Continuity and change in the transition from the first to the second generation of migrants in China: Insights from a survey in Fujian

Yu Zhu*, Liyue Lin

School of Geography, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian Province 350007, PR China

ABSTRACT

Based on a representative survey of migrants in Fujian Province, a major migrant destination in China, this paper provides a more accurate and objective picture of the new generation migrants and their differences from and similarities to the first generation migrants. While the paper confirms some common understanding of the differences between the first and the second generations of migrants in the literature in terms of their individual characteristics and personal attitudes, it demonstrates that the differences between the two generations are often exaggerated by some popular perceptions of their socioeconomic status and their readiness for integration into the destination cities, and that there are still some remarkable similarities between the two generations in these aspects. The results of statistical modelling also suggest that the generational change per se plays insignificant roles in determining migrants' situation in the cities. The paper argues that two structural factors, namely the existence of rural–urban disparity and the dominance of labour-intensive industries in the economy, constrain more fundamental changes in the generational transition of migrants in China, and that the above understanding of the new generation migrants has important policy implications.

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Introduction

In recent years, an important development in China's migration research has been the growing attention devoted to a sub-group of the migrant population, namely the 'new generation migrants' or 'the second generation migrants', who are commonly defined in both academic literature and policy discussion as those rural–urban migrants born since the 1980s (e.g. Liu & Cheng, 2008; Liu, Li, & Breitung, 2012; Wang, 2001). Starting from 2001 when this term was first proposed by Chunguang Wang (Wang, 2001), a growing body of literature has emerged to identify their major characteristics, differentiate them from the first generation migrants, examine various issues they have been confronting in their migration process, and explore policy solutions to these issues (e.g., Chen, 2003; Liu & Cheng, 2008; Liu et al., 2012; Luo & Wang, 2003; Wang, 2008; Wang & Qin, 2002). The new generation migrants have also become a major topic in the media, and attracted great attention of the government at various levels.

The new generation of migrants deserves such attention in many ways. Recent data from the State Population and Family Planning Commission show that the new generation migrants

accounted for 45.6% of the total number of migrants in China at the end of 2009 (Zhang, 2010), suggesting that they now occupy an increasingly important position in the general migrant population. They are not only younger, but migrated directly to the cities upon their graduation from schools, and therefore are not familiar with work and life in rural areas which they originated from. Their employment and life after adulthood are closely related to the cities; however most of them cannot fully integrate into the cities, as with the first generation migrants. Thus as members of China's 'floating population', the new generation migrants are in a more 'floating' and uncertain situation, compared with the first generation migrants, and therefore need more and special attention in academic research and policy making. This paper represents an effort in this regard.

Two generations of migrants: current understanding and ensuing issues

Before the emergence of the term 'the new generation migrants' and in the process of the development of related literature in China, a large body of literature concerning migrant distinctive characteristics and their mobility patterns has mushroomed in both Chinese and international literature, and this has laid down an important basis for research on the new generation migrants. Many studies have revealed some salient socioeconomic features of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 591 88037795 (O), +86 13859082438 (M).
E-mail addresses: zhu300@fjnu.edu.cn, zhuyu61@163.com (Y. Zhu).

China's migrant population and their mobility patterns, including their younger age and higher educational attainment compared to the general population (Fan, 2008: p. 60; Zhu, 2003: p. 492), their disadvantaged working and living conditions and socioeconomic status in the places of destination (Chan, 1996; Fan, 2002; Shen, 2002; Solinger, 1999; Wang, 2005), their unstable and segmented nature of employment at the lower end of the occupational strata (Fan, 2002; Guo & Iredale, 2004; Yang, 2005), and their unsettled nature and temporary mode of migration (Liang, 2001; Liang & Ma, 2004; Zhu, 2007; Zhu & Chen, 2010). Based on these findings, one can conclude that there is a clear distinction between China's migrant population and the local residents in migrants' places of destination, and that there is a low desire for the majority of migrants to identify themselves with and settle down in the destination cities (Fan, Sun, & Zheng, 2011; Zhu, 2007; Zhu & Chen, 2010).

Studies on the new generation migrants are a further step towards a more accurate and detailed understanding of migrants' characteristics and their socioeconomic status in China. Instead of making distinction between the migrant population and the local residents in migrant destination cities, literature on the new generation migrants is often focused on comparing, in many cases dichotomizing the two generations of migrants (e.g., Liu, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2007). According to most of the literature generated so far, the new generation migrants have higher educational attainment, higher occupational status and employment expectation, higher consumption and social security levels, compared to the first generation migrants. The new generation of migrants are also often labelled as being not as tough as the first generation migrants in their employment, having little emotional ties with their rural places of origin, strongly identifying themselves with the destination cities, and having strong desire to stay in the destination cities (Liu, 2010; Liu & Cheng, 2008; Liu et al., 2012; Luo & Wang, 2003; Wang, 2001, 2010). In a way, the socioeconomic features of China's migrant population and their mobility patterns identified in the previous research represent something in the past, only applying to the first generation migrants; and the new generation migrants have become increasingly similar to the local residents of their age in migrants' places of destination, and the differences between the first and new generations of migrants indicate a fundamental transition in migrants' situation in the cities (Chen, 2009; Liu, 2010; Liu & Cheng, 2008; Liu & Xu, 2007; Wang, 2010).

The above efforts to distinguish between the two generations of migrants certainly contribute to our understanding of China's migrants; however, much still needs to be done to reach a consensus. In fact, some recent studies have challenged the above mentioned popular understanding regarding the new generation migrants, suggesting that the contrast between the two generations of migrants has been exaggerated, and that the dichotomous approach in comparing the two generations of migrants is not adequate and too simplistic (e.g., Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2011; Zhu, 2010). As Zhu (2010) points out, there have been two important inadequacies of relevant research so far. First, many common understandings or perceptions on the new generation migrants have been based on case studies of individual migrant destination cities, whose data were often not collected through a probability sampling procedure and therefore whose results cannot be generalized to the migrant population in general. Second, relating to the first inadequacy, the comparisons between the two generations of migrants have been often one-sided, mainly based on their individual characteristics and personal attitudes, without adequate understanding of structural factors in shaping the differences between the two generations of migrants. Such inaccurate and superficial understanding of the new generation migrants runs the risk of taking a simplistic approach in dealing with their issues, leading to the failure of relevant policies.

By using a data set obtained from a recent representative questionnaire survey in Fujian Province, a major migrant destination in China, this paper attempts to address the above inadequacies. While effort will be made to reveal changes in the transition from the first to the second generation of migrants, more attention will be given to examine the continuities between them, and to explore factors underlying both the continuities and changes. We believe that such an approach will produce a more accurate and objective understanding of the new generation migrants, and contribute to better policy making for them.

Data and methodology

The data set mentioned above was collected through a questionnaire survey jointly conducted by Center for Population and Development Research at Fujian Normal University and Fujian Provincial Population and Family Planning Commission in December 2009. The database for all members of the floating population in Fujian Province, which was established and managed by Fujian Provincial Population and Family Planning Commission and considered to be the most complete migrant database in the Province, was used as the sampling frame, and the potential respondents were those migrants who were 15–64 years old, employed as labourers or doing business, migrated out of the boundaries of their original county-level administrative units, and had lived in the current places of destination for more than one month. As the original purpose of the survey was to collect data for a project with emphasis on women migrants, the sample sizes of female and male migrants were determined to be 2000 and 1000 respectively. Then, a four stage PPS sampling procedure was used to randomly select the county-level, township-level, and village-level administrative units, and then randomly select 10 female migrants and 5 male migrants in each of the selected villages. As a result of the above procedure, a total of 3011 respondents were interviewed, including 1994 responses from female migrants and 1017 responses from male migrants. As the proportions of female and male migrants in the total migrant population were close to 50% in the sampling frame, we randomly selected half of the responses (1016) from those of women respondents and combined them with those of men respondents to form a new data set for the analysis of this paper below. We identified 22 invalid responses in the process of data entry and cleaning from the responses, and obtained a data set with 2011 valid responses, including 997 responses from female migrants and 1014 responses from male migrants.

As the respondents were randomly selected from the most complete migrant database, the survey results are well representative of the migrant population in Fujian Province as a whole, especially those economically active migrants. Furthermore, our previous studies suggest that the general characteristics of migrants in Fujian are fairly consistent with those in the coastal areas of China (Zhu, 2007; Zhu & Chen, 2010), and therefore the analyses in this paper are of certain reference value for understanding the new generation migrants in China's coastal areas. In fact, the number of the new generation migrants accounted for 46.3% of the total migrant population in our sample, and this is rather consistent with the recent data from the State Population and Family Planning Commission mentioned earlier.

In the following we will compare the new and first generations of migrants in terms of their individual characteristics, socioeconomic status and migration intention in the migration process. We will then conduct statistical modelling to reveal the roles of the generational change in determining migrants' socioeconomic status and migration intention. On the basis of the above analysis, we will identify differences and similarities between the two groups,