



# Beyond homeownership: Housing conditions, housing support and rural migrant urban settlement intentions in China

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## ABSTRACT

Housing greatly influences the settlement of both internal and international migrants. Yet previous studies have paid attention only to the role of homeownership. This study goes beyond this limitation and investigates how housing conditions measured by ownership, size, quality, location, and housing support including the housing provident fund and the housing subsidy from work units affect rural migrant urban settlement intentions. Using survey data from the Rural-Urban Migration in China project, this study finds that rural migrants who live in better housing conditions and enjoy housing support are more determined to settle in urban areas. In addition, significant regional differences can be observed in the association between ownership of dwelling and rural migrant urban settlement intentions. Furthermore, the effect of housing support on urban settlement intentions is stronger for rural migrants living in public rental housing than for those who live in other types of housing. Such findings highlight the importance of considering the “quality” dimension of housing and housing support when analyzing the association between housing and rural migrant urban settlement. The study also underscores the necessity of building a government-led multi-agent housing provision system in China to enable rural migrants to permanently settle down in cities.

## 1. Introduction

Tenure transition from renting to homeownership is regarded as a significant life event (Huang, 2004). This is exceptionally true for migrants because such a transition is also viewed as a process for migrants to assimilate into the host society (Alba & Logan, 1992). Therefore, homeownership is a crucial indicator for predicting settlement outcomes of both internal and international migrants. Wu and Logan (2016) also suggest that homeownership is the strongest predictor of place attachment. Other than ownership, the attributes of housing encompass many other dimensions, such as price, amenities, size, tenure, and location (Tao, Hui, Wong, & Chen, 2015). Thus, investigating the link between migrant housing and settlement decisions should go beyond homeownership and consider other important housing attributes. Theoretical inquiry and empirical exploration from this perspective may provide new insights for understanding settlement behaviors of migrants and solutions for coping with the challenge of housing poverty usually faced by both internal and international migrants.

Previous studies on urban settlement (intentions) of rural migrants in China have focused on the influence of institutional (Chen & Fan, 2016; Fan, 2011; Zhu, 2007), demographic (Tang & Feng, 2015),

socioeconomic (Cao, Li, Ma, & Tao, 2014; Hao & Tang, 2015; Tan et al., 2015; Zhu & Chen, 2010), health (Xie, Wang, Chen, & Ritakallio, 2017), and social capital factors (Chen & Liu, 2016; Fan, 2011). A general conclusion of these studies is that the importance of *hukou* — the Chinese household registration system — in determining rural migrant urban settlement has increasingly given way to other factors (Zhu, 2007). On the other hand, demographic factors such as gender and cohort and socioeconomic factors such as education, income, and occupation significantly relate to rural migrant urban settlement intentions (Cao et al., 2014; Fan, 2011; Tan et al., 2015; Tang & Feng, 2015; Zhu & Chen, 2010). In addition, health is a prominent filter for including or excluding rural migrants from urban society (Chen, 2011; Lu & Qin, 2014; Xie et al., 2017). That is, healthier individuals are more likely to choose to migrate to and permanently stay in cities. Moreover, social networks are playing an increasingly crucial role in determining the residential mobility and urban permanence of rural migrants (Chen & Liu, 2016; Huang, Dijst, & Van Weesep, 2016). Rural migrants who can successfully build good social relations with local urban residents show a stronger intention to settle permanently in urban areas (Chen & Liu, 2016).

However, except for a few cases, housing has received scant

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attention as a significant factor influencing rural migrant urban settlement intentions (e.g., Liu & Wang, 2014; Tang & Feng, 2015). Furthermore, existing studies have only examined how homeownership influences rural migrant urban settlement intentions (e.g., Liu, Wang, & Chen, 2017). The attributes of housing cover a wide range (Tao et al., 2015). Thus, this study tests the associations between housing conditions — including housing quality, size, and location — and rural migrant urban settlement intentions rather than just examining the generally covered dimension, dwelling ownership. In addition, existing studies have suggested that housing supports such as subsidies are effective ways of reducing housing poverty and the social problems associated with it (Schwartz, 2006; Wood, Turnham, & Mills, 2008). Therefore, this study examines whether housing provident fund (HPF) participation and housing subsidies from work units — two critical components of housing support — affect rural migrant urban settlement intentions. Moreover, since Zang, Lv, and Warren (2015) suggest that there are significant regional differences regarding the effect of housing on urban settlement intentions of rural migrants, this study also examines how regional factors affect the association between ownership of dwelling and rural migrant urban settlement intentions. In addition to overcoming the limits of missing dimensions, this study uses data collected from a survey in 15 cities distributed in the eastern, central, and western areas of China, which is different from previous studies that have a very limited geographical scope. As such, this study arguably will produce more robust results than earlier studies.

## 2. Rural migrants and urban settlement intentions in China

The urban settlement intention can be defined as the willingness of people to permanently settle down in cities. In recent years, rural migrants in China have expressed increasingly stronger urban settlement intentions (Xie et al., 2017). This change in attitudes subverts the conventional recognition that rural migrants are only temporary residents in urban areas and will finally return to their places of origin. Given the large number of this group, which was over 169 million in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBS], 2017), this process will definitely have profound impacts on the social and economic development of China.

Traditionally, rural migrants are regarded only as urban sojourners due to the unique household registration (*hukou*) system in China. Established in the 1950s when China was in the era of socialism, the system divides Chinese citizens into two groups, urban and rural (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994). The latter group is not allowed to move into the city without permission from the government. In addition to controlling population mobility, the *hukou* system also serves as a welfare allocation system and an instrument for the Chinese government to maintain social and political stability in China (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994; Wang, 2005). For instance, urban citizens can enjoy free or subsidized food, health care, and housing as well as many other welfare entitlements, but rural citizens cannot access these benefits. Also, the Chinese government established the so-called targeted people monitoring system using the *hukou* registration (F.-L. Wang, (2004); Y. P. Wang, (2004)). Citizens who are suspected of being dangerous to society will be monitored by local governments. Under such circumstances, rural-urban migration was very rare during the socialist China.

Since the late 1970s, with the implementation of a market-oriented policy, the Chinese government has gradually relaxed the *hukou* restriction. Owing to this policy reform, enormous numbers of rural laborers have migrated to cities to seek job opportunities to improve their standard of living. Ample evidence has shown the positive impacts of rural-urban migration. For example, it boosts the Chinese economy by providing cheap labor for urban industries (Chan, 2009; Wang, 2005), and it accelerates the modernization of the countryside by delivering capital and entrepreneurship from urban to rural areas (Ma, 2001, 2002). However, due to systemic inertia, the *hukou* system still

significantly influences the livelihoods and well-being of Chinese people. Compared to people with rural *hukou*, people with urban *hukou* are still a priority in terms of incomes, job opportunities, and welfare entitlements (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Fan, 2002, 2007; Li, 2006; Sicular, Yue, Gustafsson, & Li, 2007; Wu & Wang, 2014). Because of the labor market segmentation and social exclusion associated with the *hukou* system, rural migrants are viewed only as temporary, not permanent, urban residents.

Nonetheless, permanent urban settlement has become an increasingly pervasive choice among rural migrants recently. This trend is deeply rooted in social changes that have happened in China in recent years. First, the demographic structure of China has changed substantially with the coming of the so-called Lewis turning point (Cai, 2010; Cai & Du, 2011; Zhang, Yang, & Wang, 2011). The supply of rural labor is no longer unlimited, which results in increasing wages for rural migrants (Cai & Du, 2011). Such an increase in income provides a solid foundation for rural migrants to permanently stay in cities. Second, despite the fact that the *hukou*-related discrimination against the rural *hukou* population still exists, the role of *hukou* in determining the life chances of rural migrants has been steadily decreasing (Zhan, 2011). Abolishing the rural-urban dual system created by the *hukou* system has been put on the agenda of the Chinese government. Rural migrants in the future are expected to enjoy more and more equal opportunities as urban residents. Third, cohort is an important factor that cannot be ignored. Different from the old generations, the new-generation rural migrants prefer the urban lifestyle to the rural lifestyle (Wang, 2008). As a result, they are more likely to choose to live in cities permanently (Tang & Feng, 2015).

Noticeably, in a recent study, Chen and Fan (2016) reveal that the majority of rural migrants do not wish to convert their rural *hukou* status to an urban *hukou* status at the price of giving up the rights associated with farm and residential lands. Some rural migrants even wish to keep the pattern of circular migration between rural and urban areas rather than permanently settling in cities. Two reasons may explain such phenomenon. First, rural migrants still have to face uncertainties in cities due to the existing institutional and social exclusion in urban China. The pattern of circular migration is a way to counter the risks of permanent urban settlement. Second, the improvement of rural economy and the increase of rural land value undermine the desire of urban settlement among rural migrants, particularly, for those who are original from places which are close to cities. New trends as such reflect that rural migrants are becoming more and more rational in settlement decisions in present China.

## 3. Housing poverty of rural migrants in urban China

The housing poverty of rural migrants in China has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Huang, 2003; Logan, Fang, & Zhang, 2009; Ma & Xiang, 1998; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2010; Wu, 2002, 2004, 2006; Zhao, 2017; Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009). Most rural migrants live in dormitories, shacks, and urban villages with poor facilities and infrastructure, and only a very small proportion of them have the capacity to purchase commodity housing from the private market (Li & Duda, 2010; Ouyang, Wang, Tian, & Niu, 2017; Solinger, 1999; F.-L. Wang, (2004); Y. P. Wang, (2004); Wu, 2004, 2006; Zheng et al., 2009). The housing disadvantage of rural migrants mainly comes from institutional barriers associated with the *hukou* system (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Cheng & Selden, 1994; Huang & Clark, 2002; Solinger, 1999; F.-L. Wang, (2004); Y. P. Wang, (2004); Wu, 2002, 2004, 2006; Zhao, 2017). This system excludes rural migrants from many types of affordable housing in cities—for instance, economic and comfortable housing, low-rent housing, and municipal public housing—all of which are reserved for local residents with urban *hukou* (Song, Zenou, & Ding, 2008; Wu, 2002, 2004, 2006). Meanwhile, purchasing commodity housing from the market is beyond the economic capacity of many rural migrants. As a result, rural migrants have to rely substantially on

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