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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A city of two tales: Educational gradients of discrimination experiences among internal migrants in Beijing, China

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Abstract

Drawing on 127 qualitative in-depth interviews in Beijing, China in 2015, we examine the similarities and differences in discrimination experiences among internal migrants across educational backgrounds. While institutional discrimination remains a significant barrier for both university-educated and lower-educated migrants, findings reveal a salient educational differential in the experiences of social discrimination. The reduction in social discrimination enjoyed by university-educated migrants arises from a shared class identity between them and the locals due to similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, results show a divide among migrants across education and socioeconomic status. In an attempt to distance themselves from their fellows of lower socioeconomic status, university-educated migrants and migrants of higher socioeconomic status turn towards in-group discrimination, based on perceived differentials in skills and entitlements to Beijing's resources. This study highlights the importance of unpacking the nuanced patterns and pathways across educational and socioeconomic heterogeneities in examining migrants' discrimination experiences.

KEYWORDS
China, discrimination, education, hukou, internal migrants

1 | INTRODUCTION

Following the government's relaxation of the migration restrictions, China has witnessed a dramatic increase in internal migration since the early 1980s. The country's migrant population reached 244 million at the end of 2017, which represented sizable growth (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Migrants, particularly those from less developed or rural areas, move to pursue job or education opportunities in the major migrant-receiving communities, which offer more promising economic opportunities and better-established infrastructural amenities than in their places of origin (Liang & White, 1996).

Despite the rapid increase in internal migration, China's highly restrictive residential registration system (*hukou*) constrains migrants from moving their legal residency, even after years of living in the receiving communities. Since *hukou* is associated with various social benefits, those without a local *hukou* often contend with hardships and uncertainty (Shambaugh, 2008). They are referred to as the 'floating population' in both the academic and public discourse with regard to their rootless and unstable living situations (Liang & Ma, 2004). Even those migrants who are able to obtain a local *hukou* may still face discrimination from local residents and experience grave emotional strains in their daily lives due to the cultural hierarchies across regions in China (Chang, 2009; Davin, 1998; Jacka, 2005). Not only do migrant workers tend to have less human capital, in the form of education, skills and work experiences that lead to economic rewards and prestige, than local residents, they also face employment regulations implemented to protect local residents from competition with migrants. As a result, migrants are often left to fill physically demanding and low-skilled occupations (Mu & Yeung, 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017). A lack of cultural capital, such as limited mastery of Mandarin and deficient knowledge of urban

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lifestyles, adds to the difficulties when rural migrants try to navigate the institutional and social systems of the receiving cities (Choi & Peng, 2016). Often burdened with the stigma of being the 'second-class citizens', migrants, particularly those from rural origins and with lower education and socioeconomic status, face obstacles to career advancement and meaningful social integration (Zhang & Wu, 2017). Tong et al. (2022) show that even though the local residents' educational backgrounds and their social contact with migrants alleviated their hostility toward migrants, these factors are limited in effecting integration policies such as loosening up requirements for granting a local *hukou*.

Recent years have witnessed rising diversity in the motivations and socioeconomic profiles of internal migrants in China (Mu & Yeung, 2018, 2020). There are growing populations of migrants who are from urban origins, better educated and with more established socioeconomic status (Fan, 2002). While previous studies on China's internal migrants have focused on low-skilled migrants from rural areas, integration and discrimination experiences may differ greatly across educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and the rural–urban divide, as migrants may be differently resourced and constrained in negotiating and navigating their material and cultural resources to the demand of the norms and lifeways in the receiving cities. For example, while low-skilled rural migrants may mainly focus on fast wealth accumulation, high-skilled or urban-origin migrants may be relocating to fully embrace the lifestyles of the receiving communities or just as motivated to assimilate to urban lifestyles as it is to focus on careers and wealth accumulation (Chang, 2009; Fan & Li, 2002; Gaetano & Jacka, 2013; Mu & Yeung, 2018, 2020, 2023; Roberts, 2002). Diverse educational backgrounds among migrants may also affect how they are exposed to and react to cosmopolitan and modern lifestyles, which are often prevalent in major migrant-receiving communities (Jacka, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008). Thus, better-educated migrants may be better equipped with the human, social and cultural capital that may render their integration and discrimination experiences different from their lower-skilled and less-educated counterparts.

2 | THEORETICAL ISSUES

Migration is a process involving rational decision-making, where people from areas with low wages and limited job opportunities migrate to destination cities with high wages and more job opportunities (Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). This rational perspective of migration emphasizes the need for migrants to weigh the costs and benefits of living and working in destination cities compared to remaining in their areas of origin. Among the costs involved in migration, difficulties faced by migrants in integrating and assimilating into their destination cities have been particularly pronounced. Migrants are often trapped in temporary, low-skilled positions (Carballo & Nerurkar, 2001) and endure poor living and working conditions in their destination cities in a bid to spend less and earn more money (Mu & Yeung, 2018; Wang, 2003), or due to limited job opportunities to migrants (Zhang & Wu, 2017). Moreover, migrants are often seen as an 'out-group' in the destination cities and have a hard time developing meaningful social relationships with the locals (Hendriks et al., 2016). Faced with these economic and social difficulties, migrants often fall victim to mental health problems such as neurosis and depression (Carballo & Nerurkar, 2001) and report lower levels of happiness than their local counterparts (Cheng et al., 2013; Hendriks et al., 2016).

Given the rising diversity of migration motivations and migrants' socioeconomic profiles, the experiences of discrimination may largely differ across the educational and socioeconomic divide. Particularly, aside from labour migration, there also exists a subgroup of migrants that move to pursue better educational opportunities. Different from their labour migrant counterparts, especially those with low-skilled backgrounds, student migrants often possess significant socio-economic privileges. They move to increase their long-term employ-ability or to achieve upward social mobility (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Waters, 2005). Some of them were also motivated to move out of areas with limited educational prospects and take advantage of better educational opportunities elsewhere, which was often supported by their well-off family socioeconomic status (Waters, 2012). These findings suggest that student migration may exacerbate existing social inequality among migrants from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

Therefore, migrants of various educational backgrounds may have different lived experiences of being a 'migrant' as a result of their socioeconomic origins and profiles. Considering that widespread discrimination against migrants often involves the positioning of migrants as an inferior 'out-group' (Hendriks et al., 2016), it is likely that migrants who are socioeconomically comparable to locals would be considered as part of or more related to the 'in-group' of their destination cities. As such, it is likely that better-educated migrants would experience and perceive discrimination against migrants in a markedly different manner from their fellow migrants who are lower-educated and low-skilled.

The rising sociodemographic diversity among migrants highlights the importance of understanding migrants' adaptation and discrimination experiences using the intersectionality framework. Given that an analysis on the basis of one factor alone may obscure the various aspects of discrimination, intersectionality, which has its roots in black feminism and critical race theories, seeks to empower individuals who are multiply marginalized (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1990; Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Hossin, 2020). Three fundamental components of intersectionality were noted by Else-Quest and Hyde (2016): first, there are various socially constructed categories that define people, such as migration status and education, and these social categories are linked with each other; second, inequality and power are correlated with membership in any of the social categories; third, social categories' meanings are flexible and dynamic as they are determined by both individual and contextual characteristics. By capturing the intersectional nature of discrimination, we get to take into account how people's intersecting identities drawing on their migration status and educational credentials shape the power and discrimination systems (Green et al., 2017).

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Migrants, uprooting from their natal social environments, are compelled to negotiate and transform the cultures and lifestyles that are familiar and natal to them to the demands of the new destinations, namely, the often urban, cosmopolitan and economically developed receiving cities (Li, 2013; Xie & Reay, 2020). Yet, given their diverse memberships in various social categories, they are differently positioned in such transformations. For lower-educated and low-skilled migrants from rural origins, lacking both material and cultural resources to navigate the receiving cities, their status of marginalization is often racialized, stigmatized and dehumanized into their labouring migrant bodies (Han, 2010). University-educated migrants with rural origins may have more complex, counteracting and intertwined experiences in navigating the urban lifestyles. While their university education lends a pathway toward upward mobility regarding material outcomes, the disjuncture they experience when trying to link their rural lifestyles to the urban middle-class norms, generates emotional burdens and overwhelming challenges (Li, 2013; Reay, 2005; Xie & Reay, 2020). Migrants from urban origins may experience transformations that are due to the institutional constraints stemming from their lack of nativity and the economic disparities between the sending and the receiving cities (Mu & Yeung, 2018).

The intersectional profiles of migrants also indicate the importance of understanding their discrimination experiences from different angles. While institutional discrimination may be more explicitly identified and exerted to migrants, social discrimination can be subtle given the nuanced, multidimensional and formative natures of urban middle-class ideals and lifestyles (Bonjour & Chauvin, 2018; Xiong, 2015). There may also be potential intragroup discrimination as those migrants who aspire to climb the ladder of upward mobility may be motivated to dismiss and distinguish from their social roots, to showcase and corroborate their success of transformations and adaptations to the demand of the new cosmopolitan environment in the receiving cities (Xie & Reay, 2020).

3 | THE RESEARCH SETTING

China has been experiencing the largest rural-to-urban migration in human history (Myerson et al., 2010). Rural residents migrate to urban centres at a rapid pace, often in search for higher wages and better job opportunities. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrants contribute greatly to the economic development of their receiving cities. In Beijing alone, the gross domestic product created by migrant workers measures up to 32% of the city's economic aggregate (Lu & Xia, 2016).

Despite being important contributors to China's economy, rural-to-urban migrants experience challenges when integrating into their receiving cities and are heavily discriminated against by urban residents. Rural-to-urban migrants often have difficulty adapting to the fast-paced city environment and the cultural values such as cosmopolitanism and individualism that prevail in the receiving cities, in comparison to close familial ties and conservatism they are more familiar with (Gui et al., 2012). Urban residents also often stigmatize rural-to-urban migrants based on their unruly appearances, accented dialects, and as potential threats to public health and social orders (Guan, 2011). As a result, it is often difficult for rural-to-urban migrants to develop a sense of belonging despite working in the receiving communities for an extended period of time (Zhong et al., 2016).

China's *hukou* system has further institutionalized the discrimination experienced by migrants, particularly those from a rural origin. The *hukou* system ensures that only individuals with a local *hukou* have access to benefits associated with employment, health, and education (Wang & Fan, 2006; Zhang & Treiman, 2013). Moreover, it is highly demanding and time-consuming to transfer one's *hukou* status from a rural to an urban one, or from a nonlocal to a local one (Treiman, 2011). This means that rural-to-urban migrants often retain their rural and nonlocal *hukou* status despite working and living in the receiving communities for a long time. The restrictions imposed by the *hukou* system also means that rural-to-urban migrants have limited access to jobs in the market. Most job relegated to rural-to-urban workers are low-skilled. Specifically, 82% of rural-to-urban migrants in Beijing are employed in five occupational sectors—construction, hotel and restaurant, wholesale and retail, manufacture, and domestic and other service sectors (Lin et al., 2011). The pervasive negative stereotypes associated with low-skilled jobs means that rural-to-urban migrants, and sometimes migrants as a whole, are often perceived by urban locals as a monolithic group of 'poor, dirty, uneducated and even uncivilized' individuals (Zhang et al., 2014). Such stereotypes are further perpetuated by public media where rural-to-urban migrants are frequently blamed for rising crime rates and social instability (Lin et al., 2011).

As a result, rural-to-urban migrants are not only unable to get equal access to public and social benefits and opportunities in their urban receiving cities, the rural *hukou* status also effectively turns into a social identity marker such that urban locals and rural migrants are distinguished into two social classes with the latter suffering from social marginalization (Zhang et al., 2014). Thus, rural-to-urban migrants face both institutional restrictions as a result of their rural *hukou* status and social stigma as a result of pervasive negative stereotypes associated with such a status. Being on the receiving end of such discrimination takes a toll on the health of rural-to-urban migrants. Past research has found that rural-to-urban migrants who are discriminated against suffer from lower mental health status and higher levels of psychological distress than their urban and rural nonmigrant counterparts (Chen, 2011; Deng & Law, 2020; Li et al., 2009).

Extant literature on China's internal migrants focuses extensively on the discrimination and the negative social and health consequences faced by migrants of rural origins. Due to the regional disparities in educational resources and rising geographical mobilities in China, migrants' socioeconomic profiles and motivations to move have become increasingly diverse (Mu & Yeung, 2018). For example, there are growing proportions of migrants who are of urban origins and with decent socioeconomic backgrounds and who aim to pursue

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long-term integration in the receiving communities such as by pursuing better university education.

More importantly, in the purpose of attracting talents and optimizing population structure in the major migrant-receiving cities, China's migration governance systems tend to be highly segmented (Fan, 2002). While those low-skilled migrants from rural origins are objectified for their cheap labour and are perceived as outsiders and second-class citizens in the receiving communities, their better-educated counterparts often receive state-sponsored resources that facilitate their *hukou* conversion and permanent settlements (Zhang, 2018). In response to the increasing social discontent with *hukou* segregation, in the first decade of the 21st century, several provinces began to gradually erase the distinction between agricultural and nonagricultural forms of registration and to slacken the restrictions for acquiring local *hukou* in migrant-receiving cities (Zhang, 2018). However, this shift towards a neoliberal governing mode has been highly imbalanced across regions, in the name of 'a differentiated approach to *hukou* acquisition' (*cha bie hua luo hu*). According to this differentiated approach, while requirements for *hukou* acquisition have been loosened up in smaller cities, in extra-large cities such as Beijing, population sizes are still strictly controlled, and point-based systems for *hukou* acquisition have been established and refined since 2014 (State Council, 2014).

Thus, for an extra-large city such as Beijing where differentiated migration governance prevails, it is particularly important to segment university-educated migrants from the stereotyped migrant population because obtaining a university education provides 'both the market signal and the negotiation power in a competitive labour market' (Xiao & Bian, 2017). A university-educated migrant, even if from rural origins, will likely obtain middle- to upper-class status by taking up white-collar jobs—a marked difference from other rural-to-urban migrants who are relegated to low-skilled, temporary jobs that pay poor wages. Moreover, obtaining a university education is one of the few pathways for people with rural origins to overcome the *hukou*-based institutional barrier by converting to an urban *hukou* (Wu & Treiman, 2004; Zhang & Treiman, 2013). Thus, the negative stereotypes attached to the rural-to-urban migrant population are often associated with low-skilled job status (Zhang et al., 2014). Meantime, university-educated rural-to-urban migrants who retain their rural *hukou* status are still restricted in access to certain state-sector jobs (Xiao & Bian, 2017). As such, university-educated migrants are likely to have a different experience of discrimination compared to their lower-educated counterparts as they inhabit a distinct and more complex socioeconomic class in universities and their workplaces.

This study seeks to examine differences in the experiences of discrimination between university-educated migrants and lower-educated migrants. Findings in this study will contribute to the existing literature on migrants' discrimination and integration experiences by applying an intersectionality perspective and moving beyond the view that migrants, particularly those with rural origins, are a monolithic group with singular experiences of discrimination. This nuanced perspective will be useful in informing effective group-specific policies that may alleviate discrimination against migrants in China.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

We rely on qualitative analyses, using data from 127 in-depth interviews conducted in Beijing, China from May to July 2015. The interviewees include both men and women, and migrants and nonmigrants for comparison purposes. Interviewees' ages range from 20 to 50, a prime age range for pursuit of personal goals through education and career development.

To capture migrants' heterogeneous skill qualifications and educational credentials, we include interviewees with various educational backgrounds. We did not use occupation to indicate the skill profiles because housewives and college students constitute a sizable proportion of migrants, and their potential skill profiles cannot be captured by their status of being unemployed. One extra benefit is that education not only captures skill qualifications, it also reflects varying migration motivations, socioeconomic status, and cultural preferences, all of which relate to the experiences of social integration and discrimination.

Specifically, we include all subgroups across migration status, education, and gender. In all, we have 61 male interviewees and 66 female interviewees. 47 of them have an education of college or above, 49 have a senior high or associate college education, and 31 have an education of junior high or below. Migration status was determined by whether the interviewee had a non-Beijing *hukou* and whether the *hukou* was rural or urban, both at age 12, to reflect their social origins and mobility trajectories. Based on this definition, 36 interviewees are urban locals, 21 are urban migrants, 13 are rural locals,[1] and 57 are rural migrants. Among urban migrants, 18 have an education of college or above with 17 of whom holding a Beijing *hukou* at the time of the interview, while among the 3 who have an education of associate college or lower, none converted to a Beijing *hukou*. Among rural migrants, 14 have an education of college or above with 9 of whom holding a Beijing *hukou* at the time of the interview, while among the 43 who have an education of associate college or lower, none converted to a Beijing *hukou*. This is consistent with patterns shown in the extant literature, that is, besides the division between an urban or rural origin, one's education plays a crucial role in shaping the possibilities to convert to a Beijing *hukou* (Fan, 2002; Zhang & Treiman, 2013).

The qualitative study took place in Beijing, one of the major migrant-receiving cities in China (Zheng et al., 2009). Interviewees were recruited through public Internet forums, email listservs, and word of mouth. The interviews used semistructured open-ended questions regarding interviewees' feelings, attitudes and experiences in day-to-day lives, jobs and careers, and experiences specific to

[1]We included rural locals as part of the original sampling design to reflect the full spectrum of comparisons across migration status and the rural/urban divide. We did not include rural locals in data analyses.

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migration. Interviews lasted from one to 2 h and were recorded and transcribed. The authors analyzed the qualitative data following a dynamic coding process, that is, the inductive analysis (Reczek et al., 2016). We coded and developed themes around how discrimination and integration experiences were perceived differently by migrants of various educational backgrounds. Then we established categories and subcategories that are conceptually connected to the relationship between education and discrimination. These themes are used to organize the results.

5 | RESULTS

Qualitative interviews show that there are both similarities and differences in the experiences of discrimination between university-educated and lower-educated internal migrants. Both university-educated and lower-educated internal migrants face institutional discrimination due to *hukou* restrictions before achieving *hukou* conversion. However, social discrimination is less often and less intensely experienced by university-educated migrants whose education allows them to distance themselves from the stereotypes that lower-educated and often low-skilled migrants face. Moreover, a clear social divide emerges among internal migrants where the university-educated migrants perceive their lower-educated counterparts as a socially distinct group from themselves. The varied findings across various discrimination outcomes align with the intersectionality perspective in showing *hukou* and education interact and jointly shape migrants' discrimination experiences. Particularly, we find that the interactions between *hukou* and education work differently for various discrimination outcomes.

5.1 | Institutional discrimination

Despite obtaining a higher level of education, university-educated migrants still face institutional discrimination due to their lack of a local *hukou*. Particularly, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* remains a significant barrier when vying for white-collar jobs. Despite obtaining equal educational qualifications as their Beijing-born counterparts, university-educated migrants face institutional restrictions imposed by the *hukou* system during job hunting.

Lili, who was originally from an inland province, moved to Beijing when she was 17 and subsequently, attended one of the best universities in China. We asked about her opinions on the perception that Beijing locals have an advantage when it comes downto housing and education. Lili shared that although she has already converted her *hukou*, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* restricts the job choices that her university-educated friends can take. Particularly, university-educated migrants who have not obtained a Beijing *hukou* are more inclined to take jobs that offer them a *hukou* transfer, even if the job is not the most attractive regarding pay and the fit with their fields of study:

> When I was looking for a job, I noticed that some of my classmates took up jobs they did not particularly want for the sake of obtaining a Beijing *hukou*, this could be a constraint they face during job hunting. But if you already have a Beijing *hukou*, this is not a problem, you can pick a job that you want to do, actually, this [*hukou*] is still an important factor.

Jing, who migrated from a northeastern province after attending medical school, is currently working in Beijing as a doctor in a prestigious hospital. She had a similar experience with her job search. Even for someone with such a specialized professional degree, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* was still a big disadvantage when she was on the job market:

> Even [for job search] in the hospital, Beijing *hukou* is a given priority. If you and your competition have the same educational credentials and your academic results are not outstandingly different, then it [the job] will come down to [the one who is from] Beijing.

This corroborates extant findings in the literature that university-educated migrants who do not obtain a local *hukou* cannot have an equal chance of working in the state sector or receiving equal earnings as their local counterparts (Xiao & Bian, 2017). The persistent labour market discrimination faced by university-educated migrants highlights that without a *hukou* transfer, attaining higher educational qualifications alone is not sufficient for them to fully embrace integration in Beijing.

Apart from restrictions in job choices, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* also means that both university-educated and lower-educated migrants face difficulties in promptly obtaining official documents, registering their children for school, and buying houses and cars. Several interviewees shared that migrants have to go through much more tedious and troublesome procedures to obtain official documents. Jianbing, a graduate from an elite university who was born in an inland province, shared that migrants without a Beijing *hukou* often face difficulties getting official documents such as driving licences and passports:

> When you're trying to do things, let's say you're trying to register for a driving license, if you have a Beijing *hukou*, it's easy to get it done; if you don't have a Beijing *hukou*, you have to go back to your hometown to get it done. It's the same with trying to get your passport.

The same issue with obtaining official documents is also echoed by less-educated migrants. Kun first migrated to Beijing from a northern province when he was 23, and currently works multiple part-time jobs. Kun shared that discrimination against migrants occurs in his daily life, and even hinders the process of obtaining

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official documents like temporary residence permits which are required for migrants:

> [T]he main thing about Beijing is its xenophobia, ostracism, its dislike for outsiders. After all, Beijing has a big population. […] When I first came to Beijing, temporary residence permits were still required. It was difficult to obtain them, for non-locals like us who just came to Beijing, it's practically impossible to obtain. The public service employees don't take us seriously and their attitudes were very poor. I've also interacted with my friends [about this], and the feeling is just not great.

Interviewees also emphasized the difficulty in admitting their children into local public schools due to the lack of a Beijing *hukou*. Hui is a native of an inland province who moved to Beijing after marriage. She is a junior college graduate and currently works in a childcare centre that does not offer insurance benefits. Hui detailed the demanding process of enrolling her child in local public kindergartens:

> After all, my child has to attend kindergarten now. [However,] we can't attend public kindergartens, [especially] can't get admitted to the good ones, [we] can't even get into a primary school. The basic requirements are really demanding. Many types of proof are needed. […] They even require things like house visits. I've heard it's easier [to gain admission] if you stay in public rental housing, but we are not even eligible to apply for public rental housing. […] As migrants, there are many restrictions on the things we can do.

Institutional restrictions stemming from the lack of a Beijing *hukou* are a persistent concern for both university-educated and lower-educated internal migrants. The difference in the level of educational attainment between the two groups does not remove the restrictions on various social and economic benefits that are exclusively provided to Beijing *hukou* holders.

Of course, obtaining a university education is still a potential social equalizer through which migrants may get to land a job that sponsors a transfer to a Beijing *hukou* (Wu & Treiman, 2004). Moreover, given the economic pressures and uncertainties in the receiving cities, some university-educated migrants from rural origins may choose to retain their rural *hukou* status to keep the land they own in their hometowns (Xiao & Bian, 2017). Yet, in practice, the *hukou* conversion can take a long and difficult time, and is highly selective in migrants' educational and professional credentials (Zhang, 2018). Min, who had an associate college education and worked in Beijing as a private primary school teacher for 9 years, had not even dared to think about getting a Beijing *hukou*. She referred to her temporary and nonelite status as the reasons behind such a reservation:

> No (I don't have a Beijing *hukou*), and I haven't even thought about it. It's very difficult and competitive even for PhDs to acquire a Beijing *hukou* nowadays… My job is only contract-based. It means that you are not very stable, you are here when people need you and you leave when they don't need you.

Lower-educated and low-skilled migrants can rarely transfer to a Beijing *hukou* due to their lack of required educational credentials or their limited entry to white-collar jobs that provide *hukou* transfers. All our less-educated interviewees concurred with this experience. Liang, who had worked self-employed in Beijing for more than 20 years, still held a rural *hukou* in his hometown and found a Beijing *hukou* untenable due to his rural origin and a low education of junior high school.

Therefore, the institutional restrictions imposed by the *hukou* system are equally present for both university-educated and lower-educated internal migrants in China, although the former are often better equipped to break through the hurdle and achieve *hukou* conversion. The findings indicate a unique interaction mechanism regarding institutional discrimination. That is, although the influences of education are not effective when migrants hold a nonlocal *hukou*, in comparison to their lower-educated counterparts, highly-educated migrants are still more likely to convert to a local *hukou*, based on which institutional discrimination may be largely alleviated.

5.2 | Social discrimination

As aforementioned, while migrants' integration and adaptations are more straightforward for material capital such as educational and professional credentials, channelling cultural norms and protocols to the receiving cities is much more challenging, which may result in social discrimination. Migrants are discriminated against by locals often because of the negative stereotypes associated with migrants, particularly for lower-educated and rural-origin migrants. Most of the prevailing stereotypes levied against rural-to-urban migrants are images reflecting the physical appearance of working-class migrants and the perceived lack of social sophistication. Yansheng is a native of an adjacent inland province who migrated to Beijing when he was 19. He has worked in the construction sector the whole time thus far, and shared his experiences of being discriminated against by Beijing locals due to his job status and the physical attributes associated with it:

> Beijing locals look down on us migrant workers. But frankly speaking, don't all the apartment buildings they live in only exist because of our work? They look down on us, saying that we are dirty and sloppy. But we can't get clean, our workplaces are surrounded by cement and mud. Beijing locals don't want to do such dirty work, so us migrants come and do them, shouldn't you at least be courteous, but they look

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> down on us instead, this just isn't a good situation. [...] Let's not get started on opinions, we actually don't really interact with Beijing locals, they are obsessed with cleanliness, and they absolutely despise migrant workers, this is the most serious problem.

The prevailing discrimination in migrants' day-to-day lives can lead to poor mental health. This is especially true when locals discriminate against migrants based on pre-existing prejudice that may not be true for the migrants who are the target of such derogatory verbal attacks. One such example is Yating who is a native of an inland province and moved to Beijing after marriage. She has attained an associate college education and is currently a homemaker. Yating shared that her family were looked down upon by their landlord simply for being migrants and got threatened with abrupt rent increases even though her family did not cause any trouble. She consequently suffers emotionally from being treated poorly by the landlord:

> Beijing locals particularly look down on us non-locals. [...] My landlord is one such example. We've been living here for a long time [...] But every time we run into problems, we'd have to solve them ourselves. For example, if the tap is no longer working, we'd have to go buy a new one, we don't even ask for reimbursement or anything like that, but he'd always recklessly mention raising the rent, and how if we're unhappy then we should move. These words are rather hurtful. [...] Just feels particularly unreasonable and cold, [...] He and other landlords living nearby always make comments about how migrants are of low caliber and are all deplorable, they do so even on the streets. [...] I just feel very disrespected.

As shown, the experiences of social discrimination were often closely related to the stereotypes that perceive low-skilled migrants as an inferior group and outsiders. In comparison, university-educated interviewees did not report such experiences of discrimination. They shared that their local peers in universities rarely display discriminatory attitudes, and people in their social circles mostly get along regardless of their areas of origin, by virtue of having similar socioeconomic statuses, or at least shared cultural capital and lifestyles. Xuan, a graduate of an elite university in Beijing, whose parents migrated to Beijing when she was young, has grown up in Beijing since she was a child. She shared that there is a wide variety of people in universities but there is little distinction between the rural-born and the urban-born, as well as between the local and the nonlocal:

> At university, [...]I think there is no need to avoid mentioning the differences between Beijing and other places, because there are not many rural-urban differences [in universities], especially when there are increasingly fewer universities admitting students from rural areas. Also, everyone comes from relatively good family backgrounds, [...] no one feels particularly inferior or anything like that.

Siyuan is a native of a southern province who migrated to Beijing to attend an elite university. She recounted that the prestige of the university itself lends a boost in social status to the students regardless of their *hukou* status:

> I've never experienced discrimination, perhaps because we spend long periods of time in school. Even when we go outside the school, when we mention that we are [Name of the University] students, people think of us positively, there's not much discrimination.

Lei is a university-educated migrant from an inland province who has lived in Beijing since he was 3-year-old. While he still retains his rural *hukou* status, he shared about his complete integration into Beijing to the extent that other people mistake him for a local. He also recounted how he is surrounded by people who are of similar socioeconomic background, and therefore have not experienced discrimination:

> In my case, I've grown up here since I was a child. A lot of my colleagues and friends think I am a Beijing local, and we don't really talk about this. There isn't a need to, what's the use of discussing something like this? There just isn't much discrimination. [...] In my social circle, including my colleagues, everyone is highly educated, perhaps it's due to this higher level of sophistication that I've never encountered discriminatory instances.

Admittedly, for rural-origin migrants, even if they were educationally achieving, the cultural and socioeconomic differences between Beijing and their hometown can still pose a cultural shock and entail pressures to live and thrive. Luyang is a 22-year-old man graduating from a top university. Coming from a rural background, he shared with us the challenges experienced by him during his 4-year stay in Beijing:

> Since I came from the countryside, it was my first time coming to a metropolis like Beijing, and the shock was of course tremendous for a student from a rural area. Beijing is indeed a place where cultural resources are concentrated, and I have great respect for that. But Beijing is too crowded, too many people, and the pace of living is fast. It's very difficult for people like us, who don't have any capital, to survive here.

But still, when we followed up by asking if he had felt excluded or experienced discrimination, he shook his head:

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> No, not at all. I think a lot of things (about discrimination) are anecdotal or gossip, by all kinds of social news, people may inadvertently perpetuate this impression. In fact, we usually do not feel this around us… We heard from the news that Beijing locals and migrants strangle each other, but personally, we did not feel or experience any of this (discrimination).

The interviewees highlight the critical role that socioeconomic status plays in protecting migrants from social discrimination by locals. That is, discrimination is hinged upon one's socioeconomic status and the associated class markers such as decent physical and social attributes, rather than the migration status. University-educated migrants report being able to get along well with their local peers as they share similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and rarely feel belittled. Contrastingly, lower-educated migrants report feelings of being discriminated against and even hold resentment towards the locals because of the constant mistreatment experienced by them.

The differentiated experiences reflect the socioeconomic distinction where symbolic goods are used as markers of one's class. Echoing the intersectionality perspective, for social discrimination, education plays a critical role in shrinking the gaps in life experiences between migrants and locals, although the effects may be further complicated by the rural versus urban origins of the migrant. While aesthetic markers were not explicitly mentioned by the interviewees, hailing from a prestigious university, looking physically kempt, and displaying an air of 'sophistication' allow university-educated internal migrants to assimilate themselves into a shared class with the urban-born locals and distinguish themselves from their lower-educated migrant counterparts.

Moreover, these findings also suggest the uniqueness of universities in China as an effective milieu that produces academic talents, and meantime, cultural elites by not only facilitating academic success but also fostering the environment for the development of cultured cosmopolitan tastes and confident social dispositions (Xie & Reay, 2020). There is a symbolic effect embedded in China's higher education systems. Chinese universities have also witnessed a growing population of migrant students, which may facilitate in-depth and meaningful interactions among migrant students from different social backgrounds and between migrant and local students (Li, 2013; Xiong, 2015). The intensive and interactive experiences across regional and socioeconomic divides in universities are likely to develop more inclusive attitudes toward migrants among university-educated individuals beyond campus.

5.3 | Discrimination between migrants

The educational and socioeconomic differences also drive a divide among internal migrants. Particularly, university-educated migrants often see themselves as a separate group from their lower-educated counterparts. Owing to their higher socioeconomic statuses, university-educated migrants feel like they have more in common with the locals than with their fellow migrants with less established socioeconomic status, in terms of their family backgrounds and lifestyles. This socioeconomic difference provides impetus for university-educated migrants to socially discriminate against their lower-educated and often low-skilled migrant counterparts.

Ying is a rural-to-urban migrant who has obtained a PhD. She was originally from a southern province and currently teaches in a university. When asked about what could be done from a policy viewpoint to help lower-educated migrants to achieve upward mobility, she distinguished between university-educated migrants as an 'us' entity and lower-educated migrants as a 'them' entity:

> For them, they are low-income workers who do not have the ability. For people like us, when we come here, we are seen as incoming 'talents', and we can obtain a Beijing *hukou* this way. For them, the possibility of obtaining a [Beijing] *hukou* is close to none. But without a (Beijing) *hukou*, they won't be able to enjoy various education, medical, and other services.

The clear in-group/out-group distinction made between university-educated and lower-educated internal migrants is evident in the use of the words 'us' and 'them'. While subtle, the subconscious classification of lower-educated internal migrants as a distinct group from university-educated migrants entails a discriminatory lens of the latter on the former. Lili, as aforementioned, as a graduate from an elite university, when asked about what comes to her mind when she hears the word 'migrant', explained how she neither sees herself as a migrant nor a Beijing local. She also shared an instance where she thinks lower-educated migrants are causing problems:

> There is a subtle feeling when you ask that, I don't see myself as a Beijing local, but I also don't think I am an 'outsider'. […] But sometimes when there is a traffic jam, when I see those construction cars from other provinces, I'd think things like 'Why do they come and occupy our road space during peak hours?' Apart from this, everything else is fine. Because it is a fact that without these people contributing, Beijing wouldn't be such a developed place, but sometimes I do get these thoughts when there is a heavy traffic jam.

Corroborating Lili's sentiments, working-class migrants also reported having been discriminated against by their fellow migrants. Han is a migrant with a junior high education from a northeastern province who currently works as a security guard. When asked whether he has ever experienced any form of discrimination from others, he shared that other migrants have discriminated against people like him, as migrants who arrive in the destination cities later are seen as competition for available jobs and resources:

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> I have experienced such things [discrimination] before, no matter where you go, there will be such instances. Of course, I feel indignant, but I still think it's somewhat bearable because the people who are discriminating against us are not the locals [...but] are the migrants who came to Beijing early on and earned substantial money. In principle, they're not Beijing locals. [...] These people bully [newly coming] migrants. In their eyes, they feel that these migrants are stealing their businesses. [...] They feel that they are the locals, [...] and when many other migrants subsequently arrived, labour supply increased, and consequently the pay was reduced.

Both Lili and Han's accounts show that migrants who have attained higher socioeconomic status discriminate or host negative opinions against their less established counterparts. The tendency to blame migrants for various urban social ills such as traffic jams and overcrowding is also common among urban residents (Zhang et al., 2014). Osajima (1993) proposed that this approach of assigning negative traits associated with one's own group to co-ethnic others but not the self could be a sign of internalized racism. In an attempt to distance themselves from other migrants, university-educated migrants and migrants of higher socioeconomic status emphasized the differentials in skills and entitlement to Beijing's resources between themselves and their less-established fellow migrants. They turn toward discrimination against the lower-educated migrants to stress their own status. Such within-group discrimination reveals how interactions between education and *hukou* differently positioned migrants in the power hierarchy, which showcases another mechanism of how the intersection between migration and education shapes migrants' discrimination experiences.

6 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Using a qualitative approach with 127 in-depth interviews in Beijing, we examine the similar and different experiences of discrimination amongst migrants across educational backgrounds. By investigating the nuanced effects of obtaining university education and higher socioeconomic status on the experience of discrimination, this study enriches the intersectionality perspective and contributes to the literature by moving beyond the view that migrants, particularly those of rural origins, are a monolithic group with singular experiences of discrimination.

Findings reveal a salient educational differential in the experiences of social discrimination faced by internal migrants. The reduction in social discrimination enjoyed by university-educated migrants arises from a shared class identity of them with the Beijing locals because of similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, institutional discrimination remains a significant barrier even for migrants who attain higher education. University-educated internal migrants who still retain a *hukou* at their places of origin are unable to gain access to equal job opportunities as their local counterparts. Additionally, institutional discrimination in the form of procedural inefficiency in obtaining necessary documents, registering for school, and buying houses and cars are equally present for both groups of migrants. Thus, obtaining a university education is only sufficient for reducing day-to-day experiences of social discrimination but not institutional discrimination, which is embedded into the rigid and systematic administrative and policy structures. Moreover, although university education provides a more effective pathway to achieve *hukou* conversion, the process of conversion can be highly competitive and time-consuming.

Furthermore, there is an internal divide among migrants between those who are of higher socioeconomic status and those of lower socioeconomic status. That is, the social discrimination faced by lower-educated internal migrants is from both the locals and their better-off fellow migrants who have attained greater socioeconomic status either through education or business success. Particularly, in comparison to their less established counterparts, migrants of better socioeconomic and educational backgrounds are more enthusiastic and hopeful about advancing their mobility in the urban environment. Thus, to set themselves apart from the low-skilled less-educated rural counterparts is perceived to be an effective way to disown from their natal social backgrounds and to demonstrate and validate their success of changes to the requirements of the cosmopolitan middle-class ideals and lifestyles in the receiving cities. This further highlights the importance of unpacking the patterns and pathways across educational and socioeconomic heterogeneities when examining migrants' discrimination experiences.

The diverse findings on different discrimination outcomes are consistent with the intersectionality perspective in that they demonstrate how *hukou* and education jointly influence migrants' discrimination experiences. Even though education has a limited impact when migrants hold a nonlocal *hukou*, highly educated migrants are still more likely to convert to a local *hukou*, which potentially lessens institutional discrimination. Regarding social discrimination, although the consequences may be further compounded by the migrant's *hukou* origins, education is crucial in reducing the differences in life experiences between migrants and locals. Finally, within-group discrimination illustrates a unique intersectional mechanism through which migrants were differentially positioned within the power structure.

The *hukou* system in China has been an institution that divides those with an urban *hukou* and those with a rural *hukou*, as well as those with a local *hukou* and those with a nonlocal *hukou* (Zhang & Treiman, 2013). The *hukou* system has resulted in explicit institutional discrimination towards migrants, particularly those of a rural origin, by attaching different benefits and rights according to the divide. Yet, the discrimination and constraints due to the *hukou* system, or more broadly, due to migration status, have been experienced differently across educational backgrounds. Under China's *hukou* system, *hukou* conversion, both in terms of rural-to-urban conversion and nonlocal-to-local conversion, is an important channel of institutional upward mobility for internal migrants. Although equally facing institutional

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discrimination before achieving a local urban *hukou* in the receiving communities, better-educated migrants are more likely to break through the institutional hurdle and get their *hukou* converted than their less-educated counterparts. Moreover, discrimination can happen through subtle and noninstitutionalized pathways. University education often equips better-educated migrants with cosmopolitanism and urbanism to navigate daily city life and cultivates the human, social, and cultural capital that may render their integration experiences smoother and better functional than their lower-skilled and less-educated counterparts. Given the internal divide of integration and discrimination experiences between the better-educated and less-educated migrants, better-educated migrants are motivated to navigate and redraw the boundaries between themselves, their lower-skilled and less-educated counterparts, and the locals.

Overall, we conclude that being migrants in China's often highly urbanized migrant-receiving cities continues to confer large institutional and social disadvantages. However, given the rising socioeconomic diversity among China's internal migrants, migration, integration, and mobility have been experienced differently. The social mechanisms that have driven the divide between migrants and locals are substantially more complex than has hitherto been appreciated with. The increasing sociodemographic diversity among migrants emphasizes the value of comprehending the experiences of discrimination and adaptability among migrants from the intersectionality perspective. Rural/urban divide, education, and nativity interactively shaped how migrants are positioned in the power hierarchy and the resources and constraints faced by them in navigating the demands of material and cultural norms in the receiving cities. Despite extensive exposure to an urban and cosmopolitan environment, the initial deficiencies proved difficult to make up for among migrants. Even for those who are better positioned with wealthier economic and cultural resources to promote lifestyle changes, exclusion in many forms—both external to and internal among migrants—hindered migrants' acquisition of valued material and cultural capital.

This study implies that social inequality related to migration status cannot be eliminated when institutional changes and individual ethics are kept in isolation from one another. It is necessary to alter the social structures of inequality with more egalitarian policies to distribute public resources, both for material development and cultural enrichment, across urban and rural areas, regions with varying developmental stages, and individuals with different socioeconomic statuses. It is also necessary to foster a more hospitable and inclusive culture in the major receiving cities. Further research, based on larger quantitative samples or qualitative inquiries in other major migrant-receiving cities than were available to us, would yield further insights regarding how individual behaviours are profoundly constrained by institutional and sociodemographic contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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