

Floaters, Settlers, and Returnees: Settlement Intention and Hukou Conversion of China's Rural Migrants

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Abstract

For China's rural migrants, the intention to settle in a city inherently implies two separate decisions: (1) to obtain a local urban *hukou* in the city and (2) to reside in the city permanently. The two decisions do not necessarily conform with each other. Despite the sheer volume of literature on China's rural-urban migration, little research has explicitly distinguished the two types of settlement intention. In addition, recent changes in the *hukou* policy may alter the expectations of rural migrants and hence their settlement intentions, which calls for new investigations into the current situation. This article draws on a recent survey of rural migrants in Nanjing and Suzhou to explore the settlement intentions of rural migrants. Using regression models and in-depth interviews, we confirm that settlement

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intentions of rural migrants tend to maximize individual and familial utilities. Though the *hukou* system is relaxed to allow a higher degree of flexibility, it obliges most rural migrants to consider *hukou* conversion and place of residence separately. While the former decision is a trade-off between rural and urban benefits related to the respective *hukou* status, the latter is determined by an evaluation of the livelihood and quality of life in the city. Varied conditions and expectations of rural migrants require policy makers to devise diverse and responsive welfare schemes to meet the requirements of the migrant population.

Since the mid-1980s, China's long-standing household registration (户口 *hukou*) system has been relaxed to mobilize surplus rural labor to fuel the country's manufacturing boom. Today, though the *hukou* system continues to determine access to rural and urban rights, migration and settlement choices of rural migrants have become more flexible. Some rural migrants intend to return to the countryside when they are too old for urban jobs; some migrants choose to settle down in urban areas through obtaining an urban *hukou*; the great majority of the migrant population choose to float between urban and rural areas and indefinitely postpone their settlement decision. The intention to float, settle, or return not only determines rural migrants' immediate life outcome, but also leads to various opportunities in life in the long run for the migrants themselves and their progeny.

For China's rural migrants, the intention to settle in a city inherently implies two separate decisions: (1) to obtain a local urban *hukou* in the city and (2) to reside in the city permanently. The two decisions do not necessarily conform with each other.¹ Despite the sheer volume of literature on China's rural-urban migration, few research has explicitly distinguished the two types of settlement intention. In addition, given the more recent policy changes, the disparities between migration and *hukou* conversion have been widened. In practice, high living costs and social obstacles in big cities discourage rural migrants to settle down permanently. The decreased value of urban *hukou* also motivates rural migrants to retain their rural *hukou* no matter the place they choose to settle. Given the size of China's floating population, their settlement intentions would have tremendous implications for the country's demographic changes and socio-economic development.