



# Rural-urban circularity in China: Analysis of longitudinal surveys in Anhui, 1980–2009



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## ABSTRACT

Hundreds of millions of migrants from rural China circulate between their home villages and host cities. While existing research tends to focus on the question of permanent settlement in cities, the phenomenon of circularity which has prevailed for decades is not well understood. For example, how often do migrants return, how long do they stay before migrating again, and whether and how these behaviors have changed over time, are seldom studied. Drawing from the longitudinal migration histories of 530 rural migrants from six villages in Anhui Province and using multi-level Poisson regression models, this paper examines how rural-urban circularity has changed since the 1980s. We found that migrants who first left for migrant work in the 2000s spent less time in the home location when they return, compared to those who first left in earlier decades. Male migrants return less frequently than female migrants; and younger migrants return less than older migrants. Migrants who have had high-school education, and who have young children, a spouse, and a high-quality house at the home location tend to return more frequently and spend more time when they return than other migrants. Women's circularity is more sensitive to the number of dependent children and the decade of first out-migration than men; and men's circularity is more sensitive to education level and generation than women. Our findings underscore circularity as a fundamental attribute of rural-urban migration in China, identifies the gender and generational differences in circularity, and highlights the social and household ties that sustain migrants' motivation to return/circulate.

## 1. Introduction

The hundreds of millions of rural Chinese who work in urban areas are usually referred to as migrants but not circulators in spite of their moving back and forth between their home villages and the cities (Fan, 2016; Han et al., 2009; Schmidt-Kallert, 2009). While scholars have studied the prospect of migrant settlement in cities (Fan, 2011; Tang and Feng, 2015; Zhu and Chen, 2010), research on circularity is limited. One reason is the tendency to focus on the question of permanent settlement rather than circular migration and multilocity (Fan, 2011; Schmidt-Kallert, 2009). For example, many studies highlight *hukou* as an impediment to migrants' ability to stay in cities (Chan, 1996; Wu and Treiman, 2004). Another reason is the reliance on cross-sectional data that is less powerful than longitudinal data for analyses of circular migration.

Informed by theories and research on circular migration and recent studies on migration in China (see the next two sections), this paper seeks to answer two main research questions: (1) How has rural-urban circular migration changed since the 1980s? (2) What factors have

contributed to changes in rural-urban circularity during this period? We use the longitudinal migration histories of 530 rural workers from six villages in Anhui Province to answer the above questions. By using two-level Poisson regression models, we analyze how the frequency and duration of return migration have changed over time and how they are related to gender and individual and household characteristics.

The next section reviews existing theories about circular migration and highlights some of the factors that explain changes in circularity. It is followed by a brief overview of rural-urban migration and circularity in China. Our empirical analysis focuses on villagers' migration histories via descriptive statistics and modeling. The paper concludes with a summary of our findings.

## 2. Research on circular migration

Circular migration is not new and has been widely practiced around the world, e.g., seasonal and cyclical migration in South Pacific Islands (Bedford, 1973, 1980; Hugo, 1982), Africa (Clark et al., 2007; Collinson et al., 2006; Potts, 2010; Elkan, 1967), Southeast Asia (Hugo, 1982,

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1983; Goldstein, 1978, 1987), and India (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; Gidwani et al., 2003). However, conventional theories of human mobility tend to consider migration as a one-way move from an origin to a destination rather than an interactive and iterative activity involving multiple sites and communities. Therefore, circular migration is often understood as a temporary solution for low-skilled workers that will eventually vanish with economic growth (Bedford, 1973; Hugo, 1982).

At the same time, circular migration has increased between developing and developed economies (Constant and Zimmermann, 2012; Massey et al., 1994), within developed countries (DaVanzo, 1983; Gáková and Dijkstra, 2008), and among high-skilled workers (Hugo, 2008; Qin, 2015). The increased prevalence and magnitude of circular migration hints at its resilience and begs the question if such activity is merely a transitional step toward permanent settlement. Theoretically, this question challenges the assumption that migrants are unidirectional and their objective is always permanent settlement. Rather, migrants may not intend to or may not be able to establish a new permanent residence, and some may rather maintain a “multi-locational” livelihood for an extended period of time (Schmidt-Kallert, 2009).

Four theories have informed research on circular migration. “Migration transition theory” and “dual labor market theory” focus on the effect of economic structure. Migration transition theory considers circulation as a major form of migration in a “transitional society” (Zelinsky, 1971). In this vein, circular migration occurs when small-holder agriculture, agricultural surplus labor, and urban-centered industrial development coexist, and when the demand for skilled labor does not exceed the demand for unskilled labor (Guest, 1999). Transportation is an important structural factor: it improves as a society develops, and such improvement helps facilitate circulation (Acevedo et al., 2004; Hugo, 1981). Dual labor market theory highlights capital owners who use migrant labor in the secondary sector to adjust production according to economic cycles (Piore, 1980). Because there are always uncertainties and fluctuations in economic activities, this theory predicts that circular migrants are always in demand in industrial societies.

The third theory, “social network theory,” emphasizes the perpetuation of circular migration through networks of contacts that migrants have developed. These networks provide social support and reduce living costs in host areas, which helps return migrants to migrate again (Fan and Stretton, 1984). This explanation is reinforced by the theory of cumulative causation, which contends that migration sustains itself by fostering more migration (Massey, 1990).

Lastly, the “new economics of labor migration theory” (NELM) highlights circular migration as a household strategy to maximize household income and minimize risk, especially in developing economies where the capital market is under-developed, job opportunities are not sustainable, and the formal social security system is insufficient (Hugo, 1982; Stark and Bloom, 1985; Stark, 1991). Migrants move to urban areas to earn higher incomes and send back remittances to support left-behind family members, who benefit from the low cost of living in rural areas. That they continue to reside and work in rural areas makes it easier for migrant family members to return if appropriate urban work is no longer available. The above theories point to the importance of considering factors at all three levels to explain circular migration: individual, household, and structural, as illustrated by research on international migration (Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Massey and Pren, 2012; Bastia, 2011). In the next section, we shall describe the factors at all three levels in the Chinese context.

Methodologically and empirically, existing research has rarely examined the frequency and intensity of circularity. One exception is Constant and Zimmermann’s work which documents and explains the number of times a guest worker exits and the number of years he/she lives away from Germany (Constant and Zimmermann, 2007). Using a 14-year panel dataset of guest workers, they found that the frequency of circulation first decreases and then increases with age. Younger and

older migrants spend more years outside Germany once they exit than the middle-age migrants. Being married and owning a house in Germany reduce the frequency of circulation and the number of years away. It is important to note that factors which contribute to less frequent circulation do not always lead to shorter time away from Germany. For example, being female and better educated reduces the number of exits but does not significantly affect the number of years away from Germany. Speaking the local language shortens the time away from Germany but does not affect the frequency of circulation. Having a spouse living outside Germany encourages guest workers to spend more years away from Germany once they exit the country, but it does not significantly affect the frequency of circulation. While a drawback of Constant and Zimmermann’s work is that it does not consider whether circularity changes over time, its analysis of the frequency of circulation and the amount of time a migrant spends in different locations provides an appropriate analytical tool for this paper’s empirical analysis.

### 3. Rural-urban circularity in China

China’s level of urbanization was only 18% in 1978 and it skyrocketed to 56% by 2015 (Jiang, 2013: 23; Wu, 2016), largely attributable to massive rural-urban migration. The “floating population,” referring to migrants who are living in places different from where they are officially registered, amounted to about 300 million or about 22% of the population in 2015 (NBS, 2015). Most of them are from rural origins working in urban areas, and circular migration is a prominent feature among them (Bai and He, 2003; Fan, 2011; Han et al., 2009). Specifically, these migrants do not tend to settle down in urban destinations but instead circulate back and forth while maintaining a household split between the city and the countryside (Fan, 2011, 2016). Such practice has continued for years and even decades and has become a norm among rural Chinese.

It is widely accepted that Chinese migrants’ circularity is due to the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system (Chan, 1996; Cheng, 2008; Li, 2003; Wang, 2013), which severely limits rural migrants’ access to social benefits such as subsidized housing, health care, and education in host cities. Recent research has also highlighted circular migration as a household strategy that aims at maximizing household income while guarding migrants’ economic and social resources in the countryside (Fan and Wang, 2008; Fan, 2009, 2011; Fan et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2011; Zhu, 2003, 2007; Zhu and Chen, 2010). Most empirical studies on circular migration in China have focused on the presumed progression from circularity to settlement, seeking to explain for a strong settlement intention (Fan, 2011; Tang and Feng, 2015; Zhu, 2007; Zhu and Chen, 2010) or a high probability of becoming a permanent resident (Hu et al., 2011; Mendoza, 2008; Poston and Zhang, 2008; Sun and Fan, 2011).

However, due to the paucity of longitudinal data, we know little about the intensity of circular migration, whether and how it has changed over time, and what factors affect the frequency of circularity. Longitudinal data is needed also because both migrants’ composition and behavior have changed. First, new-generation migrant workers (generally referring to those born after 1980) have accounted for more than half of the migrant population since the early 2000s, and their proportion is growing (NBS, 2011; NPFPC, 2015). Second, unlike the 1980s and 1990s when migrants tended to leave the spouse behind, it is increasingly common for migrants to pursue urban work together with the spouse (couple migration) and even bring their children along (family migration) (NBS, 2014; Zhou, 2004). Third, it appears that the length of time that migrants spend in cities has increased over time (Duan et al., 2013; NPFPC, 2015).

All the above changes seem to point to less frequent rural-urban circulation over time. Specifically, new-generation migrant workers have expressed a stronger preference for urban life than older migrants (Tang and Feng, 2015; Wu and Xie, 2006); migrating with family

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