

*Staying in the Countryside or Moving to the City: The Determinants of Villagers' Urban Settlement Intentions in China**

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Abstract

China has experienced an unprecedented surge of rural to urban migration since the mid-1980s, which has led to rapid growth of the urban population, especially in major cities. This study investigates urban settlement intentions of 4,116 rural residents using data from the Chinese General Social Survey in 2010. Based on a multilevel logistic model, the study focuses on the role of individual, household, and contextual factors in determining urban settlement intentions of rural residents. It was found that more than 90 percent of villagers in the survey do not intend to move to and settle in a city within the next five years. Among those who have some intention to settle in a city, nearly two-thirds plan to settle in small towns or small cities rather than larger cities. The results show that villagers' urban settlement intentions are shaped, both independently and interactively, by individual, household, and contextual factors.

1. Introduction

China has experienced an unprecedented surge of rural to urban migration in recent years. It is estimated that 200 to 250 million rural residents have moved to cities and towns over the past three decades,¹ contributing to the acceleration of Chinese urbanization. While urban growth represents an important economic growth engine prompting China's transformation to a market-oriented economy, the rapid urbanization process also has generated some undesirable consequences. It has been widely reported that some rural residents have been forced to leave the countryside and relocate to high-rising apartment blocks in newly constructed urban subdivisions,² while their rural lands and houses were forcibly expropriated with insufficient compensation.³

The Chinese central government released, in March 2014, the New Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020), which aims to increase substantially the proportion of urban population. The plan is to relocate about another 100 million rural residents to cities and towns in the next six years.⁴ In the past, the top-down command and control approach to accelerating urbanization has often ignored migration and urban settlement intentions of rural residents,⁵ leading to what is referred to as “forced urbanization.” Whether the planned new style urbanization can meet its target will depend largely on villagers' intentions to settle in a city, especially if the government is interested in avoiding exacerbated “forced