

Social Services Utilization, Land Tenure Arrangements, and Self-Identification among Rural Migrants in China

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Abstract

This article explores whether the government policies are related to migrants taking on new self-identity. Drawing from the literature on identity, migrant adaptation, and citizenship, we propose a conceptual model of self-identity by rural migrants in China. We argue that self-identity of rural migrants is related to social policies that discourage a sojourner mentality and allow rural migrants to enjoy the same set of social benefits as local residents. Based on data collected in Xi'an in 2012, our findings support the argument. The findings have two important implications. First, our research shows that the simple dichotomy of rural versus urban in the literature regarding migrant workers in China may not be appropriate anymore, as a considerable proportion of migrant workers in China no longer identify themselves as rural residents and not urban residents. They identify themselves as “urban population from elsewhere” (*chengshi wailai renkou*). Second, our study

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opens a new venue for understanding self-identity of migrants. We offer an understanding of how social policies are related to self-identity.

The significance of government policies that shape the integration outcomes of migrants has emerged as an important topic in understanding immigrant adaptation. Studies in general agree that policies, in particular policies related to citizenship acquisition, can impede or expedite the integration process of migrants.¹ One focus of these studies treats government policies as one of the contextual variables that affects integration or explains country differences in migration adaptation patterns.² Another focus is to explore how policies shape the life and integration of individuals without legal status.³ These studies explicitly treat policies as the divider that separates the life experience of individuals with and without legal status. They focus on exploring the economic,⁴ social,⁵ and political life experiences of those without legal status.⁶ Yet, the study of ways in which government policies are related to migrant integration leaves unexamined the relationship between policies and the self-identification of migrants as migrants or local residents. The subjective dimension is critically important, as the experience of assimilation suggests that individuals see themselves as insiders rather than outsiders, and as blurring or crossing the group boundary.

Rural to urban migration in China provides an excellent case to understand the relationship. In the past few decades, China has experienced one of the largest human migrations in history from rural areas to urban areas. Over 230 million people have moved to cities from rural villages to look for economic opportunities.⁷ However, the economic advancement and social integration of these migrant workers in the city have been curtailed.⁸ Most of the rural migrants occupy low-paying jobs,⁹ work in undesirable working environments with little job mobility,¹⁰ live in segregated communities,¹¹ and have limited social connections with local friends.¹² In short, a dual labor market and clear social segregation have emerged, with clear group boundaries for “rural residents” (農民 *nongmin*) / “rural migrant workers” (農民工 *nongmingong*) and “local urban residents” (市民 *shimin*). Associated with a clear boundary between the two groups, the label of “rural migrants” has a strong negative connotation associated with lack of civility, little education, and a different culture.¹³ Rural migrants face discrimination in society.¹⁴ It is suggested that the household registration system, *hukou* (戶口), associated with