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Housing preferences and access to public rental housing among migrants in Chongqing, China

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ABSTRACT

Since 2010, a fundamental transition in the Chinese housing system has been the policy of opening access to public rental housing (PRH) for Chinese (intra-national) migrants. While migrants are increasingly stating that they have a preference for public rental housing, some of them did not act upon such a desire while others have been insistent on it. Responding to a lack of understanding of the relationship between migrants and the public rental housing regime, the study examines three stages of migrants' access to public rental housing with a focus on exploring individual and housing differences between migrants. The three stages comprise (1) migrants who stated a preference for PRH; (2) migrants who translated the stated preference into action; and (3) migrants who persisted in the PRH application, those who applied four times or more, and those who gave up applying for a PRH after having applied one-to-three times. The study combines survey and statistical data from Chongqing, the first city to extensively offer migrants equal access to public rental housing on a broad scale. Results reveal that migrants with inter-provincial *hukou*, lower income, larger family size, more urban relatives and an expectation to improve their housing conditions were more likely to state a preference for PRH and to eventually realize such a preference. However, although migrants with unstable occupations also stated a preference for PRH, the application criteria restricted them from continually trying to realize their preferences. Moreover, migrants were less likely to move from employer supplied housing to PRH compared with moving from private rental housing to PRH. The consistent application for PRH was more likely to relate to the desire for single family housing, centrally located and larger housing, while these preferences and the PRH provision did not match.

1. Introduction

With the explosive urban growth emerging across the world, the right to housing for the large group of internal migrants has been highlighted as an important political and socio-economic human right along with other social rights (Drakakis-Smith, 2012). In the 1950s and 1960s, the state started to take responsibilities for providing massive public housing for migrants; however, inefficiencies soon emerged, public housing often remained a small scale issue, poor in terms of location and facilities, largely unaffordable, running into financial problems, and causing segregation and exclusion problems (Hegedus et al., 2013). Successful cases were found only in a few extremely rich countries like Saudi Arabia, and regions where public housing is also ownership oriented, like Singapore and Hong Kong (Chen, Stephens, & Man, 2013; Gilbert, 2012). By contrast, in most countries, including China in the twentieth century, states have withdrawn their involvements in housing provision and even decided to sell the existing public

housing at large discounts, as illustrated by the 'right to buy' policy in the UK. They have gradually authorized private sectors to provide affordable housing and capital subsidies (Gilbert, 2004; Jones & Murie, 2008). Generally, we now see a very low proportion of public housing across the world, and although developing countries generally lack rental housing, many governments consider the market to be more effective in providing housing assistance (Musterd, 2014; Ronald & Doling, 2014).

However, in 2008, the Chinese state announced a revival of its policy aimed at the construction of massive public housing, despite the fact that it had experienced serious failures in public housing provision between 1970s and 1980s. Since these failures, China had shifted its focus to promoting homeownership, giving rise to policies in support of massive industrialisation (Wang & Murie, 1996). Meanwhile, the urban population boomed from over 191 million in 1980 to nearly 670 million in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Consequently, the nation experienced an extreme shortage of affordable housing

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(Wang, 2000). China did not choose to deal with the housing problems by upgrading and allowing legalizing the self-help housing, like Latin America countries did with their slums and squatter settlements. It also did not widely expand capital housing subsidies, like in developed countries. Instead, with the aim of reducing housing problems while maintaining economic growth, the state authorized local governments to encourage public-private cooperation for constructing a large amount of public housing. A growing literature has shown interests in whether the new public housing system would run into 'old troubles' (Chen, Yang, & Wang, 2014). However, these interests rarely stretched to the access to public housing of Chinese internal migrants. Given that migrants have accounted for over 30 per cent of the urban population and given that this is the first time that China opens its public housing system for the whole migrant population, knowledge about migrants' attitudes towards the new public housing policy is crucial for understanding all impacts of the new housing policy.

Due to the household registration system (*hukou*) that was established in 1958, Chinese migrants usually were excluded from access to public housing and were more or less forced to passively choose from other, inferior, available options, that is: between employer supplied housing and inexpensive private rental housing (Wu & Webster, 2010; Wu, 2004). *Hukou* implies that for all PRC nationals in mainland China, their personal identity is classified based on both their original residential attribute ('agricultural hukou'/'non-agricultural hukou') and the region of registration (local/non-local). Prior to 2008, the Chinese state also had adopted policies that could cope with the housing needs of migrants (Huang & Li, 2014), but most attempts relied on companies to provide housing assistance to migrant employees (Li & Duda, 2010; Zhou & Ronald, 2017 a). Recent housing policy is, the first that, in principle, eliminates the *hukou* discrimination and treats migrants as equal to local residents (Wang, Hui, Choguill, & Jia, 2015). The government alleged that the provision of public rental housing (PRH) would improve the urban integration of migrants, and bring further changes to the demographic and economic landscapes of urban China (Zhou, 2018). Thus, this paper is especially interested in PRH, the only type of public housing that opens to migrants. We examine to what extent the PRH has responded to migrants' housing needs via studying their stated preferences and real access to PRH.

Unfortunately, although the Chinese state has put more efforts in developing China's public housing sector and in related housing policy, implementations of the PRH policy, especially the supply of PRH to migrants, have been poor at the local level. This has caused difficulties in studying the actual access to PRH among migrants. Some studies conducted surveys within a hypothetical context (based on stated preference data). They show that migrants have a relatively strong willingness to access PRH (Hui, Yu, & Ye, 2014). Other studies, based on revealed preference data, obtained variegated results. For instance, reluctance is found in Shanghai, Wuhan and Zhengzhou (Cai, 2012; Chen, 2012), while active participation is found in Beijing, Chengdu and Chongqing (Lu, Yang, & Zhao, 2016; Zhou, 2017a). This paper is especially interested in the distinction between stated preference and revealed action. It selected the city of Chongqing, which has provided PRH at the broadest scale in China and could show very active application behaviour of migrants. It thus represented an 'ideal city' for showing the success of the new PRH policy. The paper compares the extent to which key factors relate to the preferences for and access to PRH of migrants. It develops a series of binary logistic regression models to estimate three stages in accessing PRH, including those migrants who are stating a preference, those who are putting that preference into action, and further those who are continuing the action. The hypothesis is that the influence of the key determinants varies across the three stages. The inconsistency of the influence indicates that there is a mismatch between migrants who prefer PRH and those who really benefit from the PRH policy. This contributes to the understanding of to what extent the PRH policy has assisted migrants of different demographic and socio-economic status and with various

housing needs. The analysis differs from previous research as it provides a joint understanding of the three steps in the whole process of getting access to PRH, while it uses both survey data conducted with 546 migrants in 2013 and official release data about the 7th to 17th rounds of application for PRH between 2013 and 2016.

In the next section, the research context is presented. The then following empirical section includes the introduction of the analytical framework and the survey, followed by sections presenting the data and analysis (modeling) itself. The final section concludes with the main findings and policy implications.

2. The research context

2.1. Migrants and their marginalized position in the housing system

The focus of this study is on Chinese intra-national migrant households who move to other localities for work but maintain the *hukou* of their registration place, excluding migrants who move involuntarily due to land acquisitions. Since 1978, with a rural-urban surplus labour force dominating the population, migrants have steadily moved to cities. Similar to other countries, higher wages, better job opportunities and the promise of a decent urban life were main attraction factors. Early migrants were often seen as young, single and low educated; as having a high level of residential mobility, a limited sense of belonging and a strong orientation towards employment seeking. They generally were receiving low wages from low-skilled and low-paid jobs that local residents despised. Jobs were mainly in manufacturing and construction industries, and in housing and catering services (Li, Duda, & An, 2009; Wu & Webster, 2010; Wu, 2004). Over the past two decades, the profile of the Chinese migrant population diversified with the emergence of higher educated migrants who had been growing up with nearly no farming experience and of economically advantaged migrants who were moving up the career ladder after a long stay in cities (Cui, Geertman, & Hooimeijer, 2015; Li, 2010). These migrants bear more resemblance to local residents in terms of socio-economic status and their aspirations for social-integration, but they also show internal variation. Therefore, recent research has paid considerable attention to the differences within the migrant population. Although the socio-economic status of migrants also improved in other developing countries, the proportion of these upwardly mobile migrants has not been as high as in China (Lall & Selod, 2006).

In China, experiences with overcrowding, short and unstable rental contracts, informality, poor quality housing, a lack of options and amenities, and affordability problems have been common for migrants (Wang, 2000). Unfortunately, the housing conditions of migrants did not improve in parallel with the development of the migrant population. Conditions may even have degraded due to rising rent levels and housing prices in the larger cities (Logan, Fang, & Zhang, 2009; Wu, 2004). However, we need to be aware that the housing conditions of the majority of the Chinese migrants has not been as bad as for those who are living in urban slums and squatter settlements in Africa and in Latin American countries (Gilbert, 2004; Saharan, Pfeffer, & Baud, 2017). The essential factor that has made migrants passive and subordinated in the housing system was the *hukou* barrier. It prevented affluent migrants from purchasing owner-occupied housing and excluded low-to-middle income migrants from accessing housing welfare (Huang et al., 2014; Wu, 2004). Many migrants felt they could not escape their 'floating status' because of the *hukou* restriction. This induced a 'saving orientation', which guided migrants to minimize their housing expenses (Li & Duda, 2010).

2.2. PRH, national policy and local variations

In reality, since the economic transition in China, beginning in the late 1970s, the housing market in China has been dominated by a market-oriented regime, creating an over-heated real estate market

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