



Housing choices of migrant workers in China: Beyond the *Hukou* perspective



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ABSTRACT

The *Hukou* system has been increasingly used to explain the housing choices of migrant workers in China. These workers are not as enthusiastic to transfer their *Hukou* to the locality as the public has expected. Moreover, the role of *Hukou* is declining. Only a few studies have quantitatively analyzed the important roles of the circular status and coping strategies of migrant workers in their housing choices in China. To fill such knowledge gap and to verify the role of *Hukou*, this paper investigates the housing tenure and housing choices of migrant workers from the perspective of household strategies. Shenzhen is selected for the case study. Interestingly, *Hukou* has an indirect role in migrant housing. The re-mittances, plan to return to their hometowns, and residential mobility plans of migrant workers significantly influence their housing choices. Income has a greater influence on housing choices than housing tenure, but the opposite result is found for social security.

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1. Introduction

The floating population in China has dramatically increased from 6.6 million in 1982 to 236 million in 2012 because of the widening economic gap among regions and the deregulation of the floating population policy since the 1980s (Zheng & Yang, 2013). The proportion of this segment in the total population has also increased from 0.7% to 16.7% in 30 years. This floating population (referred to as migrant workers¹ in this study as they typically move around to seek jobs) is generally placed at a disadvantaged position in migrant-receiving cities in terms of welfare provision. Although migrant workers substantially contribute to the locality, they are largely excluded from the local public housing system, with the exception of public rental housing in some cities or housing for so-called “talents” (i.e., highly educated and highly skilled workers). Rental housing remains the most common

housing choice for migrant workers (Jiang, 2006; Wu, 2002). Overcrowding in living spaces is a common quality issue among them (Li & Duda, 2010; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2010, 2004).

The *Hukou*² system has become increasingly useful in explaining the disadvantages that migrant workers encounter in China (Chai & Chai, 1997; Huang & Clark, 2002; Huang & Jiang, 2009; Logan, Fang, & Zhang, 2009; Wang et al., 2010; Wu, 2004; Wu, 2012). It prevents migrant workers from settling down in a locality or obtaining homeownership because of its association with the local welfare system. On the other hand, migrant workers are not as enthusiastic to transfer their *Hukou* to the locality, particularly in less developed cities because they fear that they will lose their farmlands or homesteads in their hometowns (Hu, Zhu, Lin, & Wang, 2011; Lu, 2008; Zhang, 2011; Zhu, 2007). Not all migrant workers prefer to settle down in the locality (Lin & Zhu, 2010; Zhang & Chen, 2014) as they mostly consider the locality as their workplace instead of their home. Therefore, these workers continually move back and forth between the locality and their hometowns to maximize their earnings and to minimize their expenditures in the city (Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009). The circular movement and double

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¹ According to the household registration status (i.e., *Hukou*) in the locality, migrant workers can be classified either as temporary or permanent. Temporary migrant workers do not have local *Hukou* and have limited access to the local welfare system. Conversely, permanent migrant workers have local *Hukou*, are regarded as part of the local population, and can enjoy the same social welfare benefits as the locals.

² The *Hukou* system is a fundamental institution in China that was introduced in the late 1950s. This system has two criteria, namely, original living place (i.e., local vs. non-local) and *Hukou* type (i.e., agricultural vs. non-agricultural). Every citizen is allocated a *Hukou* location and type, which is passed on from parents to their children.

residential status of these workers must be investigated.

Migrant workers are enabling/active agents instead of passive recipients. Faced with disadvantages in terms of social capital, human capital, and institutional discrimination, these workers strive to cope with such disadvantages and formulate effective strategies (Liu, Wang, & Tao, 2013). The influence of coping strategies for shaping the behaviors of migrant workers in the locality must not be underestimated. Given that the housing choices of these workers vary across cities (Huang, 2004; Li, 2000; Wu, 2004), contextual factors must also be considered. “Beyond the *Hukou*-centered approach” is called for (Huang, Guo, & Tang, 2010; Zhu, 2007).

The rest of the current paper is organized as follows. The following section provides a comprehensive review of the literature. The knowledge gaps are identified, the objectives and theoretical framework of this research are proposed, and the methods of the study are introduced. The research objects are profiled in the fifth section. Six models are established for investigating the factors that affect the housing tenure and choices of migrant workers, and the findings of this study are verified. The findings are discussed and the conclusions are presented at the end of the paper.

2. Literature review

Housing is composed of various attributes, such as location, tenure, neighborhood, price, and size. Accordingly, the rationales behind housing choices are complex. Geographers and demographers are interested in the demographics, socio-economic aspects, dwelling, and characteristics of the neighborhood that affect housing choices. Wang and Li (2004) revealed that potential homebuyers in Beijing focus more on neighborhood attributes than dwellings. Li and Li (2006) examined the changes in the housing tenure among the residents of Guangzhou, China. In addition to age and education, the change in marital status can significantly affect housing tenure. The relationships among households, work units, and the state have subtle effects on the tenure choices of households, which echo the findings of Huang and Clark (2002).

Several studies have investigated housing choices from other perspectives, such as lifestyles and uncertainties. ÆRØ (2006) explained why residents in Denmark opted for a particular type of dwelling by referring to their lifestyle variables and revealed that personal tradition strongly affected their dwelling choices. Jansen (2012) explored the effect of lifestyle variables on the housing choices of Dutch households with an average or high level of income. Although the lifestyle variables of individuals contribute to their housing choices, the effects of such variables are smaller than those of their socio-demographic characteristics. Zhou (2011) indicated that the uncertainties in several aspects, such as unemployment, education, and medical expenses, negatively affected the home ownership rate among families in China.

The huge influx of migrant workers that is caused by industrialization and urbanization has spurred considerable research on the housing choices of these workers. Owusu (1998) reported that the duration of residence, income, family size, initial motives of migration, ties to the hometown, desire for home ownership, and intention to return all affected the home ownership of Ghanaian immigrants in Canada. Jun, Ha, and Jeong (2013) revealed that Korean Chinese residents tend to live close to their friends and relatives in Seoul. These Korean Chinese residents also tend to live in multi-family housing with low rents and are located close to workplaces and urban services. Migrants in China tend to live in collective and private rental housing than in purchased housing (Logan et al., 2009). The role of institutional factors differentiates China from other countries. The *Hukou* system largely restricts the housing choices of renters (Huang, 2003) and significantly

contributes to housing inequality (Huang & Jiang, 2009). Local and non-local divisions are the most important determinants of home ownership. Those residents without local *Hukou* typically live in small housing units with poor facilities. Recent migrants with rural *Hukou* tend to be stuck on the bottom rung of the housing ladder (Logan et al., 2009). Wu (2004) examined the institutional and socioeconomic factors underlying the housing tenure, rental sector (public or private), and housing conditions of migrant workers in Beijing and Shanghai. Sources of disadvantage are largely rooted in the *Hukou* system, particularly in the local-nonlocal division. Song, Zenou, and Ding (2008) examined the socio-demographic and institutional factors underlying the housing types of the residents in Shenzhen and reported that those people ascribed with non-local or local rural *Hukou*, a low level of education, young, self-employed, low income, and short intention to stay were more likely to live in urban villages³ than in other housing types. Moreover, the housing choices of individuals vary across cities. For example, most migrants in Beijing live in dormitories, whereas migrants in Shanghai live in private rental housing (Wu, 2004).

Studies on migrant housing in China largely focus on the constraints that are brought by institutional arrangements, particularly the *Hukou* system. However, migrant workers are “enabling agents” instead of passive recipients. They actively cope with the challenges that they are facing in the locality (Liu et al., 2013, 2014). The circular status of these migrants should also be given special attention (Fan, Sun, & Zheng, 2011; Lin & Zhu, 2010; Wu, 2002; Zheng et al., 2009). Zhu (2007) contended that the *Hukou* reform has limited effects on either the permanent settlement or integration of migrant workers into the locality. He suggested that policy makers should focus on the temporary nature and potential roles of migrant workers in developing their hometowns. Huang et al. (2010) indicated that the *Hukou* status has a declining role in the social exclusion of rural–urban migrants. Market competition also has a very important role. Liu et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of understanding the “coping strategies” that migrant workers adopt to examine their housing experiences in urban areas. They proved that migrants who are connected to local residents rather than to more people tend to live in formal housing and enjoy better housing conditions. Wu (2002) analyzed migrant housing conditions and observed that migrant workers made their housing decisions according to the convenience to work and save in Beijing and Shanghai. From the same perspective, Hui, Zhong, and Yu (2012) examined the work–residence matching of new immigrants in Hong Kong. Li, Duda, and An (2009) argued that the transitional economic contexts and the characteristics of individual migration could exert a greater influence on the housing providers and cost of migrants than the conventional factors in Taiwan, China. In terms of settlement intentions, Lin and Zhu (2010) examined the diversified housing demands of rural–urban migrants for housing security policies in Fuzhou, China and revealed that only a small proportion of these migrants intended to settle down in the locality. They also argued that housing should cater to the “floating” needs of migrant workers. Hui, Yu, and Ye (2014) contended that the type of *Hukou* did not affect the willingness of migrant workers from urban villages to move to public rental housing in the wake of the gradual *Hukou* reform in Shenzhen. Tao, Wong, and Hui (2014) reported that the type of *Hukou* did not affect

³ Urban villages are rooted in the dual-land system of China (i.e., urban land is state owned, whereas rural land is collectively owned). In the urban expansion process, local governments prefer to acquire only the farmland and disregard the land for homestead use to avoid the huge requisition costs that are associated with demolition, resettlement, and compensation. Therefore, villages are isolated and urban villages have emerged.

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