

## A RURAL MIGRANT COMMUNITY IN URBAN BEIJING

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### Summary

Based on the findings from an intensive community-based study, this paper examines the life and experience of rural migrants in urban Beijing in the late 1990s. Using intensive interview and observation methods, as well as data from quantitative surveys, the study has sketched a multi-dimensional profile of this community. The economic activities and occupational structure of migrants are examined. Interactions between members of the local community and migrants and among members of migrants are analyzed. Results from the study suggest that although we have witnessed a flow of massive rural to urban migration in China since the late 1970s, it is not sensible to conclude that a massive rural/urban integration process has been taking place on the same scale. Occupational segregation in contemporary Chinese society is legitimized by government regulations. Regardless of their active economic activities in urban society, rural migrants have always been outsiders in terms of social life in the city. Individual migrants and migrants as a group do not have equal access to urban labor market in formal sectors.

### 1. Introduction

The urban and rural division is one of the most significant social and political divisions in the history of the People's Republic of China. Since the late 1950s, with the

establishment of the household registration system, or *hukou*, the whole Chinese society was divided into two major sections, rural and urban areas. The *hukou* system created a spatial hierarchy of urban places and prioritized the city over the countryside. Almost all Chinese people were classified into two categories, agricultural residents and non-agricultural residents. Under the planned economic system, urban residents enjoyed many more benefits and subsidies from the government, while agricultural residents did not have much access to the government subsidies. The rapid population growth in the early decades of the People's Republic forced the government to apply very strict measurements in controlling people's spatial movement, especially from the rural to urban areas. Social integration between rural and urban areas in the pre-reform period was minimal. Not until the past two decades have people from the countryside enjoyed more freedom in spatial mobility due to recent changes in social economic policies. It has been estimated by scholars such as Kam Wing Chan and Dorothy Solinger that between 70 to 100 million people migrated from one place to another in the early 1990s for either economic motivation or other reasons, and the majority were rural people who moved to urban areas. While many people perceive the significant impacts of the massive migration on the integration between rural and urban areas, others may have some reservations in putting forward the same argument. Based on the results of year-long fieldwork in one of the migrant communities in Beijing, this paper attempts to address such questions as whether the current massive migration in China will have significant impacts on social integration or assimilation, and what are the major constraints against such social integration.

It was well documented that in many industrialized countries industrialization and urbanization were often accompanied by massive labor migration from agricultural sectors in the countryside to industrial sectors in cities. Workers who moved to the cities or industrial towns soon became a major part of the urban societies. Studies such as Milton Gordon's in 1964 about ethnic assimilation and integration in American society also suggest that minority groups' adoption of the cultural patterns of the host society was inevitable. Experiences of some newly industrialized countries in Asia, such as Japan and South Korea in the years after the World War II, also show a similar pattern. Migration, especially labor migration, played a significant role in the industrialization and urbanization process in these countries. In recent decades, massive labor transformation from agricultural sectors in the countryside to non-agricultural sectors in urban areas has taken place in China. To what extent can we see or anticipate a social integration process along with such a massive labor transformation in China? What is the life chance, if any, for those rural migrants who have moved to cities to become urban citizens and to play the roles of urbanites? Can rural migrants assimilate or integrate into the receiving communities in urban areas?

The concept of assimilation was used by a number of scholars in the studies of migration and ethnic relations. They emphasized the structural assimilation and acculturation of migrant or ethnic minorities into host mainstream society. Acculturation means minority groups' adoption of the "cultural patterns" of the host society. According to Richard Alba and Victor Nee, there are several important elements or steps in the assimilation process, namely contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation. Other scholars, such as Min Zhou, have modified this concept to a segmented assimilation concept into the society where

assimilation may not be a complete or straight-line process. In recent decades, many scholars have been critical about this concept as it considers the cultures of majorities in the host society to be superior and minorities to be inferior, which is seen as a worn-out concept in today's multicultural societies. Regardless of the criticism of the concept, this paper has adopted some major elements in the theory, namely contact, competition and accommodation, which are helpful in understanding and interpreting the migration process and minority/majority relationships in a society. However, this paper makes an important modification at the final stage, which includes "integration" instead of "assimilation".

## **2. Background of the Migrant Community and Fieldwork**

As one of the most important cultural and economic centers, Beijing has attracted a large number of migrants around the country. A migrant census conducted by the Beijing Statistical Bureau in 1997 shows that, in this capital city of a population of 13 million, about two million people had moved from other provinces and stayed in Beijing for at least one month, and about 1.5 million migrants had been in Beijing for at least six months. Migration to Beijing represents a typical pattern in contemporary China; that is, migration flow is from rural to urban areas, and from less developed to more advanced regions.

### **2.1. Fieldwork Setting: Yingfang**

From September 1997 to August 1998, the present author started the initial fieldwork in a number of migrant communities in Beijing, and then chose one community for an intensive inquiry. This migrant community is located at a residential area between the North Second Ring Road (*Bei Er Huan Lu*) and the North Third Ring Road (*Bei San Huan Lu*), where it is considered as a part of the central areas of Beijing municipal. Like many residential areas in Beijing, there is a market place in this area, which was set up by the local authority in the late 1980s. The market sells a large variety of fresh vegetables and meats, as well as small household goods. Peddlers or vendors rent stalls in the market from the local Business Administration Bureau. Almost all vendors in this market place are migrants from other provinces; only half a dozen locals appear behind the stalls here. Along with the market place, on the same street, there are a number of shops and restaurants that open seven days a week, until midnight every day. Strolling along this street during busy business hours, especially around five o'clock in the afternoon, one can see a typical picture of many market places in Beijing. Thousands of such markets provide the work places for millions of migrants in Beijing, and also provide daily goods and services for the local residents. On the back streets of this residential area, a little away from the market place, there are about ten three-story brick residential buildings built in the late 1950s. Attached to each of these buildings, there are countless small self-built huts, shelters, or shed-like houses, which are home for hundreds of vendors and shop keepers from the front street market place, and other people who rent places to live. These simple and crude accommodations were built by the local residents and are rented out to migrants. People who rent the places are called *waidiren*, or outsiders, and people who built the attached shelters call themselves *bendiren*, or locals.

The fieldwork in this migrant community lasted seven months. Starting with a handful of people in the market place on the street, the author gradually became familiar with this migrant community and its members. The fieldwork also included two trips to migrants' home villages in Henan province in central China. In addition to participation observation, which is the major method in the early period of the fieldwork, many intensive interviews were also conducted with the migrants, local residents, and local officials. The focus-group study method was also used in the fieldwork. To protect its members' privacy, the chosen migrant community was named Yingfang, which is not its real name. Among 400 households in this community, 125 households are migrant families. The total migrant population is about 316 people, with 174 male and 142 female in November 1997. About 80% of total migrants rent living space from the local residents and live in migrant-only family-type households. A small fraction of migrants live in a collective household with other migrants. The fraction of migrants who live with the local resident household is negligible. The major characteristics of this community are described in the following section with a comparison with the total migrants in Beijing.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Dr. Fei Guo** is a Lecturer of Demography, Department of Business at Macquarie University, Sydney,

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