before age 30 but widens considerably after childbearing age. Women typically bear a greater share of the burden of childbirth and child-rearing, thereby increasing the opportunity cost of their employment (Angrist & Evans, 1998). Furthermore, as Section IV on wages shows, women's wage growth largely stagnates after entering the childbearing phase, widening the wage gap with men. These findings are consistent with the "motherhood penalty" literature (Kleven et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2023).

The figure also shows an inverted U-shaped relationship between labor force participation and age. Between ages 16 and 24, participation gradually increases as people finish their education and enter the labor market. It remains stable mainly from ages 30 to 50, then gradually declines after age 50, with a rapid drop at retirement age (50-55 for women, 55-60 for men). Compared with men, women's age-related labor participation distribution more clearly demonstrates the impact of childbearing. While, generally stable from 30 to 50, women face a distinct slump in participation during the childbearing years (ages 30-35). Participation rebounds somewhat after age 35, reaching 83.26% for the 35-39 age group, but it never fully recovers to its peak level (84.42% for the 25-29 age group). It then resumes a gradual decline and begins a sharp descent from age 50 onward.

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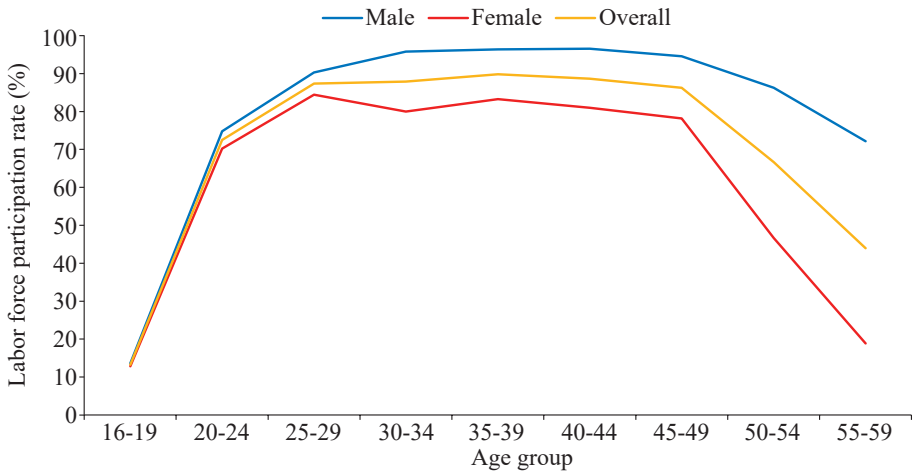


Fig. 1. Labor force participation rates by age group and gender

Notes: Calculations are based on the working-age population (ages 16-59). This sample is used for all figures and tables in Sections II through V.

Table 3 shows the labor force participation rates by city. Participation is highest in the eastern coastal cities of Shanghai and Guangzhou, where it is close to 80%. In contrast, rates are lower in Shenyang, in the northeast, and in Guiyang, in the southwest, at just over 70%. Labor force participation is also relatively low in Wuhan, in central China, and Xi'an, in the northwest, generally correlating with the level of economic development and dynamism. Moreover, the gender gap in labor force participation is relatively narrow in high-participation cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. Shanghai has a male-female participation gap of nearly 20 percentage points, while Guangzhou, despite its high overall rate, shows the smallest gender difference among all the cities surveyed. Conversely, Shenyang and Fuzhou have both lower overall participation rates and a much wider gender gap, approaching 31 percentage points. Differences in participation also exist across educational levels. Individuals with only a high school education have the lowest participation rate, followed by those with a junior high school education. In contrast, those with a junior college degree or higher show a positive correlation between education level and participation rate. The notably low rate for the high school group suggests "discouraged worker" effect and, to some extent, reflects the labor market's relative demand for workers with different educational backgrounds. Regarding labor force participation, local residents have significantly lower participation than migrants, whether they are from other urban or rural areas. The difference in the labor force participation between inter-city migrants and rural-to-urban migrants, however, is not significant. When examining these groups by gender, we find that a clear pattern emerges: groups with low overall labor force participation—such as high school graduates, local residents, and residents of Shenyang and Fuzhou—also exhibit a greater gender gap. This suggests that negative factors in the labor market disproportionately affect women.

2.2 Working Hours

As shown in Table 4, the patterns of working hours do not fully align with those of labor force participation. Guangzhou, a city with high labor force participation and a small gender gap, also has the longest average working hours. Guiyang has a relatively low overall participation

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TABLE 3. Labor force participation rates by group (%)

Grouping	Male	Female	Total
City			
Shenyang	87.88	56.02	71.83
Shanghai	89.45	69.89	79.71
Fuzhou	87.61	56.69	71.55
Wuhan	86.04	60.17	73.06
Guangzhou	87.54	71.41	79.52
Chengdu	87.45	67.28	77.30
Guiyang	81.01	64.33	72.39
Xi'an	84.28	62.65	73.12
Level of education			
Junior secondary school and below	85.64	58.33	71.28
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	81.47	48.22	65.49
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	90.72	72.24	81.61
Bachelor's degree and above	91.10	83.09	87.08
Type of migrants			
Local residents	83.97	61.47	72.39
Inter-city migration	92.70	73.70	82.88
Rural-urban migration	92.06	74.48	83.80
Total	87.29	66.25	76.71

rate, but its working hours are among the highest. In contrast, Fuzhou and Wuhan have both low participation and relatively short working hours. Across age groups, working hours generally follow an inverted U-shaped distribution: both younger and older individuals work fewer hours, while the 35-44 age group works the longest. A clear trend also emerges by education level: higher education generally corresponds to fewer average working hours. Among migrants, rural-to-urban workers have significantly longer working hours, suggesting their jobs are typically more labor-intensive.

TABLE 4. Average working hours and number of jobs held by group

Grouping	Working hours (per week)			Number of jobs held		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
City						
Shenyang	48.02	47.14	47.68	2.32	1.85	2.08
Shanghai	47.37	44.29	46.03	2.70	2.34	2.51
Fuzhou	46.96	43.62	45.60	2.28	1.79	2.01
Wuhan	46.75	44.26	45.73	2.36	1.90	2.11
Guangzhou	50.18	48.02	49.23	2.66	2.41	2.53
Chengdu	47.63	45.75	46.81	2.91	2.41	2.66
Guiyang	49.61	47.67	48.74	2.24	1.95	2.09
Xi'an	47.80	45.26	46.68	2.02	1.56	1.77

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TABLE 4 Continued

Grouping	Working hours (per week)			Number of jobs held		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Age group						
16-24 years	48.17	43.74	46.11	2.47	2.17	2.34
25-34 years	48.34	44.34	46.47	2.66	2.40	2.53
35-44 years	49.33	45.79	47.71	2.78	2.58	2.68
45-54 years	47.63	47.08	47.41	2.64	2.10	2.36
55-59 years	44.81	53.59	46.73	2.08	1.51	1.75
Level of education						
Junior secondary school and below	54.51	53.80	54.21	2.57	2.19	2.37
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	48.24	45.55	47.32	2.59	1.96	2.27
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	45.07	41.99	43.72	2.69	2.41	2.54
Bachelor's degree and above	44.05	42.01	43.07	2.62	2.33	2.48
Type of migrants						
Local residents	45.01	43.38	44.30	2.50	2.11	2.28
Inter-city migration	46.98	46.60	46.81	2.75	2.27	2.52
Rural-urban migration	54.40	50.56	52.83	2.78	2.46	2.63
Total	48.13	45.82	47.14	2.61	2.21	2.40

Notes: The number of jobs held refers to the count of full-time, non-agricultural jobs.

2.3 Job Experience

Job transitions are a key way for workers to advance their careers and for the labor market to improve its efficiency. In contrast, frequent involuntary job changes can signal poor labor market matching. In a well-functioning labor market, there is no single "ideal" number of job transitions; instead, it should offer workers roles that match their human capital and provide ample opportunities for mobility. Table 4 shows that workers in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu have the highest average number of jobs held, with over 2.5. Workers in Xi'an and Shenyang have fewer jobs, averaging around 2 each. Job experience by age group also follows an inverted U-shaped trend, with the 35-44 age group having the richest job experience and greatest mobility. The gender gap in the number of jobs held is relatively small for this age group. By education, individuals with only a high school education—who also have low labor participation—show the least mobility, having held the fewest jobs. Among migrants, rural-to-urban workers report more job transitions, reflecting the substitutability and transferability of their work.

In summary, the overall findings of this section demonstrate that regions and groups with more developed labor markets—such as Guangzhou, middle-aged workers, those with a bachelor's degree or higher, and inter-city migrants migrants—exhibit a set of favorable characteristics: high labor participation, a small gender gap, relatively short and less intense working hours, rich job experience, and high mobility. Conversely, women, high school graduates, and workers in certain cities in China's northeast and western regions show the opposite trends across these indicators. Therefore, eliminating gender discrimination, improving

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top-level educational design, and promoting balanced regional economic development are crucial for further strengthening the labor market.

3. Employment Structure

3.1 Job Search and Employment Status

Both market-based channels and traditional social networks play a role in the job search process (Table 5) with the dominant channel determined by their relative efficiency (Holzer, 1988). Market-based human resource services are the primary method for job seekers, with 34.73% of employed individuals finding their current jobs through online platforms or job fairs. Traditional methods remain essential, as 33.39% of jobs are secured through social networks like friends and relatives. Younger and more educated individuals are more likely to use market-based channels. Among workers aged 16-24, 28.30% found their jobs through online media, while 30.86% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher used job fairs. In contrast, over 40% of workers aged 45 and above relied on traditional social networks.

TABLE 5. Job search methods for current job (%)

Job search method for workers	16-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-59 years	Total
Government, community, or commercial employment agencies	2.74	2.95	3.43	4.39	6.57	3.68
Job fairs or recruitment events	20.10	24.29	24.92	16.58	11.72	21.57
University career center or school referral	14.28	7.58	6.29	7.36	8.45	7.55
Introductions from relatives, friends, or acquaintances	20.08	27.35	33.88	40.66	43.56	33.39
Direct contact with employers	13.32	9.09	9.99	14.11	12.97	11.12
Demobilization/placement arranged by the military or government	0.09	0.85	1.55	3.12	7.45	2.01
Recruitment through civil service or public institutions	0.85	5.41	6.67	4.34	4.72	5.25
Other	0.23	1.53	1.81	3.95	3.50	2.26
Sum	100	100	100	100	100	100

Notes: "Government, community, and commercial employment agencies" includes government employment halls, community employment service centers, and commercial agencies. "Direct contact with employer" includes being contacted by an employer, contacting an employer directly, and being hired after an employer-sponsored training or apprenticeship. "Other" includes print media and other methods.

Most workers are formally employed, while business venturing is a key path for some groups (Table 6). As the urban labor market matures, 80.89% of workers are employed as formal staff or employees in government agencies, public institutions, and enterprises. Another 18.75% are self-employed or entrepreneurs. Younger, highly educated individuals are more likely to be employed in formal positions. An impressive 92.64% of workers aged 16-24 are employees, and 73.28% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher are employees, with another 18.71% working as formal

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staff in government or public institutions. Business venturing and self-employment are more common among older, less educated, and migrant workers. Among rural-to-urban migrants, 20.70% are self-employed, and this figure rises to 28.19% for those with a junior high education or less.

TABLE 6. Distribution of employment status (%)

Grouping	Employees of government or public institutions	Corporate employees	Employer	Self-employed	Unpaid household helper	Sum
Gender						
Male	7.75	70.74	7.65	13.72	0.14	100
Female	9.14	74.94	4.16	11.11	0.65	100
Age Group						
16-24 years	1.76	92.64	0.89	4.56	0.15	100
25-34 years	7.04	79.46	4.68	8.60	0.23	100
35-44 years	9.26	70.60	7.21	12.36	0.57	100
45-54 years	9.79	65.01	7.85	17.04	0.31	100
55-59 years	8.55	68.02	4.11	19.12	0.20	100
Level of education						
Junior secondary school and below	0.70	62.87	7.50	28.19	0.74	100
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	2.90	76.80	7.36	12.64	0.30	100
the Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	5.67	82.13	5.23	6.45	0.52	100
Bachelor's degree and above	18.71	73.28	4.89	3.12	0.00	100
Type of migrants						
Local residents	12.82	73.01	5.08	8.77	0.32	100
Inter-city migration	4.38	76.71	7.60	11.09	0.21	100
Rural-urban migration	1.32	69.88	7.61	20.70	0.50	100
Total	8.35	72.54	6.15	12.60	0.36	100

Notes: "Employer" includes those with temporary employees. "Self-employed" refers to those who operate a business without employees.

3.2 Sectoral Structure by Ownership

Market-based enterprises are the primary employers (Table 7). About 50% of workers are employed by private enterprises or foreign-invested enterprises (including those from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Macao SAR, and the China's Taiwan region), and another 20.08% are self-employed in non-agricultural activities. The public and state-owned sectors also create a significant number of jobs, with 27.20% of workers employed by government bodies, state-owned enterprises, or collectives. Differences in urban economic development stages are reflected in the structure of employment ownership. In Shanghai, 60.74% of workers are employed in private or foreign-invested enterprises, while in Guiyang and Chengdu, the proportions of workers engaged in non-agricultural self-employment are 31.63% and 25.20%, respectively. Younger workers are more likely to enter market-based sectors, such as private

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and foreign-invested enterprises; 58.90% of workers aged 16-24 are in private enterprises. Highly educated individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to be in public and state-owned sectors (44.03%), a trend also seen among individuals with local household registration (37.46%). Among rural-to-urban migrants, 33.20% are engaged in non-agricultural self-employment.

TABLE 7. Ownership Type of employer by group (%)

Grouping	Government bodies and public institutions	State-owned, state-holding, and collective enterprises	Private enterprises	Foreign-invested enterprises	Non-agricultural individual businesses	Others	Sum
Gender							
Male	10.24	18.42	43.55	4.87	20.89	2.03	100
Female	13.03	12.23	46.48	5.16	19.01	4.09	100
Age group							
16-24 years	5.56	17.05	58.90	5.06	12.50	0.93	100
25-34 years	10.29	13.87	52.06	5.15	15.30	3.34	100
35-44 years	12.14	15.13	44.74	5.60	19.05	3.34	100
45-54 years	12.25	16.60	38.89	4.41	25.63	2.22	100
55-59 years	14.05	22.45	27.61	3.57	29.02	3.30	100
Level of education							
Junior secondary school and below	2.66	8.58	40.66	1.89	44.53	1.68	100
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	6.69	13.45	50.10	5.81	21.25	2.69	100
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	9.25	17.41	54.33	4.49	10.39	4.12	100
Bachelor's degree and above	22.12	21.91	40.57	7.34	4.65	3.41	100
Type of migrants							
Local residents	16.78	20.68	39.23	5.62	14.01	3.68	100
Inter-city migration	7.34	12.09	54.81	7.20	16.98	1.58	100
Rural-urban migration	2.80	7.77	51.48	2.87	33.20	1.89	100
Total	11.44	15.76	44.81	4.99	20.08	2.92	100

Notes: "Foreign-invested enterprises" include investments from Hong Kong SAR, Macao SAR, and China's Taiwan region. "Non-agricultural self-employment" includes freelancers and flexible employment. "Other" includes private non-enterprise units, land contractors, and similar categories.

3.3 Employment Structure

The service sector is the main employer in urban areas, with wholesale and retail trade being the largest industry (Table 8). Wholesale and retail, along with manufacturing, account for the most jobs, at 16.24% and 12.62%, respectively. Construction and transportation, storage, and postal services are also significant, each employing over 7% of workers. Employment structures vary between cities. Shanghai has an advantage in IT and R&D, with information transmission, software, and IT services accounting for 7.87% of its jobs, and scientific research and technical services accounting for 7.74%. Guangzhou and Shenyang have strong manufacturing bases, where

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manufacturing makes up 17.78% and 17.46% of jobs, respectively. Chengdu's high construction job rate (12.56%) reflects the city's ongoing expansion and development. By education, workers with a bachelor's degree or higher are concentrated in information transmission, software, and IT services (10.67%) and education (10.43%). In contrast, those with a junior high education or less are mainly in wholesale and retail (23.24%) and manufacturing (17.15%). Rural-to-urban migrants are more likely to work in construction, accommodation and catering, and residential services than local residents and inter-city migrants.

TABLE 8. Industry distribution of workers (%)

Industry	Shenyang	Shanghai	Fuzhou	Wuhan	Guangzhou	Chengdu	Guiyang	Xi'an	Total
Agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery	0.23	0.38	1.44	0.13	0.09	0.20	0.30	0.17	0.27
Mining	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.03	0.00	0.00	3.03	0.20
Manufacturing	17.46	12.60	6.90	10.68	17.78	10.29	9.37	6.62	12.62
Electricity, gas, and water supply	1.00	0.84	1.46	2.72	1.66	1.39	1.59	1.68	1.44
Construction	6.33	4.97	7.08	8.50	5.19	12.56	8.22	9.14	7.56
Wholesale and retail trade	16.60	13.69	19.09	18.55	20.54	13.26	18.37	14.18	16.24
Transport, storage, and postal services	9.49	6.71	6.69	8.04	5.20	8.30	9.02	7.44	7.22
Accommodation and food services	5.95	5.85	6.26	5.61	6.46	8.33	7.24	8.06	6.71
Information, software, and IT services	3.31	7.87	6.96	4.50	5.31	5.61	4.21	4.66	5.76
Finance	1.59	3.98	5.30	2.45	2.27	4.79	3.21	2.83	3.40
Real estate	4.31	5.71	3.40	3.55	4.30	4.42	3.91	5.86	4.65
Leasing and business services	5.50	7.75	2.79	2.37	4.96	4.97	3.68	3.11	5.19
Scientific and technical services	4.68	7.74	2.60	1.85	3.31	4.47	2.15	3.14	4.53
Utilities and public facilities management	0.56	0.47	0.94	1.42	1.15	0.70	1.14	0.53	0.82
Personal and other services	4.40	6.11	7.02	4.00	5.68	4.32	5.86	5.90	5.33
Education	5.36	3.78	8.40	7.53	4.08	5.11	6.98	8.08	5.22
Health and social work	3.41	5.22	3.07	4.46	3.42	3.63	4.14	4.09	4.09
Culture, sports, and entertainment	2.17	2.21	2.33	2.36	2.11	3.10	3.26	3.28	2.51
Public administration and social security	7.65	4.13	8.27	11.24	6.47	4.56	7.34	8.18	6.25
Sum	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

3.4 Occupational Structure

Most urban workers are in social production and life service occupations (Table 9). This occupational structure closely mirrors the industrial one, in which about 50% of workers are in these roles, while nearly 20% are in professional and technical positions. Professional and technical jobs are more common in Shanghai, Fuzhou, Wuhan, and Xi'an. Gender differences in occupations are notable. Women are more likely to be in professional and technical positions

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or clerical work, while men are more concentrated in production and manufacturing. The role of education is also clear: 39.10% of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher hold professional and technical jobs, while 66.39% of those with a junior high education or less are in social production and life service roles. Rural-to-urban migrants are significantly more likely to work in production and manufacturing (22.14%) than local residents or inter-city migrants.

TABLE 9. Occupational distribution of workers (%)

Occupation	Shenyang	Shanghai	Fuzhou	Wuhan	Guangzhou	Chengdu	Guiyang	Xi'an	Total
Heads of party and state organs, mass organizations, social organizations, and enterprises/institutions	3.45	4.88	2.79	2.88	1.16	3.13	3.14	1.27	3.02
Professional and technical personnel	19.27	22.77	23.02	24.95	17.33	16.93	16.93	21.50	19.95
Clerical and related staff	17.00	15.47	17.25	17.96	15.60	12.70	10.88	15.11	15.06
Workers in social production and life services	46.61	48.51	50.73	43.59	50.80	51.86	56.91	52.11	49.86
Production and manufacturing workers and related personnel	13.68	8.16	6.07	10.51	14.93	15.12	11.84	9.86	11.92
Others	0.00	0.22	0.14	0.12	0.18	0.26	0.30	0.15	0.19
Sum	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Notes: "Other" includes workers in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishing, as well as military personnel.

4. Wages

Gender wage gaps are evident across cities and different life stages. The overall wage ratio (male: female) across the eight cities is 1.26, with the widest gap in Shenyang (1.52) and the narrowest in Shanghai (1.19). The observed gender wage gap comprises both legitimate components, such as differences in human capital, and the adverse effects of labor market discrimination (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Figure 2 shows significant wage disparities by income quintile. The top 20% of earners earn, on average, 7.86 times as much as the bottom 20%. Women make up 56.21% of the lowest quintile but only 31.87% of the highest.

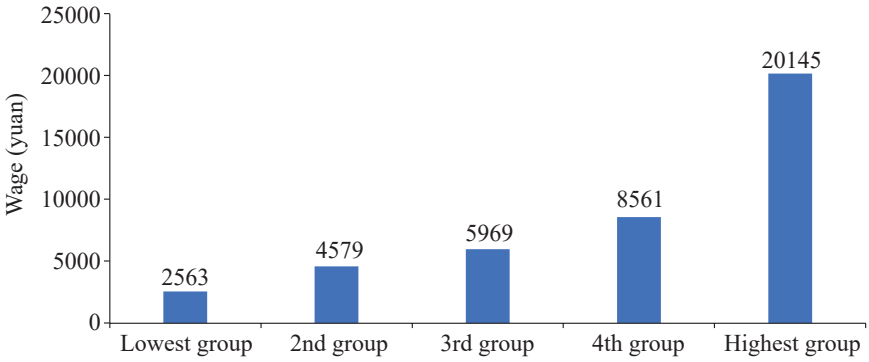


Fig. 2. Average monthly wages by quintile

Notes: Wages refer to the actual take-home pay for the previous month (including in-kind benefits), after income tax, social insurance, and housing fund contributions.

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The age-wage curve follows a typical inverted U-shaped pattern (Figure 3). Wages increase with age, peak around 40-44, and then gradually decline. A notable divergence between men's and women's wage trajectories begins after age 25. At this point, men's wages continue to rise steadily, while women's salaries essentially stagnate. Between ages 25-29 and 40-44, men's wages increase by 20%, while women's wages grow by only 5%. Notably, this disparity widens the gender wage ratio from 0.99 at ages 20-24 to 1.17 at ages 25-29, and further to 1.34 at ages 40-44.

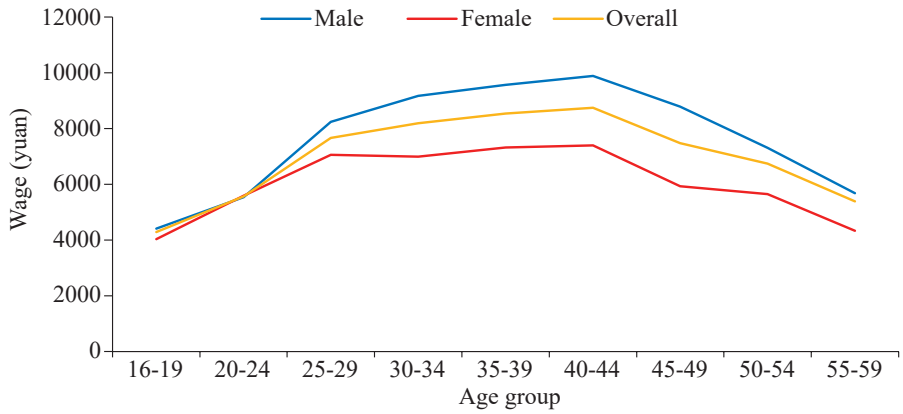


Fig. 3. Age-wage profiles by gender

Individuals with higher education have a clear advantage in the labor market (Table 10). The average monthly salary for those with a bachelor's degree or higher is 10,706 yuan, nearly double that of workers with a junior high education or less (5,379 yuan). This figure is also almost 60% higher than the salary for those with a junior college or vocational degree. In comparison, workers with a high school or junior college (vocational) degree earn only 19% and 25% more, respectively, than those with a junior high education or less. As higher education has expanded, the wage premium for a junior college degree has decreased, while the premium for a bachelor's degree or higher remains significant.

Migrants moving from one city to another (inter-city migrants) also show a competitive advantage. Their average monthly salary is 9,275 yuan, which is 18% higher than that of local residents and 41% higher than that of rural-to-urban migrants. This advantage is partly due to their human capital: 44.41% of inter-city migrants have a bachelor's degree or higher, a proportion similar to that of local residents (43.69%) and much higher than that of rural-to-urban migrants (15.16%). Their advantage also stems from their industry distribution and employment-matching efficiency. This group is more likely to work in information transmission, software and IT services, and scientific research and technical services, which have significantly higher average monthly salaries of 11,408 yuan and 10,864 yuan, respectively. Furthermore, they show a greater tendency to enter market-based sectors, which typically exhibit higher employment matching efficiency (Table 11).

The disadvantaged position of rural-to-urban migrants is also reflected in their concentration in lower-paying industries. Many in this group are self-employed, and self-employed workers have an average monthly salary of only 5,976 yuan, which is 22% lower than the average for all workers. The primary industries employing rural-to-urban migrants, such as accommodation and catering

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TABLE 10. Average monthly wages by group (yuan)

Grouping	Male	Female	Total
Level of education			
Junior secondary school and below	6042	4483	5379
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	7027	5138	6384
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	7496	5701	6709
Bachelor's degree and above	12037	9267	10706
Type of migrants			
Local residents	8724	6808	7889
Inter-city migration	9947	8494	9275
Rural-urban migration	7299	5523	6570
Employment identity			
Employees of government agencies or public institutions	9574	8106	8884
Corporate employees	8079	6469	7361
Company owners	14642	11009	13581
Self-employed	6225	5569	5976

TABLE 11. Average monthly wages by industry (yuan)

Industry	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery	8205	5932	7095
Mining	6265	4383	5565
Manufacturing	8364	6566	7751
Electricity, gas, and water supply	7287	7261	7280
Construction	8176	7817	8096
Wholesale and retail trade	7713	6051	6803
Transport, storage, and postal services	7261	7129	7233
Accommodation and food services	6838	4715	5813
Information, software, and IT services	12946	8206	11408
Finance	10943	8922	9834
Real estate	7530	5431	6641
Leasing and business services	8676	8519	8599
Scientific and technical services	11272	10202	10864
Utilities and public facilities management	8980	3595	6215
Personal and other services	6351	4878	5587
Education	8709	6973	7542
Health and social work	10847	7584	8845
Culture, sports, and entertainment	9068	6925	8017
Public administration and social security	6802	5473	6271

and residential, repair and other services, also have low average wages, at only 5,813 yuan and 5,587 yuan, respectively—24% and 27% below the overall average.

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5. Education

Education is a critical component of human capital. The fifth round of the China Urban Labor Survey shows (Table 12) that the average years of education for the population aged 16-59 (excluding full-time students) is 12.65 years. For the employed population, it is 13.04 years, while for the non-employed population (excluding full-time students), it is 11.36 years. The proportion of employed individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher is 35.31%, which is 19.35 percentage points higher than the proportion among the unemployed.

TABLE 12. Educational attainment of the employed and unemployed populations

Grouping	Employed population					Non-employed population				
	average length of education (years)	Level of education(%)				average length of education (years)	Level of education(%)			
		Junior secondary school and below	Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	Junior college/ associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	Bachelor's degree and above		Junior secondary school and below	Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	Junior college/ associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	Bachelor's degree and above
Gender										
Male	12.94	28.79	21.11	17.79	32.30	11.61	42.30	21.63	15.64	20.43
Female	13.18	28.06	14.42	18.23	39.29	11.28	42.82	28.46	14.23	14.49
Age group										
16-24 years	14.22	8.54	19.89	31.42	40.14	13.10	26.95	16.07	26.43	30.55
25-34 years	14.29	15.26	14.65	22.63	47.46	13.66	21.82	15.34	22.67	40.16
35-44 years	13.62	24.09	15.61	19.47	40.83	12.64	28.15	24.89	19.90	27.06
45-54 years	11.47	45.11	23.26	10.86	20.78	10.15	54.40	27.61	11.47	6.52
55-59 years	10.26	55.18	25.33	8.86	10.62	10.29	53.33	35.07	8.19	3.42
Type of migrants										
Local residents	14.00	16.96	19.80	19.56	43.69	11.61	38.39	30.55	16.09	14.98
Inter-city migration	13.82	21.72	14.08	19.79	44.41	12.78	29.21	25.03	14.06	31.70
Rural-urban migration	10.85	53.79	16.96	14.09	15.16	9.73	64.78	14.43	9.68	11.11
Total	13.04	28.47	18.23	17.98	35.31	11.36	42.69	26.77	14.58	15.96

Notes: The "non-employed population" includes the unemployed, homemakers, and retirees, but not full-time students.

A steady intergenerational rise in educational attainment is evident. Employed individuals aged 25-34 have an average of 14.29 years of education, about four years more than those aged 55-59. Among the 25-34 age group, 47.46% have a bachelor's degree or higher, which is 36.84 percentage points higher than the 55-59 age group.

Women's educational attainment is increasing and has surpassed men's. Among the employed population, the average years of education for women is 13.18, which is 0.24 years higher than for men. The proportion of employed women with a bachelor's degree or higher is also about

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7 percentage points higher than for men. Among the non-employed, women's average years of education are slightly lower than men's.

The educational level of rural-to-urban migrants is substantially lower than that of local residents and inter-city migrants. Among the employed, they average only 10.85 years of schooling, and a striking 53.79% have a junior high school education or less—figures significantly worse than those for the other two groups.

The educational requirements for different industries vary (Figure 4). The industries with the highest average years of education are education, scientific research and technical services, information transmission, software and IT services, health and social work, and finance. All have an average of over 15 years of education, and more than 64% of their workers have a bachelor's degree or higher. The industries with the lowest average years of education are accommodation and catering (10.50 years) and residential, repair, and other services (10.80 years). Over 50% of workers in these two industries have a junior high school education or less.

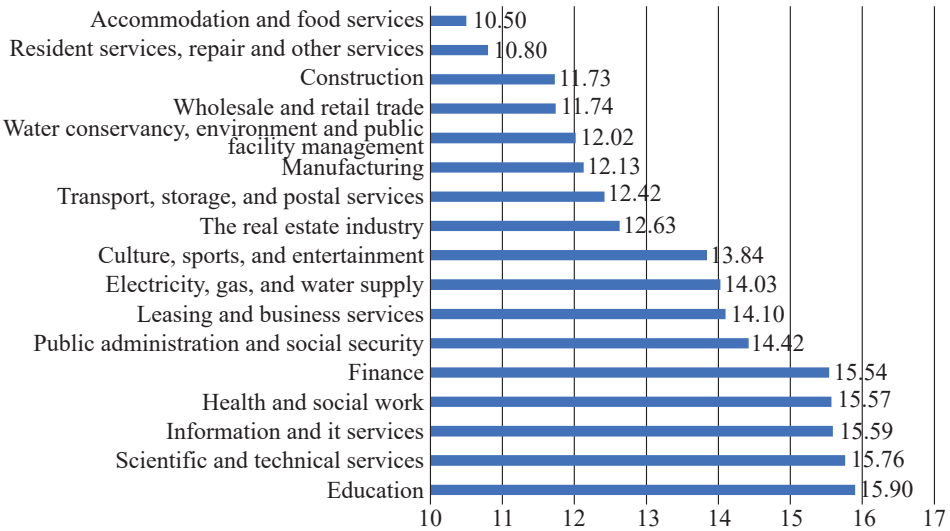


Fig. 4. Average years of education for the employed population in key industries

The educational level of the employed population is closely related to their occupation. Workers in professional and technical roles, as well as those in Party organizations, government bodies, mass organizations, and social organizations, have a high level of education, with an average of over 15 years of education. The proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher is 57.78% and 68.90%, respectively. In contrast, those in production and manufacturing, and in social production and life service roles, have lower educational levels.

The average educational level also differs significantly by employer type. Workers in government agencies and public institutions, state-owned and state-holding enterprises, and foreign-invested enterprises have higher average years of education (15.74, 14.29, and 14.82 years, respectively), with the proportion of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher at 68.18%, 49.69%, and 56.73%. Non-agricultural self-employed individuals and freelancers have much lower levels of education, with average years of education at 10.35 and 9.74, and the proportion with a

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bachelor's degree or higher at 8.20% and 8.14%, respectively. For these two groups, 59.76% and 67.95% have a junior high education or less.

By employment status, the self-employed (without employees) have a low educational level, with an average of only 10.06 years of education, and 63.74% have a junior high education or less. Formal staff in government or public institutions have the highest level, with an average of 16.46 years of education and 79.08% having a bachelor's degree or higher. For regular employees and employers (including those with temporary employees), the average years of education are 13.24 and 12.38, respectively, and the proportions with a bachelor's degree or higher are 35.65% and 28.10%, respectively.

6. Social Security

Social security serves as a fundamental policy instrument for redistribution and the advancement of equitable prosperity. Its core components encompass pension, medical (including maternity), unemployment, and work-injury insurance, as well as the housing provident fund. The pension system consists of a three-pillar structure. The first pillar, basic old-age insurance, is the main component, with a coverage rate of about 80%. Table 13 shows that coverage is significantly higher for middle-aged and older groups (45 and up) than for younger groups. The second and third pillars—enterprise annuities/occupational pensions and commercial old-age insurance—serve as supplementary pensions, with coverage rates of 4.99% and 3.69%, respectively. Supplementary pension coverage follows an inverted U-shaped curve with age, indicating that younger people are more willing to take up supplementary pensions than older adults. The coverage of supplementary pensions also increases with educational attainment, meaning more highly educated groups have more adequate retirement savings.

Still, 9.61% of individuals have no pension coverage. Among young people aged 16-24, those with a junior high education or less, and rural-to-urban migrants, the non-coverage rate exceeds 15%, highlighting the urgent need to expand social security coverage for vulnerable groups.

The medical security system has three tiers: the primary tier (basic medical insurance for urban employees and urban/rural residents), the supplementary tier (primarily commercial medical insurance), and the safety-net tier (medical assistance). The coverage rates for basic medical insurance among urban employees and urban/rural residents are 79.32% and 94.63%, respectively, and play a fundamental role in meeting basic medical needs and improving public health. Table 14 shows that women and older people have higher basic medical insurance coverage than men and younger people. Highly educated groups also have significantly higher coverage of employee medical insurance. Commercial medical insurance coverage is below 10%. Younger, more educated groups are more willing to purchase commercial medical insurance.

Currently, 8.07% of the population lacks any form of health insurance. The non-coverage rate exceeds 10% for young people aged 16-34, those with a junior high school education or less, and rural-to-urban migrants. This pattern closely matches the groups with inadequate pension coverage, highlighting the need for further efforts to achieve universal coverage in the social security system.

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Coverage for unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and the housing provident fund is 63.42%, 63.66%, and 49.23%, respectively. Coverage tends to be higher among young adults aged 25-44, people with higher education, and both local residents and inter-city migrants. In contrast, coverage is lower among older individuals, those with less education, and rural-to-urban migrants.

TABLE 13. Coverage rates for various pension plans (%)

Grouping	Basic pension insurance for urban employees	Pension insurance for urban residents	New rural social pension insurance	Enterprise / occupational annuities	Commercial pension insurance	Non-coverage ratio
Gender						
Male	78.85	77.49	87.78	5.73	3.52	10.22
Female	84.72	75.95	71.72	4.24	3.85	8.99
Age group						
16-24 years	67.69	35.47	32.61	6.63	1.92	36.52
25-34 years	78.12	71.92	72.14	5.47	3.56	13.64
35-44 years	78.29	86.40	81.29	7.63	5.28	9.02
45-54 years	74.29	89.03	84.67	6.06	4.81	8.28
55-64 years	88.20	71.31	81.76	3.24	2.58	7.12
65 years and above	97.61	62.24	80.31	1.50	1.63	3.35
Level of education						
Junior secondary school and below	65.39	77.12	80.97	0.66	1.71	15.01
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	83.90	82.64	79.72	2.97	3.50	7.99
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	89.85	76.92	54.03	3.94	3.71	7.46
Bachelor's degree and above	95.53	62.99	57.70	10.92	6.82	4.27
Type of migrants						
Local residents	91.02	74.39	73.87	5.36	4.06	6.09
Inter-city migration	81.67	67.32	100.00	4.91	5.48	10.55
Rural-urban migration	52.05	100.00	79.78	3.03	1.66	19.63
Total	81.65	76.61	78.95	4.99	3.69	9.61

Notes:

Coverage rate of basic pension insurance for urban employees = number of participants ÷ total number of employed or retired individuals aged 16 and above (excluding full-time students).

Coverage rate of basic pension insurance for urban residents = number of participants ÷ total number of unemployed urban individuals aged 16 and above, excluding retirees and those already enrolled in employee pension insurance.

Coverage rate of new rural social pension insurance = number of participants ÷ total number of unemployed rural individuals aged 16 and above, excluding retirees and those already enrolled in employee pension insurance.

Coverage rate of enterprise/occupational annuities = number of participants ÷ total number of individuals enrolled in employee pension insurance.

Coverage rate of commercial pension insurance = number of participants ÷ total number of individuals aged 16 and above (excluding full-time students).

Non-coverage rate: number of individuals without any pension insurance ÷ total number of individuals aged 16 and above (excluding full-time students).

All calculations exclude active military personnel.

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TABLE 14. Coverage rates for various medical and other social security programs (%)

Grouping	Medical insurance				Unem-ployment insurance	Work injury insurance	Housing provident fund
	Basic medical insurance for urban employees	Basic medical insurance for urban/rural residents	Commercial medical insurance	Medical insurance non-coverage rate			
Gender							
Male	76.84	94.19	9.17	8.46	62.10	62.74	48.97
Female	82.06	95.05	9.40	7.68	65.18	64.89	49.56
Age group							
16-24 years	67.19	88.04	7.74	20.34	57.92	57.79	45.59
25-34 years	76.66	90.19	8.94	13.45	68.53	68.34	55.48
35-44 years	76.79	93.54	12.36	9.02	68.56	68.79	54.18
45-54 years	71.09	95.58	9.42	8.28	57.22	57.80	40.58
55-64 years	84.30	93.55	5.50	7.12	47.92	48.95	37.43
65 years and above	95.13	90.17	3.24	3.35	8.24	9.59	0.00
Level of education							
Junior secondary school and below	61.88	97.14	6.94	10.62	29.79	31.83	14.95
Senior secondary school (including vocational secondary)	81.30	93.18	6.53	7.38	56.36	55.73	36.78
Junior college/associate degree (including higher vocational programs)	88.28	88.10	10.36	7.28	76.27	75.06	57.36
Bachelor's degree and above	94.50	82.03	16.06	4.06	87.71	87.70	79.23
Type of migrants							
Local residents	88.46	94.45	10.06	5.00	72.94	72.14	59.29
Inter-city migration	80.56	91.08	11.34	9.50	69.55	70.18	56.40
Rural-urban migration	49.86	95.92	5.83	17.10	42.49	44.59	26.81
Total	79.32	94.63	9.28	8.07	63.42	63.66	49.23

Notes:

Basic medical insurance for urban and rural residents includes both urban resident medical insurance and the new rural cooperative medical scheme.

Coverage rate of basic medical insurance for urban employees = number of participants ÷ total number of employed or retired individuals.

Coverage rate of basic medical insurance for urban and rural residents = number of participants ÷ total number of unemployed individuals, excluding retirees and those already enrolled in employee medical insurance.

Coverage rate of commercial medical insurance = number of participants ÷ total population.

Non-coverage rate: number of individuals without any medical insurance ÷ total population.

Coverage rate of unemployment insurance, work injury insurance, and housing provident fund = number of participants ÷ total number of employed, non-retired individuals aged 16 and above (excluding full-time students).

All calculations exclude active military personnel.

7. Satisfaction

Since its first round in 2001, the China Urban Labor Survey has included several indicators to measure subjective well-being. Respondents rate their satisfaction with their current life and their job (or non-employment situation) using a five-point scale: "very satisfied," "satisfied," "neutral," "dissatisfied," or "very dissatisfied." To examine the impact of including a middle

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option, a randomized experiment was conducted in the fourth round in 2016 and continued in the fifth round. Respondents born in odd-numbered months were given the five-option scale, while those born in even-numbered months were given a four-option scale that excluded the "neutral" option.

Table 15 shows the distribution of life and work satisfaction. Overall, residents in the surveyed cities reported high levels of satisfaction. On the five-option scale, 71.77% and 69.26% of residents reported being "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their life and work, respectively, while only 5.61% and 6.29% were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied." A comparison of the five-option and four-option results shows that the neutral option has minimal effect on the percentages choosing the extreme categories of "very satisfied" or "very dissatisfied." When the neutral option is removed, about two-thirds of respondents choose "satisfied" and roughly one-third choose "dissatisfied."

TABLE 15. Distribution of life and work satisfaction (%)

Satisfaction rating	Life satisfaction		Work satisfaction	
	5 Options	4 Options	5 Options	4 Options
Very satisfied	15.05	15.79	13.55	14.58
Satisfied	56.72	71.40	55.71	72.28
Neutral	22.62	-	24.45	-
Dissatisfied	4.85	11.77	5.59	12.10
Very dissatisfied	0.76	1.05	0.70	1.03
Sum	100	100	100	100

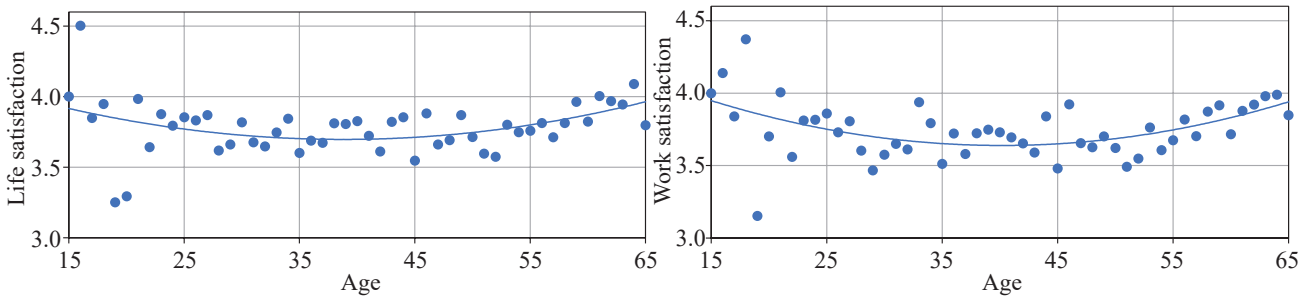


Fig. 5. Lifecycle characteristics of life and job satisfaction

Notes: Only responses from the five-point scale were used. "Very satisfied," "Satisfied," "Neutral," "Dissatisfied," and "Very dissatisfied" were scored from 5 to 1, respectively.

Life satisfaction often follows a clear lifecycle pattern, typically described as a U-shaped curve related to age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Easterlin, 2021). Some studies, however, point to a wave-like pattern instead. Our data are consistent with an overal U-shaped age-satisfaction profile (see Figure 5). Young people tend to feel optimistic, driven by high expectations for the future and excitement for new experiences, which boosts their well-being. As they age, however, the pressures of work, financial stress, and family responsibilities take a toll, pushing satisfaction to its lowest point around age 40. Later in life, as people better manage stress, face fewer challenges, and place less emphasis on material goals, their happiness tends to rise again.

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8. Concluding Remarks

China's economy is undergoing rapid structural changes, reflecting both the global trends typical of economies transitioning from middle- to high-income status and aspects unique to China's development path. These shifts are significantly reshaping the labor market. The recently completed fifth round of the China Urban Labor Survey offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of the critical changes shaping the labor market and the broader economy. It provides an essential foundation for understanding and navigating the development of China's labor market in this new era.

Launched at the start of the 21st century, the survey has spanned five rounds over more than two decades, capturing the most transformative period in China's labor market. Researchers have used it to explore how structural changes affect individual workers, identify labor market patterns unique to China, and advance both the theory and practice of labor economics (Du et al., 2017; Qu et al., 2022). By rigorously tracking labor market dynamics and household welfare through standardized surveys, this work not only fulfills an urgent need for theoretical and policy development in labor economics but also embodies the vital mission of researchers to contribute to national progress.

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