Settlement Intention and Split Households: Findings from a Survey of Migrants in Beijing’s Urban Villages*

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Abstract

For almost three decades, millions of rural–urban migrants in China have continued to circulate between their urban migrant work and their

* This research was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation (BCS-0455107), the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Division of Social Sciences, the UCLA Academic Senate, and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. I am grateful to the Beijing Municipal Institute of City Planning and Design, Siqi Zheng, Mingie Sun, Yizhen Gu, Yang Cao, Ning Wang, Cong Sun, and Wei Yan for their research assistance and input. Earlier versions of the article were presented at the Conference on Migration and Mobility in a Global Historical Perspective, National Taiwan University, August 25–28, 2010, and at the International Conference on China Urban Development, University of Hong Kong, December 7–8, 2010. I would like to thank Jianfa Shen, Nora Chiang, and two anonymous referees for their feedback and suggestions, which helped me improve the article.
rural home, maintaining a split-household arrangement where some family members are left behind. Based on a survey of migrants in Beijing’s urban villages conducted in 2008, this article focuses on migrants’ settlement intention. Consistent with recent studies, this research shows that the majority of rural migrants do not intend to stay permanently in cities. Having more family members in the city facilitates the earning of urban wages but is not necessarily indicative of a long-term plan to stay. Rather, the author’s empirical analysis highlights migrants’ labor market and social futures in the city as important factors of their settlement intention. These results underscore circular migration and split households as long-term practices among rural Chinese, in contrast to the conventional assumptions that those arrangements are temporary.

China’s “floating population” (liudong renkou 流動人口) stood at 221 million in 2010 and is projected to increase to 350 million by 2050.¹ The bulk of the floating population is from rural areas, and many left the place of origin years ago and have lived and worked in urban areas for a long time. But they are still considered “floaters” because they are not living in the place where they are registered. Indeed, numerous articles and books addressing the relationship between the floating population and the household registration (hukou 戸口) system have been published.²

“Floating” and “floaters” connote also a state of fluidity and of not settling down. Rather than settling down permanently in the place of migrant work, the vast majority of rural–urban migrants in China circulate between the city and their home village, many for years and even decades. It is the long-term circulation of veteran migrants, along with a new generation of migrants who grew up fully immersed in the notion that migrant work is the only way to make a living, that contributes to the growing size of the floating population.³

Given the large and persistent rural–urban differences in job opportunities and standards of living, it is not unreasonable to expect that rural migrants have a strong desire to leave the countryside for good and stay permanently in urban areas. However, many studies have found that rural migrants’ settlement intention is not as strong as expected.⁴ One of the objectives of this article, based on a recent survey in Beijing, is to document migrants’ settlement intention and to highlight considerations that underlie their intention to or not to settle down.