

Study on the Dilemma and Countermeasures of Rural-urban Migrant Workers Citizenization

Fei Zhang

College of Economics and Management, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang, China
zhangfeizju@126.com

Keywords: Migrant Workers Citizenization, Dilemma, Countermeasures

Abstract: In the new era, to further promote urbanization development, it is necessary to continuously enhance the citizenship capabilities of migrant workers, improve the efficiency of labor resource allocation, and scientifically guide the settlement of the migrating population. The current process of rural migrant workers' urbanization in China exhibits new characteristics and issues. This is primarily manifested as follows: the trend of rural migrant workers' intra-provincial mobility is becoming increasingly evident; there is a significant structured divergence in the willingness of rural migrant workers to settle in cities; the work environment for rural migrant workers is less than optimistic; the challenge posed by the contrast between the high cost of urban living and the low labor productivity of rural migrant workers is more pronounced; and the phenomena of "labor shortage" and "employment difficulties" coexist. Recommendations include taking measures to create employment opportunities, streamline the settlement registration system, optimize the employment environment, and strengthen vocational skills training to enhance the citizenship capabilities of migrant workers.

1. Introduction

Accelerating the urbanization of the agricultural transfer population is an important goal of China during the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan period. An important feature of China's rapid urbanization is large-scale internal migration. Since the reform and opening up, especially after 1990, China's rural areas have experienced large-scale labor migration. With the accelerated pace of urbanization and the widening income gap between urban and rural areas, more and more farmers are choosing to leave the land and go to the cities and towns for employment, and rural migrant workers have become an important part of China's modern industrial workers. According to the 2022 Migrant Workers Monitoring Survey Report, the number of migrant workers in China in 2022 was 295.62 million, an increase of 3.11 million or 1.1% over the previous year. Among them, 123.72 million are local migrant workers, an increase of 2.93 million or 2.4% over the previous year; 171.9 million are moving across the country, an increase of 180,000 or 0.1% over the previous year. The number of rural migrant workers in China increased from 225.42 million in 2008 to 295.62 million in 2022, an increase of 70.2 million in 15 years, or 31.14%. From the development history and experience of the world's major developed countries, after the urbanization rate reaches 70%, it will enter the stage of urban-rural integration and development, and the urbanization process will slow down. During the

"13th Five-Year Plan" period, the threshold for migrant workers to settle in most cities has been continuously relaxed, but the willingness of migrant workers to settle in cities has been declining, and there is a structural mismatch between the supply of policies for absorbing migrant workers' citizenship and their willingness to settle in cities, so that rural migrant workers are facing the dilemma of "willing to settle but not able to, able to settle but not willing to settle" [1]. The citizenization of migrant workers should be based on the premise of fully respecting the wishes of migrant workers. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the new characteristics and dilemmas of the urbanization of migrant workers in the new era, and improve the capacity of migrant workers' urbanization. Improving the efficiency of the allocation of labor elements, and then scientifically guiding the migrant population to settle down, will inject new vitality into the economic development and promote the further development of urbanization [2].

2. Connotation and Characteristics of Migrant Worker Urbanization

Citizenship of rural migrant workers refers to the fact that rural migrant workers have moved to cities and towns to take up stable employment and permanent residence, and that they enjoy the rights and interests of citizens on an equal footing. Citizenization in China usually requires two steps. The first step is to become a migrant worker through rural-urban mobility, retaining the rural household registration and shifting the occupation from farming to urban non-farm employment. In the second step, they become citizens by acquiring urban household registration. According to statistics, the urbanization rate of China's resident population in 2021 was 64.72%, but by the end of 2020, the urbanization rate of China's household registration population was only 45.4%, lagging far behind the urbanization rate of the resident population, namely, about 260 million people are living in the cities and towns but have not gained the status of citizens or enjoyed the rights of citizens, and the majority of China's rural migrant workers are in the first stage of citizenship. With the social development period and the time of the formulation of major policies as the standards for classification, the evolution of migrant workers' urbanization can be divided into three development stages: "embedding", "drifting", and "integration" [3].

The process of migrant workers' citizenship includes at least three parts, namely, the willingness, ability, and result of migrant workers' citizenship, in which the willingness reflects the motivation of migrant workers' rural-urban mobility, the ability is the key to whether or not migrant workers can become citizens, and the result is also the goal of citizenship, which is the gradual integration of migrant workers into the city by realizing that they mainly perform non-agricultural work, live in the city and enjoy the same rights to social security as urban residents. According to the embedding theory [4], social integration is a crucial perspective on the urbanization of migrant workers. It refers to the process where mobile populations become closer to local residents in terms of economics, behavior, culture, and attitudes, or the reduction of differences in these aspects. This perspective emphasizes that urbanization involves not only a change in household registration but also the social security beneath it, as well as the ability of individuals to fully integrate into the entire system at the psychological and cultural levels. Economic integration is a fundamental requirement for survival and a basic guarantee for comprehensive social integration. Stable employment and economic income are prerequisites for migrant workers to survive and establish themselves in the city. Social integration constitutes an intermediate level of integration. Beyond health and income levels, further integration of migrant populations is determined by factors such as living conditions, social roles, and access to welfare benefits like social medical insurance and pension insurance. Identity recognition represents a higher level of social integration. A strong sense of self-identity and the belief that one belongs to the local community indicate a higher degree of integration among mobile populations. Psychological integration, the highest and deepest level of social integration, reflects the willingness of migrant

workers to continue living in the local area and their desire to become part of the local community. It involves subjective psychological integration on the part of the migrants and passive psychological integration on the part of the local residents who are willing to accept the migrants [5]. Cultural integration is the fundamental sign and crucial entry point for the urban integration of migrant workers. It signifies a transformation in the values, lifestyles, and behavioral habits of migrant workers [6].

3. Current Situation and Difficulties of Migrant Workers' Citizenship

3.1. The Trend of Intraprovince Migration is Becoming More Obvious

Since the beginning of the reform, with the advent of market-oriented reforms, a large number of rural-to-urban migrant workers have transitioned from "single-dwellers", who don't leave their hometowns to find non-farm jobs, to "dual-dwellers," meaning they maintain households both in rural and urban areas. They typically live in urban areas for work but return to their rural homes during festivals. In terms of the distance of migration, the types of rural-to-urban migration have evolved from "local migration" to "cross-regional migration" and then returned to "nearby migration."

From the mid-late 1980s to 2010, driven by the market-oriented reform of factors in urban and rural areas, regional development disparities, and the rapid process of urbanization, the primary characteristic of Chinese migrant workers' migration was interprovince migration. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of inter-provincial migrants in China increased rapidly from 42.42 million to 85.88 million, doubling within a decade. Since the 18th Party Congress, with the accelerated development of medium and small-sized cities and the promotion of local urbanization and urban citizenship, the number of migrant workers choosing to work in nearby cities has been steadily increasing, while the proportion of inter-provincial migration has been declining. In 2022, there were 171.90 million migrant workers went out across the country in China, with a year-on-year growth of 0.1%. Among them, 70.61 million engaged in inter-provincial migration, representing a 1.0% decrease compared to the previous year, while 101.29 million were involved in intra-provincial migration, with a 0.9% year-on-year increase.

Since the global financial crisis in 2008, China's economic growth has slowed down, and labor-intensive manufacturing industries that used to absorb a large number of migrant workers for employment and export-oriented production have faced significant challenges. This has reduced their ability to absorb rural labor, and the cost of living in major cities has continued to rise. Consequently, the opportunity cost of cross-regional employment for migrant workers has increased. Meanwhile, the economic conditions and living environments in the central and western regions of China have improved, leading to an increase in the number and proportion of migrant workers choosing to work within their home provinces [7].

3.2. Migrant Workers' Willingness to Settle in Cities Shows Obvious Structural Contradictions

Migrant workers' willingness to settle in cities is a key factor in the continued promotion of urbanization in the new era. However, their desire for urban citizenship has been declining. The first manifestation is that the trend of intra-provincial mobility among rural migrant workers is becoming more and more obvious, but their willingness to settle is lower than that of inter-provincial mobility. In 2022, the number of inter-provincial migrant workers decreased by 6.84 million compared to 2015, accounting for a reduced share of the total migrant worker population from 27.9% in 2015 to 23.9%. In contrast, intra-provincial migrant workers increased by 9.9 million, constituting a higher proportion of the total, from 32.9% in 2015 to 34.3%. According to the 2019 China Household Finance Survey data, the proportion of inter-provincial migrant workers willing to settle in their current urban residence was 30.9%, while this proportion was lower for those migrating within the province (26%),

within the city (19%), and within the county (28.4%).

Secondly, the central and western regions of China have been absorbing more migrant workers, but the willingness of these workers to settle in these regions is relatively low. In 2022, the central region absorbed 67.71 million migrant workers, accounting for 22.9% of the total, marking an increase of 7.94 million workers and 1.4 percentage points compared to 2015. Similarly, the western region absorbed 64.36 million workers, constituting 21.8% of the total, with an increase of 12.27 million workers and 3 percentage points compared to 2015. However, in terms of their willingness to settle, migrant workers employed in the central and western regions showed significantly lower intentions compared to those in the eastern region. Particularly, the willingness to settle for inter-provincial migrants in the eastern region was 38.5%, which was 12 percentage points higher than those working within counties in the central region and 11.3 percentage points higher than those working within counties in the western region [1].

Thirdly, migrant workers in large cities with high settlement thresholds have a higher willingness to settle, but those in smaller towns without settlement thresholds have a lower willingness to settle. Large cities offer more job opportunities, better public services, and higher administrative levels, making them more attractive to migrant workers, resulting in a stronger desire to settle. However, larger cities often have higher settlement thresholds. Conversely, smaller towns do not have settlement thresholds, yet migrant workers have a lower willingness to settle there. With the implementation of pro-agriculture policies, rural socio-economic conditions have improved significantly, and rural land and residential land have appreciated in value. This has increased the opportunity cost of migrating to urban areas for migrant workers. If the cost of giving up rural land rights is greater than the benefits of obtaining urban household registration, migrant workers tend to be less willing to settle in urban areas.

Lastly, the willingness of young and middle-aged migrant workers to settle in cities is relatively low. Due to age and qualification restrictions imposed by urban employment conditions, both older and younger migrant workers find it challenging to secure stable employment and settlement in cities. However, eligible young and middle-aged migrant workers have a weaker willingness to settle in their current urban residences. In contrast, younger and older migrant workers show a stronger desire for urban development opportunities and public services, making them more inclined to settle.

3.3. The Employment Environment for Migrant Workers is Far from Optimistic

From the perspective of the three industrial sectors, the proportion of migrant workers engaged in manufacturing and construction has been steadily decreasing, while the proportion engaged in the service-oriented third sector, such as entertainment, has been increasing. This reflects the changing employment structure of migrant workers in line with industrial structural upgrades and societal development. In 2022, the proportion of migrant workers engaged in the second industrial sector in China was 47.8%, with 27.4% in manufacturing and 17.7% in construction. Meanwhile, 50.9% of migrant workers were engaged in the third industrial sector.

It's evident that migrant workers have become a significant force in the development of the urban secondary and tertiary industries. However, the majority of them are employed in the secondary labor market, taking on jobs with high labor intensity, low wages, and less job security. Employers often pay migrant workers based on the local minimum wage or slightly higher, leading to a prolonged period of low wage levels for migrant workers. To earn more income, they are compelled to work overtime, resulting in employment conditions that are far inferior to those of urban employees [8].

According to the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data, the majority of migrant workers are employed in private enterprises or individual businesses, accounting for 69.60%. More than half of them do not have signed labor contracts. Overworking is a prevalent issue among migrant workers,

with an average workweek of 55.94 hours, far exceeding the legal limit of 44 hours. Specifically, 77% of migrant workers work more than 44 hours per week, 59% work more than 50 hours per week, and 35% work more than 60 hours per week [9].

3.4. The Challenge of High Urban Living Costs and Low Labor Productivity of Migrant Workers is Increasingly Prominent

Due to the development and concentration of the manufacturing industry, China's economy has formed three growth poles: the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta, and the Bohai Bay urban agglomerations. An increasing number of migrant workers are moving to these regions, particularly the megacities and large to medium-sized cities within them. These areas have significantly higher economic development levels compared to other regions in China, resulting in the highest cost of living nationwide. Even urban residents with relatively higher incomes in these regions face severe housing pressures. Providing housing security for migrant workers through the local government finance is extremely challenging.

In terms of the distribution of migrant workers by region, in 2022, among China's migrant workers moving across the country, 154.47 million individuals were located in the eastern region, accounting for a staggering 89.9% of the total. Even if these mega-cities and large cities were to completely relax their household registration (hukou) system, the lower income levels of migrant workers, would still make it challenging for them to sustain the high cost of living in these areas. Therefore, the contradiction between the high cost of living in these regions and the low labor productivity and low wage levels of migrant workers has become a major obstacle and challenge to the urbanization of migrant workers in the current stage [10].

3.5. Co-existence of "Labor Shortage" and "Employment Difficulty"

In the early stages of industrialization, the primary obstacle to the transformation of migrant workers into urban citizenship was the lack of traditional forms of capital, including human capital, social capital, and financial capital. In the era of informatization, the development of digital technology has deepened the digital gap between different groups, exacerbating the inadequate digital human capital and social capital of migrant workers. The declining demographic dividend, the penetration of digital technology, and the wave of automation replacing human labor in traditional labor-intensive industries have weakened employment opportunities for migrant workers. High-tech industries demand advanced digital skills, which do not align with the knowledge structure of migrant workers. This mismatch leads to more rural migrant workers moving towards the relatively lower-income third sector, intensifying the job competition for low-skilled migrant workers. Meanwhile, the employment opportunities replaced by digitization differ from the new positions created in terms of their human capital requirements, in particular, intelligent production, represented by artificial intelligence and robotics, requires a significant workforce with intermediate-level skills. However, within the current Chinese rural migrant worker population, there is a higher proportion of low-skilled labor. As a result, labor shortages and structural unemployment coexist [6].

4. Suggestions for Promoting the Citizenization of Rural Migrant Worker

4.1. Develop the County Economy and Create Abundant Employment Opportunities

Fully tap into the resource advantages and potential, rationally plan the functional layout of county-level cities, improve infrastructure, entrepreneurial atmosphere, living conditions, and create a favorable urban environment to enhance the attractiveness of county towns. The provision of high-

quality education, healthcare, and elderly care services is a critical factor in retaining migrant workers living in the county, so there is a need to strengthen the capacity to guarantee public services and increase the participation rate of migrant workers in social insurance.

4.2. Remove Institutional Barriers to Cross-Regional Settlement and Improve the Continuity Mechanism for Inter-Provincial Household Registration

It is essential to improve the national unified social insurance public service platform, strengthen support for the nationwide coordination and accounting of social insurance, and facilitate the convenience of cross-regional claims, continuation, and transfers. In the realm of pension insurance, given the high mobility of migrant workers, it is advisable to establish a fully funded pension insurance system primarily centered around individual accounts and allow for the transfer of these individual accounts nationwide. Furthermore, innovative mechanisms must be developed to secure the property rights and interests of rural assets for rural migrant workers, unlocking the value of rural assets and alleviating concerns after their migration. Since rural land rights and interests will remain an important safeguard for the livelihoods of rural migrant workers and their families over an extended period, and the attachment to rural land assets and concerns about the loss of rights and interests are significant factors contributing to the low willingness of migrant workers to obtain urban household registration. Therefore, it is important to encourage voluntary practices such as land transfer, trusteeship, contract farming, and equity participation are encouraged to help migrant workers achieve higher land operating income.

4.3. Optimize employment channels for rural migrant workers and create a fair employment environment

Firstly, it is imperative to standardize the labor management practices of market operators and strengthen the supervision of the conclusion and fulfillment of labor contracts with rural migrant workers. Secondly, measures should be taken to improve the working environment and employment arrangements for rural migrant workers, ensuring their employment and labor compensation rights in urban areas. Thirdly, it is essential to regulate the working hours and labor intensity of rural migrant workers, establishing standardized and flexible dual-hour work patterns. This includes flexible scheduling of work hours to safeguard the legitimate rights of rural migrant workers to rest.

4.4. Strengthen Vocational Skills Training for Rural Migrant Workers and Enhance Their Labor Productivity

Firstly, it is crucial to establish and enhance a government-led rural labor force training system that bridges the urban-rural divide. Support should be provided for employers to establish stable labor training centers in rural areas, fostering collaborative development of customized training programs. Secondly, there is a need to optimize and integrate vocational skills training resources, facilitate close alignment between vocational education and the employment of rural migrant workers, establish integrated practical training centers, and encourage vocational schools to conduct on-site training in partnership with enterprises. Thirdly, it is essential to regularly update training content, intensify training efforts for key industries, urgently needed occupations, and the skills required in emerging industries. This will enhance the adaptability of rural migrant workers to industry upgrades, transformation, and changing job requirements.

5. Conclusion

The urbanization process in China has entered a new phase. This paper analyzes the new developments and challenges in the ongoing urbanization of rural migrant workers in China, considering factors such as migration patterns, citizenization intentions, and employment characteristics, based on statistical data. It has been observed that rural migrant workers are migrating shorter distances, yet there exists a structural contradiction in their intentions and capabilities for urbanization. While most rural migrant workers continue to be employed in secondary labor markets, their occupational skills are hard to meet the demands of the digital era's economic structural transformation and upgrading. Additionally, in recent years, with the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy and increased national attention to agriculture, rural areas, and rural residents, the potential income from rural land and homesteads has grown, posing multiple obstacles to further urbanization. Therefore, on one hand, there is a need to continually enhance the vocational skills of rural migrant workers and intensify skill training to enable them to quickly adapt to the demands of industrial structural transformation, upgrading, and the digital age. On the other hand, there is a requirement to overcome institutional barriers and accelerate the promotion of equal access to public services between urban and rural areas while fostering coordinated development between urban and rural regions.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Fund Projects: Scientific Research Fund of Zhejiang Provincial Education Department (NO. Y202249679); Zhejiang Provincial Natural Science Foundation of China (NO. LQ21G030011); Jinhua Science and Technology Plan Project (Grant NO. 2022-4-035); and Zhejiang Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences (ZFHSS, NO.21NDQN219YB).

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