Is It Really Just a Rational Choice?  
The Contribution of Emotional Attachment to Temporary Migrants’ Intention to Stay in the Host City in Guangzhou*

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Abstract

Migrants’ settlements have been and will continue to be the most important issue in China’s urbanization in the coming decades. Using data from a household survey of temporary migrants in villages-in-the-city in Guangzhou city in China, this article explores the relationships among satisfaction, attachment, and the stay–leave intention. The authors begin by questioning the tradition that the concept of rationality is an adequate tool for psychological explanation, despite its widely acknowledged importance. They then model stay–leave intention by incorporating both cognitive and affective evaluations. The

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ordinal regression results demonstrate that temporary migrants’ stay–leave intention is more of an affective choice than a cognitive choice. Intraprovincial migrants are found more likely to intend to stay in Guangzhou than interprovincial migrants. Finally, the authors conclude by discussing the negative impacts of discrimination and territorial identity in fostering temporary migrants’ identification and attachment to the host city.

Nineteenth-century concerns, models, and assumptions are widely accepted in contemporary thinking on migration. In China, under market-oriented economic reforms and export-based industrialization, over the past three decades migration flows, especially migration to megacities from the country’s vast rural hinterlands, have been massive. Migrants’ settlements have been and will continue to be the most important issue in the coming decades. To what extent do subjectivities, both cognition and affect, explain temporary migrants’ intention of staying in or leaving the host city? In the present study we try to answer this specific question. We argue that affective evaluation contributes to migration decisions in its own way. “Simply dismissing them as irrational will surely leave us vulnerable to their effects.” Theoretically, we question the tradition that the concept of rationality is a valid tool for psychological explanation, despite its widely acknowledged importance. Empirically, we model mobility propensity by incorporating both cognitive and affective domains of subjectivities. The ordinal regression results demonstrate that affective evaluations of both the neighborhood and the city are highly relevant to migrants’ mobility propensity.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Migration and Settlement Decision Making

Research on migration is intrinsically interdisciplinary and has captured the interests of geography, economics, development studies, political science, sociology, and anthropology. Why people migrate is one of the most studied questions. Three levels of analysis contribute to the theoretical knowledge base of migration: individual decision making at the micro level, the migrant’s social context at the meso level, and the structural causes and the direction of migration at the macro level. The microeconomic model of individual choice is particularly influential, hypothesizing that individuals maximize their utility and respond to