

*Mobility and Life Chances in Urbanization and Migration in China: Introduction**

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China has witnessed an unprecedented urban revolution, manifested by rapid urbanization and massive migration that have driven the proportion of urban population above 50 percent.¹ Along with the expansion of cities, millions of migrants move across the rural and urban boundaries, between different regions, and beyond the limits of the household registration status (户口 *hukou*). From 1982 to 2010, the number of cities increased from 244 to 654, and the number of rural-hukou migrants in urban areas increased from 46.5 million to 205.6 million.² The expansion of urban areas and population has been characterized not only by its scale and rapidity but also by the high degree of spatial variability. Under the market-oriented reforms, China's eastern coastal areas, or "early-developed" regions, were "opened up" first and have benefited from preferential policies.³ Some coastal and major metropolises like Beijing,

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Shanghai, and Guangzhou have become the “first-tier” cities that have attracted far more migrants than other “second-tier” or “third-tier” cities, which have marginalized so-called “late-developed” regions. In inland areas, given the lagging infrastructure and services, as well as the limited access to international markets,⁴ governments have made various efforts to reduce regional inequalities and help interior cities meet the criteria set by their eastern counterparts.⁵ Under the recent national strategy of Go West, the Rise of Central China Plan, and the One Belt One Road Initiative, urban sprawl and land development have been on the rise in inland areas. The New Urbanization Plan by the central government, which aims to confer 100 million new urban *hukou* by 2020, also opens up more room for urban development in small cities and towns.⁶ Local governments in inland and central China or less-developed areas desire to catch up in the modernization campaigns or build a “modern” city image, and the more-developed areas continue to witness urban development and restructuring to maintain their attractiveness to residents and migrants. As suggested in this special issue, urbanization and migration have greatly reshaped the regional and local development patterns in areas including Jiangsu (southeastern China), Anhui, Hubei (central China), Ningxia (northwestern China), and Inner Mongolia (northern China).

There have been mixed observations on how people have fared in urbanization and migration processes.⁷ On the one hand, urbanization and migration are accompanied by the unleashing achievement motivations and entrepreneurial dynamics from the previously rigid institutional barriers and urban-rural divides. On the other hand, structural inequalities have been reproduced and reinforced in urbanization and migration processes. Studies of both research traditions have long been plagued by the dichotomy between urban core versus rural periphery, which have been commonly phrased as “early-developed” and “late-developed” areas regarding urbanization, or “receiving” and “sending” places regarding migration. With its roots in the dependency theory in the 1960s and world system theory in the 1970s, this analytical framework suggests that economic power is unequally distributed between urban core and rural periphery and that the latter is trapped by its disadvantaged position and structurally dependent on the former.⁸ Such a dichotomous analytical framework underscores the unequal power relations underlying the broad picture of economic development and labor migration flows. However, this perspective has been criticized for its determinist view that sees rural periphery and migrants as passively suffering victims who could do little

to alter structural forces. The agency of individuals and collectives rooted in rural peripheries is largely overlooked. Over time, it has been increasingly recognized that rural and suburban areas also have their own development potential and economic prospects and that migrants also have their own agency and reflexivity. Moreover, the rigid forms of dichotomy have been challenged given the diverse forms of integration and segregation, the flexible boundaries, and the complicated motivations behind the decisions to leave, to stay, and to move back and forth. Urbanization and migration do not always enhance life chances of some and deprive those of others, but often have complicated implications for different groups of people who are involved or affected.

This special issue is based on a collection of conference papers presented at the International Conference on Urbanization and Land Development in China's Interior and Frontier Regions in December 2015. The conference itself was an extension of a research project on urban transformation in the outskirts of Yinchuan City, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The conference was particularly timely, given China's current pledge to develop "a new type of urbanization" that aims to be more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, and to rebuild the Silk Road, the millennia-old trade route that spans China's Hexi Corridor in the Northwest through Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe. This special issue presents five articles to delineate a complex picture of how urbanization and migration have been experienced at the grassroots level, and how such processes are interwoven with the changing patterns of mobility and life chances.

In this special issue, different localities are positioned and restructured in the nation's modernization campaigns, and their roles as early- or late-developed places in urbanization, or as sending places, stepping stones and destinations in migration flows have been reshaped and continuously negotiated. The resource flows and labor moves between urban cores and rural peripheries have become more fluid and diversified over time, and the relationship between roots and destinations needs to be contextualized in economic and social changes under the national strategy of Go West, the "Rise of Central China Plan, and the One Belt One Road Initiative. The population flows into cities and towns are still constrained by persisting institutional barriers, but the changing patterns of resource distribution and redistribution have also introduced new opportunities and challenges, sometimes reinforcing the sociospatial inequalities while at other times creating new room for grassroots actors

to maneuver. This special issue illustrates the shifting and flexible boundaries between urban cores and rural peripheries, and the complicated interactions between roots and destinations, which were reflected by grassroots motivations, strategies, and livelihood in the urbanization and migration processes.

At the grassroots level, previous studies have often focused on the “gains” and “losses” in this process for various actors,⁹ and this special issue includes other dimensions to investigate the grassroots consequences: return and settlement choices, migration trajectories and processes, employment and entrepreneurship, living space and housing access, and so on. Rather than describing ordinary urban citizens, relocated peasants, or rural migrants as victims in development processes, these articles provide a complicated picture of how people are relocated in the different market and institutional contexts, and their changing strategies to deal with economic opportunities, personal development, family welfare, and identities. Based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative evidences, these articles present how opportunities and constraints have been shaped and altered by the urbanization and migration processes, with considerable variations among the supposedly “backward” or “left-behind” groups, including migrants, returnees, landless peasants, and middle- and low-income residents, in more or less developed areas.

The first article, by Shuangshuang Tang and Pu Hao, focuses on the settlement intentions of rural migrants. Without local *hukou*, migrants are often called the “floating” population and are not expected to permanently settle down in host cities. Studies have also found that a large proportion of the low-educated rural migrants have neither a long-term plan to stay in large cities,¹⁰ nor an intention to convert their *hukou*.¹¹ Tang and Hao examine the tension and trade-off between roots and destinations for rural migrants by looking at two types of settlement intentions—to settle in urban areas permanently (as opposed to returning to the rural home) and to obtain a local urban *hukou* (as opposed to retaining the rural *hukou*). Drawing on a survey in Nanjing and Suzhou, their analysis suggests that rural migrants tend to consider the two types of settlement decisions separately. Factors underlying the two processes are distinct: *hukou* conversion decision is a compromise between rural and urban benefits tied to the respective *hukou* status, while the decision on the place of permanent settlement is based on a comparison of livelihood and quality of life in rural and urban areas. These findings shed light on

theoretical and policy discussion on the integration of rural migrants in cities and address inequality issues among rural migrants from different origins and of different backgrounds from a new perspective.

The second article, by Huimin Du, expands the discussion of migration trajectories and processes from the perspective of sending places. In addition to low-educated rural migrants, the out-migration of the highly educated has led to a “brain drain” in late-developed areas, whereas the leading urban areas along the east and south coast of China have benefited from the immigration of the highly educated (known as 孔雀東南飛 *kongque dongnan fei* in Chinese). But Du challenges the prevalent view of “brain gain” for destinations and “brain drain” for roots by illustrating that migration is a continuous process rather than a single event. Drawing on data from a life-history survey conducted in Chaohu, one of the main sending places in Anhui province, Du explores the spatial mobility of educated young adults and shows that their migration trajectories are varied and dynamic. A tiny small proportion move once, while the vast majority move back and forth and cross different levels of borders, including the city, provincial, and country borders. Some move up, some move down, some stay the same, some move away and return. In the process of migration (movement or journey) and non-migration (rest or dwelling), people interpret, negotiate, maintain, or transform their identities. By analyzing the biographical narratives of migration, Du makes it evident that migrants’ identities are dynamic, fluid, open-ended, positional, and constructed, suggesting that both mobility and place are indispensable components of identity construction.

The third article, by Cary Wu, Qiang Fu, Jiabin Gu, and Zhilei Shi, points to a rising wave of return migration to hometowns in the past decade. From the perspective of the places of origin, the economic and social implications of return migration become increasingly important, and Wu et al. focus on the entrepreneurial potential of return migrants in their hometown. As an autonomous area with a high concentration of ethnic minorities, Enshi is one of the major sending places of rural migrants in Hubei province that also has witnessed return migration in recent years. Wu et al. find that return migrants are more likely than non-migrants to be self-employed. Self-employment, as compared with farm or waged jobs, is typically believed to be more dynamic and likely to boost the local economy by introducing more products and services, creating new job opportunities, increasing competition, and raising economic productivity. Their finding thus supports the optimistic view of

return migration as an opportunity for rural development. They also find that the influence of return migration on self-employment is contingent on the interaction between migration and family background. That is, family background, especially family wealth, is vital in determining returnees' engagement in self-employment. Their observation that starting up self-employment usually demands significant if not overall family resources suggests a heavy reliance of returnees on their families and inadequate support from the state and market.

The fourth article, by Jing Song, Huimin Du, and Si-ming Li, further challenges the root-destination boundary by examining a rural community subsumed in urban sprawl in northwest China. The area was recently urbanized as part of the municipality of Yinchuan in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which turned former rural residents into urban citizens. Song et al. bring together two research traditions of how former peasants changed their jobs, from the market competition perspective and the social institution perspective. Like other inland cities that embrace recent development fevers, Yinchuan has adopted a "compensation-based" approach to paving the way for peasants' "urban" future, which is different from the approaches of letting the developers or collectives provide employment opportunities for landless peasants. As a result, young and educated men enjoy more advantages in the enhanced labor market, and older people, women, and low-educated peasants, who used to be accommodated in agriculture before land development, become vulnerable in market competition when agriculture ceases to function as a safety net. Given the increasing fluidity and stiffer competition, the governments' training and reemployment programs have limited effects, with increasing age and gender discrimination in the low-end informal labor market on the one hand, and the limited formal and stable jobs such as civil servants and community officers for the educated and better connected on the other hand. Urbanization has also fueled the entrepreneurial dynamics, but the market adventures are highly dependent on the resources and networks the family possessed prior to land development, and on their previous market exposure and experiences. In sum, both market forces and institutional arrangements in urbanization and relocation processes help to shape their entitlements, resources, and agency in the labor markets, and this article suggests that these supposedly "backward" former peasants have actively adapted their job-seeking strategies given the structural constraints. Their adaptive strategies illustrate the mixed impacts of resource distribution in the occupation transition and the

related anxiety due to the limited safety nets for the landless peasants.

The final article, by Xing Su and Zhu Qian, turns to another side of urban development: the development of different housing segments, including commodity housing and second-hand commodity housing (SHCH), and its consequences for middle- and low-income residents. The study uses data from the municipal statistics in Ordos City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where the economic take off based on coal resources since 2000 heated up real estate development. Speculative real estate development led to a rapid increase in both the supply and price of commodity housing, and low- and moderate-income families were largely priced out of the market. However, given the decline in coal prices around 2011, the housing market bubble burst, and SHCH became more affordable to low- and moderate-income households. Such phenomena are analyzed based on the housing filtering theory. In times of economic prosperity, rich families bought multiple homes in the primary market in anticipation of further price increases. With the turning of the economic tide and the burst of the housing bubble, they were forced to sell in a depressed market. Rather paradoxically, economic downturn sometimes creates a chance for the redistribution of the urban wealth via the filtering process in the housing market, and this created opportunities for low- and moderate-income families to upgrade their housing lot. Although urban development has been said to increase and reinforce social inequalities in much of the previous studies, urban development also creates room for negotiation and resource redistribution, which have affected housing access at the grassroots level in a recently developed city. While the heating up of the housing market is not dissimilar from the experience of cities in the southern and eastern coastal regions in earlier times, Ordos witnesses the combination of generally low purchasing power and ambitious real estate development. Given its heavy reliance on natural resources, the volatility of the market in this area may lead to the oversupply of commodity housing, the burst of housing bubble, and unexpected restructuring of life chances and living space.

This special issue contributes to studies on urbanization and migration in China by illustrating the sociospatial differentiation of people in the recent development and migration waves and challenging the notion that peripheries and migrants are always trapped by their disadvantaged positions. Articles in this collection speak to existing studies on the continuing inequalities and stratification in the urbanization and

migration processes, but also shed light on the new opportunities and constraints that have been created in these processes. Urban residents, former peasants, minimally educated migrants, and highly educated migrants illustrate unique and diverse motivations and strategies to adapt to such development patterns, and rural and periphery areas and economic sectors also show some development potential to accommodate their agencies in striving for personal development and family welfare. There exists some room, albeit limited, for grassroots actors to grab the opportunities of mobility and life chances, such as those created either by the burst of property bubbles or the bargaining of the rural-to-urban transition. For instance, market fluctuations and uncertainties in newly developed areas may facilitate middle- and low-income families to carve out a space to access certain housing market segments (Su and Qian's article). There are also diverse forms of transitioning to "urban jobs" when the agriculture-based safety nets are lost (Song et al.'s article). For those who moved elsewhere as migrants, they cannot simply be interpreted as passive and disempowered victims of the uneven development of the economy. In fact, they deliberately make their decisions on *hukou* conversion and place of residence given the uneasy processes of adaptation and integration into cities (Tang and Hao's article), or actively seek better economic opportunities via return migration given the limited support from the state and market (Wu et al.'s article). Rather than a simple "brain drain," the highly educated migrants from late-developed areas adopt more flexible and complicated migration strategies when negotiating their mobility and identities (Du's article).

This special issue sheds light on theoretical and policy debates on urban development and migration flows beyond the conventional dichotomies. While many studies tend to circumvent the complexity of the migration process, articles in this special issue suggest that migration may involve many moves. Du's article has shown the dynamics of migration of the highly educated, and the article by Tang and Hao illustrates the different settlement intentions among rural migrants. Although Wu et al. consider only permanent return migration in their study, they also present evidence of the presence of circulation, that is, temporary return migration. This highlights the need to give more attention to circular and repeat migration to understand migration patterns, settlement/return intention, and the role of migration in both sending places and receiving places. For the sending places, the article by Wu et al. has confirmed the significance of return migration of migrant workers for rural development; the benefits

of the return of highly educated migrants are self-evident. Yet, such benefits also depend on the extent to which returnees' potential is utilized. In the cases of Enshi and Chaohu, it seems that the sending places are not prepared to facilitate the return and integration of either low-educated rural migrants or university graduates.

Regarding the institutional arrangements of urban expansion and urban development, peasants or ordinary urban residents are often not integrated smoothly into the expanding urban landscape, either regarding living space and housing access, as suggested by Su and Qian, or in terms of compensation, relocation, and reemployment, according to Song et al. These different social groups face multiple stratification mechanisms and adopt diverse strategies in resisting or adapting to the urban economies and lifestyles. The findings echo some of the existing studies on the disadvantages and barriers people have faced, but also suggest some potential for ordinary citizens, relocated peasants, and rural migrants to participate in and share benefits from the development processes. Rather than seeing displaced residents or urbanized peasants as a homogenous group to be relocated and "trained" to become modern citizens, policies should be contextualized to address their unique desires and needs. For example, the widely practiced "compensation" approach and reemployment projects need to take into account people's diverse experiences prior to development campaigns. By investigating the various mechanisms of stratification and mobility, we hope to push the boundaries of research to the further differentiations within the late-developed areas and the adaptive space to maneuver among previously marginalized groups. It is important to understand the similar and different growth trajectories and development dynamics of early-developed and late-developed areas of China, the shifting and flexible boundaries of urban cores and rural peripheries, and the evolving relationship between roots and destinations, which will help to inform policy making on urban development, resource distribution, and social integration.

Notes

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 - 4 Susan M. Walcott, “Xi’an as an Inner China Development Model,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 44, No. 8 (2003), pp. 623–640.
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