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Fostering a more ‘cultured’ city through inclusion: Metrics for sense of belonging for migrants in Chinese urban areas

Ercument Gorgul^{a*}, Lucy Luo^b,
Carlos R. Rivera^c, Blaire-Ashley H. Jesseph^d, Jacob Hamel^e

^aTongji University, 1239 Siping Road, Shanghai, 200092, China

^bJoint US-China Collaboration on Clean Energy, Shanghai, 20000, China

^cHarvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States

^dAppalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, United States

^ePrinceton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, United States

Abstract

Over the past four decades, infrastructural and economic development in Chinese cities has outpaced its cultural development. As the proportion of people living in cities in China quintupled from 1950 to 2014, from 11% to 54% according to a 2009 report by McKinsey, while at the same time various challenges have paved the way to limit cultural prosperity and quality of life in cities. Cities currently face number of problems: Vehicle-oriented streets are not friendly to pedestrians; public spaces are designed without users in mind [1]; communities are isolated from one another [2]; and finally creative industries are lagging behind other industries according to a 2014 Forbes report.

It seems that China's urban development states a condition of “survivability” rather than “livability”. What is understood from the notion of livability within a city today is to be able to sustain quality of life through holistic planning strategies rather than purely economic ones. Such cities create robust natural environments as well as built environments, social equity as well as social stability. And as a result both a more reliable creative prosperity and economic prosperity have been maintained.

This paper will seek to establish a 3-pillar approach to social inclusion and will examine each of these through issues related with migrants in China facing today. It seems that there is a great potential in using mobile and web-based technologies to generate rapid and sustainable solutions for migrants. There is also an enormous potential to develop feedback mechanisms for these solutions that can become part of the ‘culture’ of living in big cities in China.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 134 8272 5491;.
E-mail address: ercu_gorgul@tongji.edu.cn

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1. Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed the largest internal migration of people in recorded history as hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens have left the countryside to pursue manufacturing and service jobs along the China's coastal cities. Since 1950, the nation's urban population has quintupled from 11% of the total population in 1950 to 54% in 2014 [3]. For many migrants, leaving the countryside towards urban opportunities has led directly to higher wages and an increased standard of living through access to better health and educational services.

The breadth and speed of this demographic transition has created a number of externalities that challenge social cohesion of many urban communities. For example, Shenzhen's fast-paced development creates a stark contrast between its towering skyline with the poverty of surrounding villages, as the benefits of urbanization have not accrued evenly to China's migrant population. The current status of the *hukou*, a required household registration system, bars most migrants from enjoying the high-quality public services afforded by the nation's first and second tier cities because their *hukou* belong to another province. In addition, especially in first tier cities such as Shanghai, migrants face discriminatory perceptions and treatment by locals who view them as uncultured or backwards [3]. As a result, a majority of migrants experience exclusion from the prosperity of urban growth surrounding them. Indeed for the past three decades, the urban development in China has been guided by principles of economic development, such as GDP growth and factory output [4]. The resulting landscape experienced by many migrants is one that not only barely meets their basic physical needs, but also falls short on satisfying the expectations set by urban middle class prosperity. In short they seem like landscapes in which to survive, rather than live.

To further explore challenges faced by migrants, and to offer potentially valid proposals for policy considerations aimed at migrant social alleviation and how this can be introduced as sets of cultural norms of living in big cities in China, this paper will examine the migrant worker's world through the lens of social inclusion.

2. Components of inclusion

The term social inclusion can be understood as “the extent to which individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society, taking into account economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement” [3].

For the purpose and extent and limits of this paper and regarding the context of cities in China, it might be relevant to divide the extent of social inclusion into three major policy goals:

- Physical inclusion
- Social inclusion
- Economic inclusion.

Under physical inclusion, the potential of how to improve migrants' access within central urban areas of city for their most basic physical needs regarding health care is examined. Under social inclusion, creation of an environment promoting inclusion and appreciation for other inhabitants of different backgrounds is examined. For economic inclusion, the measures that are potentially most effective in increasing and equalizing migrant access to local education and employment opportunities are examined. Finally, to amalgamate the findings into potential policy proposals for municipal governments dealing issues of social integration of migrants, we will analyze case studies from Europe, Shanghai, and Tianjin.

3. Physical inclusion through networks

Though challenges of education and healthcare persist, perhaps the most omnipresent difficulty of migrants adjusting to city life is acclimating to a new and foreign social environment. Migrant workers within China are overwhelmingly young with a median age of 32.8, of which 80% of all migrants are under 35 years of age [3]. Migrants tend to be better educated than their peers who chose to remain on countryside, but often are less educated than permanent residents of the cities to which they are moving into. On average, migrants in China receive an

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