

# ***Transformation and Belonging: Analyzing the Dynamics of Property Choices among Rural Migrants Transitioning to Urban Middle-Class Identities in China During the 1990s***

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**Abstract:** This study articulates the transformative trajectory of rural migrants towards urban middle-class status in China during the notable period of the 1990s, placing a particular emphasis on the strategic significance of housing decisions within this metamorphosis. It meticulously examines the confluence of economic imperatives, social networks, and urban governance frameworks as pivotal determinants shaping the housing choices of these migrants, thereby facilitating or constraining their socio-economic mobility and integration into the urban milieu. Employing a robust qualitative methodology encompassing in-depth interviews and case studies, the research elucidates the nuanced interplay between individual agency and structural impediments in the pursuit of urban middle-class identity. This scholarly inquiry not only unveils the complex dynamics of social stratification and urbanization but also enriches the discourse on the socio-political implications of migration and housing policy in the context of China's rapid urban transformation. Through this lens, the study contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of the processes underpinning social identity formation and the reconfiguration of urban landscapes in developing economies.

**Keywords:** Urbanization in China, Rural to urban migration, Middle-class identity formation, Housing choice dynamics

## **1. Introduction**

China saw an unparalleled urbanization process toward the close of the 20th century, which not only transformed the cities' physical landscape but also had a significant impact on the social structure and life paths of its residents. Rural-urban migration on a large scale, particularly the integration of rural migrants (migrant workers) into urban areas, is a prominent subject in sociology and urban studies. This study investigates the changes that the rural migrants made during the urbanization process at the end of the 20th century which led to them from rural class to urban middle-class identities through the home choice. This study is designed to explain how house choice helps migrants switch social status and measures the multiple consequences of this mechanism on urbanization and social structure development in China.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Background of the Urbanization Process**

Urbanization in China is intricately connected to its economic growth and demonstrates several stages of development. The urbanization process in China could be categorized into three phases: fall (1960-1978), uplift (1979-1995), and development (1996-2010) [1]. China's urbanization and economic growth have demonstrated moderate performance on a global scale, displaying characteristics of coordinated development. Urbanization has impacted the shift of rural migrants to the urban middle class due to changes in urban housing policies. This has highlighted a multifaceted relationship between migrants, housing markets, housing preferences, and policy adjustments [2].

### **2.2. Housing for rural migrants**

Housing is not only an expression of basic living needs but also an important symbol of social status and identity. Rural migrants usually consider factors such as market trends and consumer preferences when choosing housing. Research has shown that migrants' housing choices are influenced by multiple factors such as economic ability, social networks and urban policies [3]. Moreover, tenants preferred public housing when purchasing a home after market mechanisms were introduced into an otherwise welfare-oriented housing system [4]. Although the government has introduced several policies to improve the housing conditions of migrants, the actual effects and their impact on the social mobility of migrants remain to be explored.

### **2.3. Policy analysis**

Urban policies play an important role in determining the housing choices and social mobility of rural migrants. Since the reform and opening up, China's urban housing policies have undergone a shift from welfare-oriented to market-oriented. For example, a research focused on housing holding patterns in six Chinese cities and found that household socio-economic factors, such as age, occupation, and educational background, had a significant influence in determining housing holding patterns [3]. Other researchers found that real-line upward mobility was more difficult for some rural migrants in Shenzhen, China, where national policies at the central and local levels had an important role in hindering social mobility and perpetuating the disadvantaged position of rural migrants [5]. This study will further analyze how these policies affect migrants' housing choices and their social mobility.

### **2.4. Research gaps and contributions**

The majority of research on housing, social mobility, and urbanization has concentrated on social groups as a whole; there is a dearth of studies examining particular groups or regions. Therefore, research into the precise processes and pathways by which rural migrants attain class leapfrogging via housing choices is still necessary given China's very fast urbanization trend. This research examines how rural migrants choose their homes and how that decision affects social mobility in an effort to provide fresh insights into the social structural changes brought about by China's urbanization process.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This mixed-methods research methodology seeks to explore the experiences of China's rural-urban

migrants in the late 20th century by using quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The main advantage of its use is to collect data in both magnitude and variety thus, creating a rounded view of the migrations.

### **3.2. Data collection**

#### **3.2.1. Semi-structured interviews**

The participant was selected depending on many factors, including their migration history, the period they have been living in the city, gender or age differences among them. In the process of developing a sample size for the study, both its intensive as well extensive nature was chosen, which made 15 participants a suitable sample size for data saturation to be attained. Interview sites were selected to ensure ease of accessibility, security, and safety for participants, with privacy as the key priority. The choices set before participants were their homes, a chilling place in a park, or an online portal. In order to guarantee that all participants understood the reasons for and rights of their participation, as well as to protect and safely use their data by our team before the interviews were conducted, an ethical assessment was done carefully before any interviews took place.

#### **3.2.2. Structured questionnaires**

The questionnaire was developed to get desirable rates of response and data quality while covering a wide range of subjects such as social integration, economic motivation, and the ways of collecting data in order to ensure the good quality of the data collection. The distribution strategy for the questionnaire was devised to ensure the participation from participants with different choices of completion and response preferences, including both paper-based and online questionnaires being sent out.

### **3.3. Data analysis methods**

#### **3.3.1. Quantitative analysis**

By working with statistical tools such as SPSS, R or Python, the frequency distribution analysis, exploratory data analysis (EDA), and descriptive statistics could be used to look at the relationship among different variables, help give a picture of the overarching, and identify key trends and patterns in the experiences of migrants.

#### **3.3.2. Qualitative analysis**

Textual transcription of audio recording from semi-structured interviews was first carried out through the open coding procedure to help in qualitative analysis. The end product was identification of the themes. The everyday concepts were compared and combined in repeat. This gave the main categories that were used for the researching by using this methodology. In order to achieve range and complexity of this research, inconsistencies or conflicts that were revealed from data in time were closely observed; themes analysis results have provided a vetel framework which encompassed not only how a migrant experiences his/her life but also the social and cultural aspects of migration in general.

#### **3.3.3. Complementary analysis**

The analytical process was strengthened by the addition of both the quantitative and qualitative processes. Qualitative information gave us a deeper understanding of the notion behind certain

inclinations, while quantitative data served scientifically justified fluctuations and general patterns relevant to the sphere of migration. By employing a mixed-method approach, the research shed light on complex relationships that exist among migrants on social, cultural, economic, and policy levels - providing a basis for more prudent policy development in the future.

## 4. Data analysis

Urbanization has become a pervasive reality in modern societies, with rural-urban migration playing a critical role. This article presents results of a survey on rural-urban migrants to gain an in-depth picture of their experiences, obstacles, views and effects on relevant policies. Key considerations included migration contexts and motivations; housing choices; economic statuses; social integration/acclulturation processes as well as policy perceptions/impacts as well as future plans/expectations.

### 4.1. Background and motivation for migration

Economic factors have been found to be at the forefront of rural-urban migration. All participants in a research project said their primary reason for migrating was lack of economic development, consistent with current research that frequently highlights improved prospects and higher standards of living as key elements in urbanization processes. Findings suggest population movements toward economically vibrant metropolitan environments is caused by an absence of such developments and employment possibilities in rural regions.

### 4.2. Housing choices

Studies showed that 66.67% of migrants considered accessibility the primary factor when selecting an urban place to live. Long-term obligations (such as loans and monthly rent payments) also played a pivotal role in making their decisions, underscoring the significance of taking into account financial affordability as well as ease of living when selecting their living environment. These results underscored the necessity of taking financial affordability and ease of living into account when looking for an apartment or house for rent.

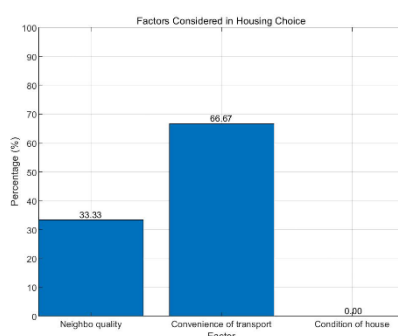


Figure 1: Factors Considered in Housing Choice

### 4.3. Economic and occupational status

The opportunities for careers offered by cities complicate the issues of job hunting demonstrated by the experiences of the participants. Even though the urban settings allowed for the improved quality of professional and economic development of some immigrants, it also posed challenges to employment stability as it illustrated that the process of socio-economic integration through urbanization is complex.

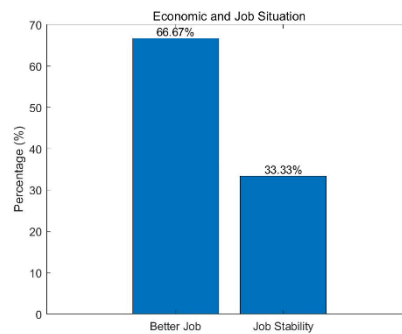


Figure 2: Economic and Job Situation

#### 4.4. Social integration and acculturation

Although all participants confessed to having at least some xenophobic thoughts on occasion, most of the migrants however did not regard the fact that they did not speak the national language or the accent as an obstacle in the process of their assimilation into urban life. Such a fact means that immigrants succeed in adapting to their new surroundings and in highlighting the need for promoting mutual acceptance and intercultural integration in the context of urbanization.

#### 4.5. Policy Perceptions and Impacts

Migrants are found to favor policies that boost their earnings and educate them on means of improving their business potential as noted in people's preference for employment aid and vocational training programs that have direct economic benefits in the city. Unfortunately, most migrants believe the current rules only partially address issues they experience - this indicates policymakers should address more specifically their unique requirements.

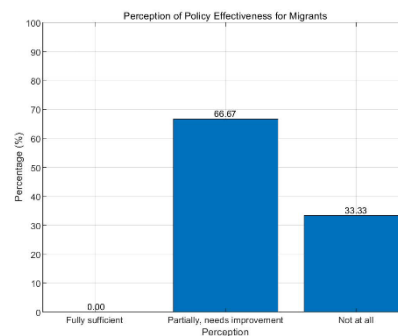


Figure 3: Perception of Policy Effectiveness for Migrants

#### 4.6. Future plans and expectations

Migrants typically harbor various professional goals for themselves and their children, such as progressing within their current field or branching out into new ones; exploring a range of career options; returning to rural areas or moving abroad. Furthermore, migrants typically hold high expectations of the academic opportunities available to their children from migration. According to data available to us today, economic stability, educational advancement, and job advancement all play a key role for migrants' professional and personal goals.

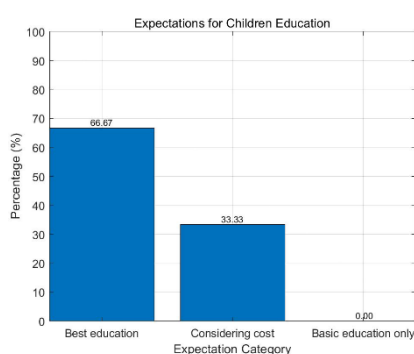


Figure 4: Expectations for Children Education

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Economic Growth and Motivation to Migrate

Economic stagnation encourages movement from rural to urban areas, aligning with previous research on factors influencing rural migration [6]. Migrants are looking for improved economic prospects, highlighting the significant impact of economic variables on social mobility during urbanization. Migrants typically struggle to meet their high career expectations due to the complexity and competitiveness of the metropolitan work market. According to a comprehensive study, approximately 25% of China's urban labor force is currently unemployed or only marginally employed [7]. This is partly due to the shutdown or reduction in the size of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in cities like Wuhan, as well as the decrease in economic growth rates since the mid-1990s [8]. Such an example illustrates the complex correlation of economic development and migratory impulses, as well as all challenges and prospects of the urbanization process.

### 5.2. Changes in housing choices

The migrants' home preferences were greatly influenced by the early development of the 1990s urban land reform and China's economic structure that had undergone reorganization. The housing choice pattern of the migrants in the cities shows that even if the housing is not newer or has lower neighborhood quality, migrants prioritize the accessibility and affordability, which indicate not only the financial struggles they encounter in the cities, but also a strong emphasis on timeliness and cost-effectiveness [9]. For instance, it is important to note that they usually face asymmetric information in their home searches, which makes openness and the availability of information paramount in the urban migration process. According to [10], people from the rural areas who come to live in urban areas often do so for financial reasons and may want to live in affordable residential areas close to the place of employment or somewhere that they can easily access. Thus, it appears that not only the rent cost but also the employment location matters when migrant workers choose housing. These housing policy change and market fluctuations introduced new opportunities for the migrants, but the changes also brought price rise and market flow that distracted their home choices and urban integration.

### 5.3. Economic and occupational stability

It was the time of 1990s when the state-owned firms underwent reform and economic upheaval and migrants started to experience high number of problems in the domains of economic and occupational stability. Individuals are provided with opportunities to seek for new economic possibilities through migration but the empirical evidence show that migrants come up with enormous problems in getting



stable economic and professional lives. A significant portion of the migrant group found that their initial work in an urban area did not yield the anticipated economic benefits, leading to increasing worries about job security [11]. The Beijing municipal government implemented strategic incentives to encourage unemployed urban workers to learn from rural migrants and become economically self-reliant through self-employment or by working in industries like construction and services, in response to the unemployment crisis caused by massive layoffs at state-owned enterprises (SOEs) [8]. This highlights the economic and occupational difficulties experienced by migrants and emphasizes the importance of enacting efficient measures to aid the economic and occupational assimilation of migrants amidst rising urbanization.

#### **5.4. Social integration and cultural adaptation**

Although migrants may experience sporadic xenophobic sentiments, they generally do not view language or dialect disparities as a significant barrier to assimilating into urban environments. This indicates that migrants exhibit a certain level of resilience in terms of cultural adjustment. This pattern demonstrates that migrants may engage with metropolitan life to some degree, despite cultural differences. Addressing cultural differences and occasional experiences of exclusion is necessary to foster a more inclusive and integrated urban environment [12]. Furthermore, the research discovered that while urban villages offer opportunities for social engagement, migrants' assimilation into these communities is still restricted. On the other hand, migrants residing in commercial housing communities, which are often gated, attained greater levels of social integration in socioeconomic success, neighborhood interactions, and social connections. However, the process and degree of this integration were selective, as noted by [10]. Urban villages offer migrants a source of income but do not offer them greater opportunities for social integration. To improve the social integration and acculturation of urban migrants, it is essential to address not just their housing decisions but also to enable their complete incorporation into urban life through policies and social practices.

#### **5.5. Policy Perceptions and Future Expectations**

Migrants appreciated the government's employment assistance and training measures but stressed the need for more improvements, especially in the areas of housing and living conditions. Migrants' future goals and ambitions, like seeking steady employment and educational chances, offer valuable insights for crafting improved policy approaches [13]. Friedmann discusses the difficulties of policy and governance in the shift to urbanization, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development, better living circumstances, and increased job prospects [8]. His analysis highlights the challenges policymakers encounter in facilitating the integration of migrants into urban areas. The complexities of the challenges cover policy and project implementation at the local levels and the balancing of economic growth, social-cultural cohesion and environmental sustainability. We emphasize the improvement of the understanding of the migrants' point of view about policies and their vision of future to successfully identify and deal with their issues because of urbanization. This would ensure development of effective policies in urban areas that are more inclusive and tolerant.

### **6. Conclusion**

The housing decisions of rural migrants are studied in detail in this research and the social impact of urbanization on social mobility include. Study findings suggest that migrants' decisions pertaining to housing are heavily influenced by unfavorable economic conditions, policy settings, or ties to the social network, thus, revealing the complex connection between the individual tactics and the overall policies at large. Policymakers need to acknowledge the particular and set about improving housing affordability, expanding employment and facilitating the social integration for migrants. It is

necessary to conduct further research on diverse urban experiences (especially different groups) to come up with new concepts for building fair and inclusive future cities.

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