



## Residential satisfaction of migrant workers in China: A case study of Shenzhen



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### ABSTRACT

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The floating population in China has reached 211 million. Most of these people live in overcrowded rental housing with poor conditions. However, they are not as dissatisfied with their residence as expected. Quantitative analysis has seldom been conducted to explore the underlying reasons for this level of satisfaction. This paper aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the residential satisfaction of migrant workers and analyzing the underlying factors by using two-round survey data in Shenzhen, China. Kinship and friendship, mobility, family life, and housing facilities and services significantly affect residential satisfaction. The effects of institutional factors and residential preferences are not significant. These findings provide a deeper understanding of the housing behavior of migrant workers in China.

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### Introduction

Both the imbalance in regional development and the deregulation of the floating population policy in the 1980s accelerated the influx of the floating population<sup>1</sup> from less developed to developed regions in China to search for job opportunities. Since the 1978 economic reform, China has experienced remarkable speed in economic growth and exceptional urbanization. The urbanization rate increased from 10.6% in 1949 (i.e., the founding of the People's Republic of China) to 17.9% in 1978 (i.e., the commencement of China's reform and open-door policy) and further to 51.3% in 2011, which indicate an almost fivefold increase over 60 years (Fig. 1). A large economic development gap exists between regions, especially between western inner cities and eastern coastal areas and between urban and rural areas. In 1993, China had a floating population of about 70 million. The number increased to 140 million in 2003 (Xinhua Net, 2005) and to 211 million in 2009 (Ifeng.com, 2010). The percentage of the floating population was 5.9% in 1993, 10.8% in 2003, and 15.8% in 2009. The members of this floating population, who have left their original places of household registration to search for better job opportunities in urban cities, are usually called migrant workers.

In general, migrant workers live in overcrowded housing with poor facilities. Overcrowding is the most commonly reported quality issue by migrant workers (Li & Duda, 2010; Wang, Hou, & Zhai, 2010; Wu, 2004). The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS)<sup>2</sup> indicates that migrant workers occupy a much smaller living space than their local counterparts. In China, the average floor area occupied by migrant households is 61.3 m<sup>2</sup>, and that occupied by local households is 77.6 m<sup>2</sup>; in Shenzhen, the figures are 48.8 and 74 m<sup>2</sup> per household, respectively. Migrants who live in dormitories and inner suburbs suffer from the poorest housing quality (Jiang, 2006; Li & Duda, 2010; Wu, 2002, 2004). Although temporary migrants occupy far less space and endure poorer conditions than their local counterparts, they are less dissatisfied with their residence than locals (Wu, 2004). More than 80% of temporary migrants feel neutral or good about their housing conditions. Li, Duda, and An (2009) observe that the residential satisfaction of migrant workers in China does not follow standard patterns. This phenomenon is attributed to the preferences of migrant workers for convenient travel to work and low cost, their less emphasis on housing size or qualitative aspects, and the intervening effect of employment (Li et al., 2009; Wu, 2004).

Residential satisfaction is the degree to which the residential environment helps residents achieve their goals (Canter & Rees, 1982). The degree of satisfaction can be obtained by a comparison between people's actual residential environment and their ideal one. Although residential satisfaction is an important indicator of

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<sup>1</sup> Floating population refers to people who have left their original living places without officially changing their household registration. These people are also called "temporary migrants." The other kind of migrant workers is called "permanent migrants" (i.e., those who changed their household registration).

<sup>2</sup> CGSS is an annual national survey conducted since 2003 by the People's University of China and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

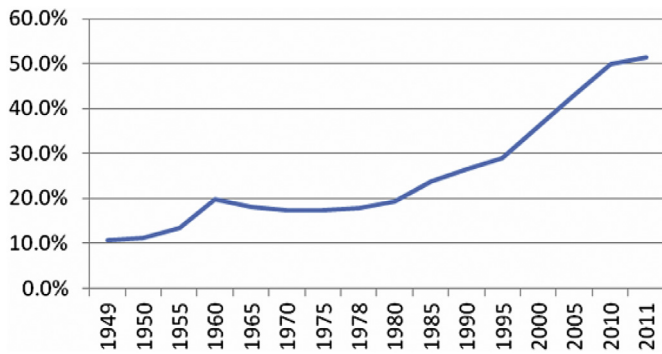


Fig. 1. Proportion of urban population to total population in China. Source: China Statistical Yearbook, 2012.

living quality, no statistical analysis has been conducted to examine the residential satisfaction of migrant workers in China or has tested hypotheses on reasons behind the non-standard patterns of residential satisfaction. Policymakers also remain poorly informed about the interventions they can provide to alleviate housing poverty among migrant workers. Input from migrant workers is urgently required. Thus, this study aims to investigate the residential satisfaction of migrant workers in China and the reasons for the non-standard patterns. The subjects of this study are temporary migrant workers who have stayed in the locality for at least half a year and do not have a local *hukou*.<sup>3</sup> For convenience, these workers are called migrant workers. The research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To investigate the overall residential satisfaction as perceived by migrant workers in Shenzhen
- 2) To examine the satisfaction of these workers with different housing aspects
- 3) To examine their satisfaction with different housing types
- 4) To explore factors that affect their overall residential satisfaction

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, literature is reviewed to identify possible reasons that underlie the non-standard patterns of residential satisfaction of migrant workers in China. Hypotheses are proposed accordingly. Second, the research methods are presented. The paper describes migrant workers in Shenzhen in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, mobility characteristics, housing characteristics, and residential preferences. The next section examines the residential satisfaction of migrant workers: (1) overall satisfaction, (2) satisfaction with different housing aspects, and (3) satisfaction with different housing types. Three models are established to explore the factors that affect overall residential satisfaction. To verify the results, the fifth section compares and discusses findings from the two-round surveys. Lastly, conclusions and policy implications are presented.

## Literature review

### Migration and migrant workers

Many empirical studies on migration and migrant workers in China have been conducted since the 1990s (a few studies were made in the 1980s). Such research has focused on geographic

distribution, migration indicators, and migration effects, among others (Chai & Chai, 1997; Goodkind & West, 2002; Fan, 2005; Liang & Ma, 2004; Wu, 2006, 2008; Zhang & Song, 2004). The characteristics of migrant workers have also been examined, such as young age, low education, mobility, low wage, occupation, employment orientation, no sense of belonging, and *hukou* status (Chan, Yao, & Zhao, 2003; Li, 2006; Liang & Ma, 2004; Ma & Chen, 2008; Shen & Huang, 2003; Wong, Li, & Song, 2007; Wu, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006; Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009). The housing behaviors of migrant workers are characterized by little investment in improving housing conditions and little emphasis on amenities or housing services. These characteristics are attributed to the specific characteristics (i.e., household-level strategies, the transitional economic environment, and individual migration characteristics) of migrant workers as well as the *hukou* system in China (Huang & Jiang, 2009; Li et al., 2009; Logan, Fang, & Zhang, 2009; Wu, 2004).

Among all the housing characteristics of migrant workers in China, housing choices and conditions are the most frequently examined. Renting and dormitories are the most common housing choices of migrant workers. Wu (2002, 2004) examined the factors that underlie the housing choices and conditions of migrant workers in Shanghai and Beijing and found that such housing choices are generally affected by *hukou*, age, education, income, period of stay, intention to stay, family members in the locality, kinship and friendship ties, and employment. Huang and Jiang (2009) and Logan et al. (2009) also observed the significant effects of institutional factors. Li et al. (2009) indicated that the housing choices of migrant workers are heavily affected by their transitional characteristics in terms of employment, strong saving orientation, mobility, and family life. The effects of education and income are insignificant. The housing conditions of migrant workers are generally affected by housing choices, region, income, education, marital status, *hukou*, and employment (Wu, 2002, 2004). Poor housing conditions are attributed to restricted access to urban housing and temporary status. Intention to stay has more effects on housing conditions than the duration of stay.

### Residential satisfaction

Studies about residential satisfaction can be classified into four categories. The first category is the residential satisfaction of certain demographic groups. From an ethnicity perspective, Jagun, Brown, Milburn, and Gary (1990) used multivariate techniques to identify the factors that best predict the residential satisfaction of urban black adults. Physical environment, socio-economic variables, and personal variables were identified as predictors of residential satisfaction. The second category is residential satisfaction of people at certain stages of life. Amerigo and Aragonés (1997) analyzed the residential satisfaction of around 1000 housewives in terms of cognitive, subjective, social, and behavioral aspects. The following factors contribute to residential satisfaction: non-overcrowding of the house, relationships with neighbors, housing quality, urban insecurity, infrastructure, neighborhood facilities, residential safety, overcrowding, and health infrastructure. The third category is residential satisfaction with respect to certain housing preferences. Ge and Hokao (2006) conducted surveys in two Japanese cities and studied the residential satisfaction of people with different housing preferences in terms of comfort, health, safety, and community. The fourth category is residential satisfaction with particular building performance and design. Li (2010) studied residential satisfaction with affordable housing<sup>4</sup> in Beijing, China. The

<sup>3</sup> *Hukou* is a household registration system that is a fundamental institution in China. *Hukou* was introduced in the late 1950s. It has two criteria: original living place (local vs. non-local) and *hukou* type (agricultural vs. non-agricultural). The system allocates a *hukou* location and *hukou* type to every Chinese citizen, which are passed on from the parents to their children.

<sup>4</sup> Namely, Jingji Shiyong Fang, public housing selling to low- and medium-wage earners.

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