

## *From Newcomers to Middle Class: The Social and Spatial Mobility of New Urban Migrants\**

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### *Abstract*

This article studies the relationship between social and spatial mobility of new urban migrants and residents. The objective is to present the influences of the household registration system on the social mobility of China's new urban migrants through a comparison of the differences and similarities between these two groups. Two data sets are adopted in this article: the Blue Book of Youth Nos. 1 and 2 and in-depth interviews conducted during the summers of 2009, 2010, and 2011. Thematic analysis was employed to understand their social mobility after spatial mobility. Results show that new urban migrants are relatively vulnerable. While society generally expects them to assimilate rather than achieve upward social mobility, the hukou system limits their access to social welfare and security. Meanwhile, new urban residents who have access to advantages consider themselves lower-middle class in terms of consumption, and maintain certain flexibility to further establish their social and economic status. In this article, "opportunity" is a significant theme. New urban residents strive to leverage their urban resident status to create individual wealth. For new

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migrants, the hukou system has relatively reduced the “opportunity.” Although city government in China has launched some related policies, they remain insufficient in eliminating the physical and psychological gap between new urban migrants and residents, or to significantly increase opportunities available to migrants. A phased abolition of the hukou system should be implemented as soon as possible to reduce social costs and meet China’s goals for social development and fairness.

## 1. Introduction

Innovations in communication technology have extended mobile Internet access to most of China, where population flows are controlled by a rigid household registration system. In 2011, for the first time, over half of China’s population lived in urban areas, a demographic trend that has been called one of the most important social and economic phenomena of the 21st century. This massive rural-urban migration has driven urban development and supplied labor to China’s manufacturing and construction sectors. However, estimates suggest that about 200 million rural migrants who are the main labor force now live in urban areas without local household registration.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, China’s cities have given rise to a large middle class, driving domestic consumption, which is playing an increasingly important role in China’s continued economic development.

Today, China’s leadership is committed to the continued expansion of the middle class and the development of a “harmonious society,” goals that indicate China’s middle class is emerging as an important driver of domestic economic growth consumption, thereby enhancing their economic value. The Chinese urban economy is gradually transforming from a primary reliance on cheap migrant labor to middle-class domestic consumption.

Some scholars have proposed reform strategies to further expand the middle class. Chan’s road map for hukou system reform gave first priority to college and university graduates, followed by skilled workers, stable self-employed workers, and finally low-skilled migrant laborers. The proposed road map would gradually help such migrants attain urban residency permits. The ultimate goal of these reforms is to abolish the existing hukou system. Rural youth moving to cities to attend university are more likely to reach middle-class status, and thus contribute to the development of internal consumption.