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Source: *China Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Special Issue: Migration and Development in China (October 2016), pp. 121-147

Published by: Chinese University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43974671>

Accessed: 19-12-2019 11:07 UTC

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*From Newcomers to Middle Class: The Social and Spatial Mobility of New Urban Migrants**

Yu-Ling Song

Abstract

This article studies the relationship between social and spatial mobility of new urban migrants and residents. The objective is to present the influences of the household registration system on the social mobility of China's new urban migrants through a comparison of the differences and similarities between these two groups. Two data sets are adopted in this article: the Blue Book of Youth Nos. 1 and 2 and in-depth interviews conducted during the summers of 2009, 2010, and 2011. Thematic analysis was employed to understand their social mobility after spatial mobility. Results show that new urban migrants are relatively vulnerable. While society generally expects them to assimilate rather than achieve upward social mobility, the hukou system limits their access to social welfare and security. Meanwhile, new urban residents who have access to advantages consider themselves lower-middle class in terms of consumption, and maintain certain flexibility to further establish their social and economic status. In this article, "opportunity" is a significant theme. New urban residents strive to leverage their urban resident status to create individual wealth. For new

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*The project titled "Expansion of the Middle Class, How Is This Possible? Dialectical Relationship Between Spatial and Social Mobility of Urban New Migrants in Beijing" is funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, R.O.C. (103-2410-H-018-032). The author appreciates the anonymous reviewers who provided constructive suggestions for this article.

migrants, the hukou system has relatively reduced the “opportunity.” Although city government in China has launched some related policies, they remain insufficient in eliminating the physical and psychological gap between new urban migrants and residents, or to significantly increase opportunities available to migrants. A phased abolition of the hukou system should be implemented as soon as possible to reduce social costs and meet China’s goals for social development and fairness.

1. Introduction

Innovations in communication technology have extended mobile Internet access to most of China, where population flows are controlled by a rigid household registration system. In 2011, for the first time, over half of China’s population lived in urban areas, a demographic trend that has been called one of the most important social and economic phenomena of the 21st century. This massive rural-urban migration has driven urban development and supplied labor to China’s manufacturing and construction sectors. However, estimates suggest that about 200 million rural migrants who are the main labor force now live in urban areas without local household registration.¹ At the same time, China’s cities have given rise to a large middle class, driving domestic consumption, which is playing an increasingly important role in China’s continued economic development.

Today, China’s leadership is committed to the continued expansion of the middle class and the development of a “harmonious society,” goals that indicate China’s middle class is emerging as an important driver of domestic economic growth consumption, thereby enhancing their economic value. The Chinese urban economy is gradually transforming from a primary reliance on cheap migrant labor to middle-class domestic consumption.

Some scholars have proposed reform strategies to further expand the middle class. Chan’s road map for hukou system reform gave first priority to college and university graduates, followed by skilled workers, stable self-employed workers, and finally low-skilled migrant laborers. The proposed road map would gradually help such migrants attain urban residency permits. The ultimate goal of these reforms is to abolish the existing hukou system. Rural youth moving to cities to attend university are more likely to reach middle-class status, and thus contribute to the development of internal consumption.

However, an increasing number of studies indicate that rural-urban migrants are frustrated by a mismatch between spatial and social mobility due to factors such as restrictions from the hukou system. Many of these studies have focused on reforming the hukou system to benefit migrant workers,² including their experience in transit and initial adjustment,³ demographic composition and social mobility,⁴ and migrant communities and urban villages (城中村 *chengzhongcun*).⁵ Those studies have contributed to the present understanding of social inequality in China.

Moreover, as the education level is rising and average age is younger among urban migrants,⁶ the discussion of their social mobility has evolved in recent years.⁷ The extant research has mainly focused on clarification of urban migrants, their psychological suitability, social network status, living conditions, consumption ability, willingness to settle in cities, and other group features, emphasizing their function for cities, that is, that they are a significant group to offer the labor force and boost the consumption of cities under the change of population structure and the diminishment of demographic bonus. On the other hand, studies have stressed that they remain in the awkward space between “middle” and “lower-middle” class. In particular they have encountered unequal accessibility to opportunities due to the household registration system, which has received more concern from the scholarship. But these studies have failed to identify possible mechanisms by which new urban migrants achieve social mobility, or by which new urban residents,⁸ whose status has much in common with that of new urban migrants, accumulate social capital through spatial mobility to enter the middle class once they have obtained local urban household registration.

Against this background, this research demonstrates how the household registration system affects the social mobility of China’s new urban migrants. Are migrants able to overcome institutional obstacles to accumulate social capital? How does the status of these migrants compare with that of new urban residents? This research illustrates the differences and similarities between these two groups.

To answer these questions, this study primarily relies on two data sources for the analysis of new urban migrants and residents, specifically the *Blue Book of Youth: The Development Report on Chinese Youth No. 1 (2013), No. 2 (2014)* (hereinafter *Blue Book I* and *Blue Book II*) and in-depth interviews with urban new residents of Beijing and Shanghai.

2. Literature Review

Since the 1990s, the social status of urban migrants in China has undergone significant changes, and these people now have the potential to enter the middle class. But rigid social structures complicate social mobility processes. In the following literature review, we examine the social strata of China's floating population and how they are affected by the current household registration system, along with theories regarding the relationship between social and spatial mobility.

a. The Expansion of the Middle Class and the Hukou System

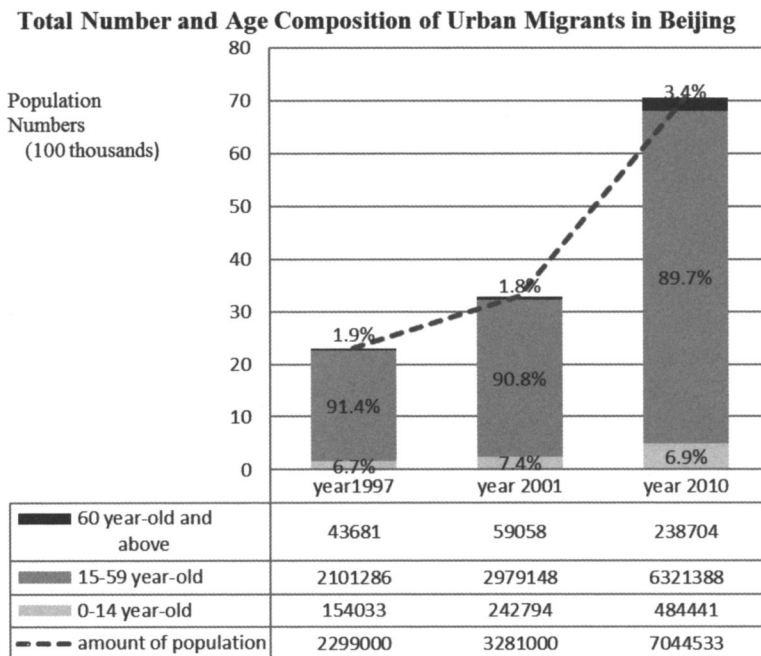
China's rapid, sustained economic growth has given rise to a large middle class with extraordinary consumption power, turning China from its former role of the "world's factory" into a world market for domestic and imported goods. The Chinese government has made the continued expansion of the middle class a key priority for social policy, as doing so is seen as a means of promoting the emergence of a "harmonious society" and of fueling continued economic growth through increased domestic consumption. Thus, the foundation of Chinese economic development will shift progressively from low-cost migrant labor to middle-class consumption.

However, a consensus has yet to form on how to define China's middle class. The work of Alvin So points out that class boundaries of the middle class are inherently fuzzy and theoretically controversial.⁹ Numerous attempts at conceptual precision and unending debates among class theorists have not brought us closer to a consensus in defining middle class and drawing its boundaries in a clear fashion. Lu Han Lung demonstrates the similar point that the middle class should have its own class conscious according to Marxism. But more and more blue-collar workers have identified themselves as middle class since the 1950s.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not significant to draw a precise boundary around the middle class. However, Li Qiang proposes a more delicate definition of middle class. She points out the criteria in general: high and stable incomes, occupations in professional and management positions, high levels of educational attainment, and affordable consumption for a comfortable life.¹¹ However, she still defines the middle class vaguely. She suggests that different definitions are proposed from various dimensions such as public image, the government's definition, and the sociological definition. But these definitions share common criteria: high level of consumption, upper and middle levels of income, white-collar workers

with professional and management skills, high levels of educational attainment, and owning some assets such as housing and a vehicle.

In present scholarship, the middle class is segmented into various groups by the criteria. For example, Hisao Hsin Huang proposes three groups of middle class, such as new middle class, old middle class, and marginal middle class; the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences divides the Chinese middle class into ten sectors with five socioeconomic levels.¹² The criteria have a mutual effect and influence social mobility. For example, the raising of educational levels results in enhanced occupational stratum, income, consumption ability, and wealth. In 2008, the population of the middle class was estimated at around 22 to 23 percent of the total population. More recent estimates put the actual figure at about 11.9 percent, but a consensus has emerged that the middle class will continue to grow quickly, expanding to 50 percent of the population within 10 years.¹³

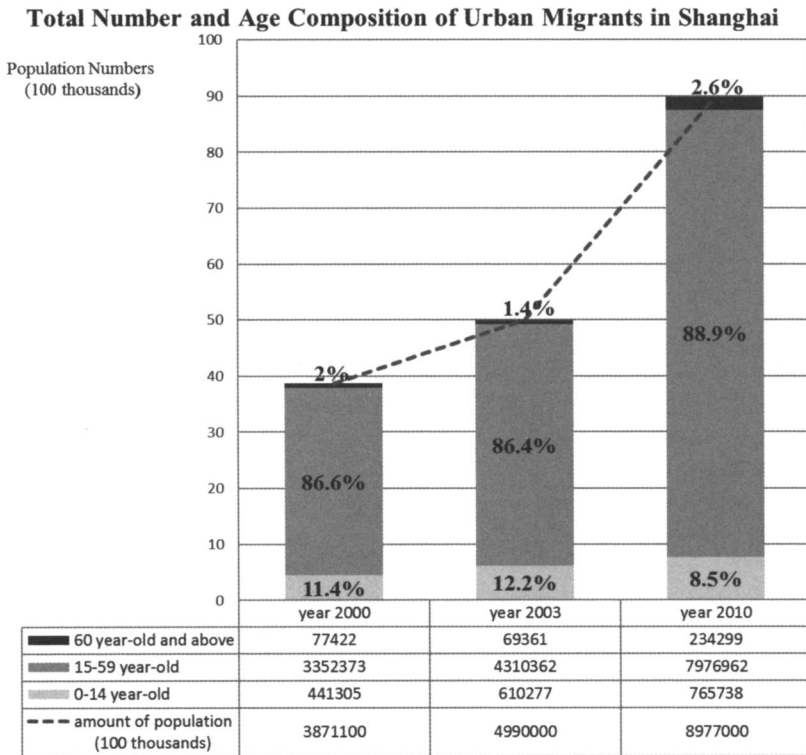
Figure 1: Comparison of Nonnative Population and Age in 1997, 2001, and 2010



Note: Comprehensive statistics on internal migrants began to be compiled only in 2010. Most cities cannot provide relevant statistics, so comparative data are presented only for random years in Beijing.

According to recent Chinese census data, the proportion of cross-provincial blue-collar migrants in the “agricultural, forestry and fishing industry” and “production and transport industries” is declining, while white-collar migrants (e.g., state and party administrators, enterprise personnel, professionals and technicians, and commercial service personnel) increased from 28.9 percent of such migrants in 2000 to 41 percent in 2010. These white-collar migrants have the potential to enter the middle class.

Figure 2: Comparison of Nonnative Population and Age in 2000, 2003, and 2010



Moreover, the proportion of China’s population that can be described as middle class rose from 18 percent in 2008 to 27 percent in

2011. Megacities like Beijing attract more white-collar migrants to work in technology, management, and commercial services. Such occupations accounted for 16.52 percent of people with Beijing hukou, as opposed to about 7 percent for migrants.¹⁴ This indicates that there remains plenty of room for migrants to assume white-collar positions. Such migrants are typically young and skilled, or highly educated college graduates, searching for employment in cities, but have yet to secure their desired jobs or income levels. Such migrants are referred to as a “marginal middle class,” with the potential to join the actual middle class.¹⁵

Census data from 2010 show a significant expansion of the nonnative populations of Beijing and Shanghai. From 1997 to 2010 the population of Beijing grew to include about 5 million migrants. The age structure for this subpopulation remained static, with 90 percent of nonnatives between the ages of 15 and 59 (Figure 1). According to 2012 survey data published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 71.6 percent of migrants are between the ages of 14 and 45.

While the educational attainment of the vast majority of urban migrants was limited to middle or high school, the number reporting junior college or above increased from 9.7 percent in 2001 to 24.4 percent in 2010 (Figure 3). Migrant workers accounted for about 60 percent of the population with tertiary education; and the college-educated population born after 1980 was estimated at 15 million. It has been mentioned that the traditional role of higher education is related to promoting social mobility and decreasing social inequalities. Although this function has gradually diminished in the United States, researchers and policy makers are striving to strengthen the effect of education for moving toward a less class-based society.¹⁶ In China, education as cultural capital is still an approach for young people to change their social status. However, according to Beijing and Shanghai data (Figures 3, 4), the education level of nonnatives has been enhanced in the past 10 years, but the population of the middle class has not expanded correspondingly. However, an increasing number of young urban migrants are bringing their cultural capital to the cities, and yet remain unable to settle there permanently. The potential for this population to bolster China’s middle class requires attention to the obstacles they face in achieving upward social mobility.

Figure 3: Education Level of Beijing Nonnatives over Time

Educational Attainment of Urban Migrants Over 6-year-old in Beijing

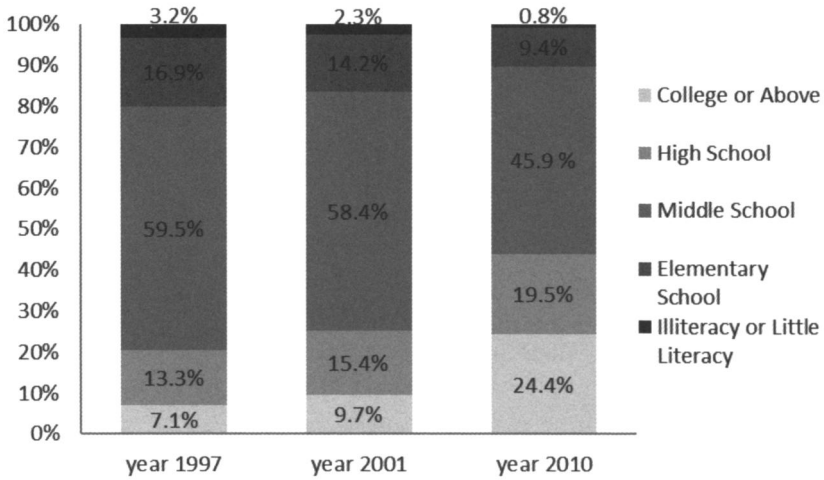
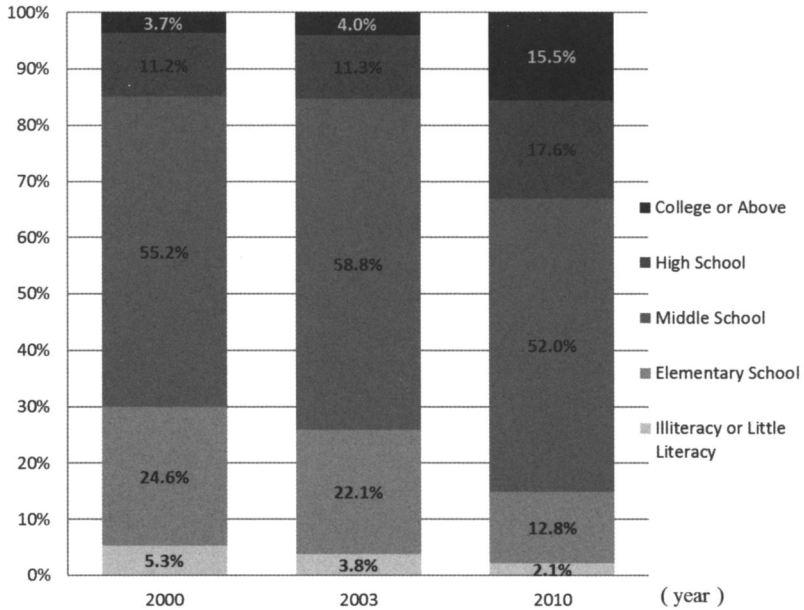


Figure 4: Education Level of Shanghai Nonnatives over Time

Educational Attainment of Urban Migrants Over 6-year-old in Shanghai



According to Marxism and Weberism, social class is determined not only by material conditions but also by social relationships. Eric Olin Wright claims that social relationship is more powerful to limit and regulate the process of wealth obtainment than the factors influence individual inequality. In Giddens's view, social relationship comprises "life chance," which is created by the economy, and culture of society, which provides people the ability to own and share the property. Therefore, social institutions such as household registration have generally been important mechanisms to provide change.¹⁷ However, the household registration system has increasingly served as an obstacle to social mobility. In the occupational classification structure of China's megacities, nonnatives constitute a relatively small proportion of white-collar workers (45.2 percent and 54.8 percent, respectively). But in small and medium-sized cities, cross-provincial migrants account for a significant majority of white-collar workers. Thus, in China's megacities, the hukou system prevents nonnatives from entering upper-level jobs. This acts to steer migrants away from megacities toward smaller cities where opportunities are actually more limited.¹⁸

China's hukou system has governed urban and rural residency for 55 years. In 2012, the Chinese leadership proposed reforms to promote the "orderly transformation of the rural population into urban citizens." These efforts are closely related to the expansion of the middle class because without an urban hukou, migrants have no legal right to live in cities and thus are cut off from essential social services and economic resources, creating a permanent urban underclass and thereby undermining social stability. *Xinhua*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, recently noted, "China's urbanization and modernization requires allowing migrant workers to become urban citizens, and doing so will significantly promote social justice and social stability."¹⁹

Urban migrants live on the fringes of urban society, providing the cheap labor that fuels urban construction and manufacturing, but without access to social welfare and security available to officially recognized urban residents. This inequality has caused considerable concern.²⁰ However, in recent years, the demographic makeup of urban migrants has changed in terms of educational level and skill set. According to *Blue Book I*, published by the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, new urban migrants are currently divided into three categories designated as "ant tribe,"²¹ "migrant laborers," and "urban white-collar workers." Moreover, such migrants are further classified by educational level and occupational

training as “knowledge workers,” “laborers,” and “investment type.”²² Members of these groups share some common characteristics: they are young migrants seeking improved employment opportunities, they face difficulties in securing an urban hukou, and they exist on the fringes of urban society. With the exception of “migrant laborers,” these young migrants have enormous cultural capital, but their circumstances and low incomes result in appalling and cramped living conditions, and these migrants are seen as a “marginal middle class.”²³ Their cultural capital gives them some of the characteristics of the middle-class population, but they remain unable to settle permanently in the cities, and thus are unable to achieve true social mobility through spatial mobility. Consequently, from the standpoint of achieving social equality and harmony, the positive relationship between spatial and social mobility will gradually counteract social inequalities and class conflicts in Chinese society.²⁴

b. The Relationship between Spatial Mobility and Social Mobility

Liberalism holds that, in an industrialized society, social mobility is the most effective mechanism to achieve social equity, and thus serves as a catalyst for social justice. In the Western world, following industrialization, spatial mobility took on positive implications for social upward mobility, with people moving from rural areas to the cities in search of work opportunities, leveraging these opportunities into improved living conditions for themselves and increased opportunities for their children. The frequency of spatial mobility has increased significantly in the era of globalization, and the relationship between spatial mobility and social mobility is constituted as a positive link that is frequently mentioned in the current context of globalization.²⁵ However, some commentators suggest that this sentiment has overlooked the differentiation of social strata caused by spatial mobility, and thus ignore the effects of social context, individual social networks, and resources on the relationship between spatial and social mobility.²⁶

Many studies have concentrated on the impact of spatial mobility on social mobility in terms of its capacity to overcome mechanisms that perpetuate social disparities. Ulrich Beck argues that opportunities created by cross-border interaction have emerged as the most important factor determining inequality among social strata.²⁷ This suggests that spatial mobility is an essential condition for upward mobility, and people with higher social status are more spatially mobile. Zygmunt Bauman

noted that “upper class” people are able to go where they please, but members of the “lower class” are usually tied to the land and incapable of moving.²⁸

Moreover, studies of urban poverty from Britain and the United States have stressed that a lack of mobility is related to social exclusion.²⁹ These theoretical views are mainly criticizing the focus on how social structures influence the results of social mobility outcomes, limiting social mobility. Those belonging to the lower social strata tend to be fixed under the uneven social structure.

Many studies on urban poverty in America and Britain provide abundant discussion on the mismatch between spatial and social mobility. They have found that spatial mobility is not closely related to social mobility among the urban poor because of restrictions on individual capacities and social structures. They tend to practice “imaginary mobility” rather than physical movement since, given limitations imposed by individual capabilities and social structure, it is easier for such people to establish cross-border relations than to bridge social and spatial gaps in the city. For young urban vagrants, spatial mobility is a survival strategy, but they are often forced to remain “fixed in mobility” because of their urban poverty.³⁰ However, the spatial mobility of the elite and the middle class is closely related to their social mobility, but many cosmopolitan elites move quickly from one place to another, making social mobility irrelevant. This shows that it is not necessary for people to accumulate various types of capital and practice upward social mobility through the processes of spatial mobility. Inequality is usually rationalized through spatial mobility, and the impact is particularly dependent on social class.³¹

These results indicate that in Western societies, a mismatch between spatial and social mobility occurs among both the poor and the cosmopolitan elite. However, how does the hukou system impact the living conditions of in China? Does spatial mobility allow migrants to accumulate various types of capital? What are the differences in terms of social conditions between new urban migrants and residents (i.e., those with a local hukou)?

3. Research Method

This article examines two groups of new urban migrants and established residents in Beijing and Shanghai. The migrants are mostly under the age

of 35, mainly the generation born after 1980, who originally came to the cities to work or pursue university studies. While they do not possess a local hukou, they are still eligible for basic public services and social security through their employer or school. Thus, they can purchase housing and vehicles, and access social security in the Beijing government. Urban residents, by contrast, have local hukou in Beijing or Shanghai.

Data are mainly taken from secondary sources including the *Blue Book I* and *Blue Book II*, published by the research center at Beijing's University of International Business and Economics since 2007. The report integrates five large-scale surveys of urban new migrants with a sample size of 16,500 extended to cover Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Xian, and Chongqing.³² Migrants are categorized as "ant tribe," "migrant workers," and "the new next generation white-collar workers" to analyze their living conditions and emphasize their problems faced as well as their roles and functions in cities. These reports are seen as a relatively comprehensive source of current data about urban migrants, and data for the "ant tribe" and "next generation white-collar workers" are used here since members of these groups have the potential to enter the middle class.³³

In-depth interviews were conducted during the summer between 2009 and 2011 in Beijing and Shanghai.³⁴ An additional 27 interviews were conducted with new urban residents (see the appendix).³⁵ Most interviewees moved to Beijing or Shanghai at the end of the 1990s to attend university. These cities provided unparalleled access to resources and facilities and thus, after graduating, they stayed on to look for work, preparing to stay for the long term. The *Blue Book* authors would categorize most of the interviewees as "new generation white collar," that is, possessing considerable cultural capital, and engaged in professional and technical jobs (e.g., scientific research, corporate managers, and government employees). Upon securing employment, they sought to secure a local urban hukou through their work units to become "residents." As of the time of the interviews, only three had failed to obtain a local hukou, and each interviewee already owned at least one housing unit. Some of the Beijing interviewees had access to subsidized housing through their work units. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling. Interviewees were usually contacted through common friends and acquaintances of the researcher. Semistructured in-depth interviews were based on a list of questions related to the research aims and related

literature. Questions covered issues related to motivation, purpose, and process of migrating from the respondent's hometown to the city, processes and experiences involved in finding work and housing, and resulting issues related to subjective identity. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' knowledge and consent.

Thematic analysis was used to extract themes at multiple levels. By sorting items of interest into proto-themes, and organizing items relating to common thematic elements as reported in the interviews into categories, themes were produced through sentence by sentence analysis of the interview text. Through multi-examination, the themes were collected and the story line developed by formulating thematic statements. Eventually, the story line, which is composed of several themes, revealed the entire condition of new urban migrants and new urban residents, and is used as the basis for comparison between them. Therefore, themes are differentiated into three levels depending on specificity. For example, "identity and strata," "purchasing housing," and "building wealth through investment" form the first level. Beneath, for example, "building wealth through investment," there are "tenants vs. 'second generation landlords'" for new urban migrants, and "moderate investment" and "using rental to purchase new housing" for new urban residents. These subthemes belong to the second level of themes. Then the third level is the statements below the second level of themes. They are composed based on the story line. The analysis seeks to examine the process of social mobility among urban residents, who enjoy native urban hukou and relatively stable social and economic status, to determine whether spatial mobility might allow urban migrants to overcome various types of capital that could help them achieve upward social mobility. Three common main themes were identified: "identity and strata," "purchasing housing," and "building wealth through investment."

4. Research Findings

a. Identity and Strata

1. *New Urban Migrants: "Double Minority," "Social Pathologies," "Social Assimilation," and "Hukou as Obstacle"*

Regarding to the identity of strata of migrants, *Blue Book I* results demonstrate that such migrants occupy a no-man's land between their rural roots, to which they have difficulty returning, and their adopted

urban societies, which do not accept them as fully integrated members. While they live and work in the cities, their hukou and families remain behind in the countryside. They earn money in the cities to provide for the education of their children back home. While they live in urban areas, they have no access to urban social networks and social welfare programs, which isolates them from the rest of urban society. At the same time, they are physically removed from their rural societies, and thus fail to accumulate social capital at home, leaving them socially marginalized if they do return to their villages. This isolation from both their immediate surroundings and place of origin gives them a “double minority” status. Given the gradually widening gap between rich and poor in China, these migrants cannot depend on economic and social resources from their families, and so they often feel a sense of relative deprivation when competing with peer groups. Their social relationships are mostly established within informal communities of migrants from the same or nearby hometowns and classmates, rather than with locals (I, pp. 10–13).

The *Blue Book* authors tend to pathologize young urban migrants in terms of their stagnant social mobility, saying that, living in tight-knit informal communities, such migrants may be able to organize and mobilize, creating social problems as they vent their frustrations. The authors propose solutions including improving nonnative access to community services, which may not only defuse tensions, but also allow for closer monitoring of such groups (I, pp. 32–35). In addition, the *Blue Book* authors present an expectation that migrants will completely assimilate into urban society, thus enhancing their economic competitiveness and chances of achieving upward social mobility (I, pp. 91–108). The indicators used to measure degree of social integration of their groups concern how they submit themselves to the powerful mainstream value that is more like the concept of “assimilation” than social integration. Therefore, the discussion of social integration tends to position such groups as potential sources of problems, an attitude that is also revealed by officials who have low expectations of eventual assimilation of such migrants.

Although the *Blue Book* authors agree on the need to reform the hukou system, their suggested strategy is to guide “ant tribes” to seek employment in small and medium-sized cities, and to conditionally relax hukou system restrictions in medium-sized and large cities as a means of gradually helping migrants achieve urban residency (I, pp. 32–38). This indicates the sustained and serious constraints and limitations the hukou

system places on new urban migrants. Failing to resolve this problem will leave such migrants unable to access important social resources or affordable housing. The interrelatedness of these factors acts to perpetuate the vulnerability and poverty of migrants and give rise to the feelings of inequality (I, p. 28). Hence, new urban migrants eventually come to rely on economic resources from their families rather than their own cultural capital (I, pp. 38–43).

2. *Becoming Residents: “Class with Individual Effort,” “Lower-Middle-Class Consumption,” “Timing and Opportunities as Key Factors for Success,” “Maintaining Flexible Attitude to Life”*

During the process of transitioning to resident status, migrants experience issues related to identity, pressure, and adjustment. Despite having lived in the city for many years, they remained acutely aware of the differences between themselves and locals. They stressed that they needed to work harder than locals who secured free housing from their parents. Thus, they perceived the lives of local residents as being easier and more relaxed, saying that locals could live well even given a relatively lower level of occupational success (Interviewees BJ17, BJ5). Some interviewees criticized the locals for their passive attitudes toward life and their unwillingness to engage socially with nonlocals. They stressed their relatively unprivileged upbringing (Interviewees SH13, SH14, BJ4) and their need to rely on themselves. Some identified themselves as members of “the real middle-class” who had achieved their status through individual effort, rather than on the accident of birth.

Successful migrants (i.e., those who had purchased urban housing and secured urban hukous) recalled the difficulties they had faced in their personal experience of becoming “residents.” They identified themselves as lower-middle class because of the impact of high transportation costs and inflation had on their lives (Interviewees BJ3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 20; SH4). They don’t place a great emphasis on entering the middle class, because they see social mobility as dependent on conditions that are not available to them. First, locals have a significant advantage in not needing to secure housing independently. Second, earlier migrants (i.e., those born in the mid-1970s) had greater opportunities because of the greater availability of affordable housing built in Beijing from 2001 to 2004. While this does not completely relieve them of housing-related anxiety, it does provide access to better housing conditions. Third, although most such migrants stayed in the city to work after completing university, even those working in the same work unit will achieve

different income levels due to their various occupational specializations (Interviewees BJ5, 10, 20; SH13).

Despite their local hukou and homes, the migrants are still subject to considerable economic pressure. They remain uncertain whether their present quality of life represents an improvement to that of their parents' generation, when citizens were allocated welfare housing (Interviewees BJ11, 12, 14, 17). Their priority is not necessarily to join the middle class because they recognize that the conditions necessary for the accumulation of wealth are not necessarily available to them and that they will have difficulty catching up with locals in terms of socioeconomic status. Consequently, they expressed the need to remain flexible and to manage their expectations.

b. Purchasing Housing

1. Urban Migrants: "Hereditary Difficulties in Securing Housing," "Urban Exclusion," "Unsettlement"

Housing is the greatest concern for urban migrants, and most require government assistance to secure adequate housing. According to the *Blue Book II* surveys of all youth groups (p. 28), there is a relatively high proportion of rental among urban new migrants rely on rental accommodation, and their proportion of owner-occupied dwellings are the lowest comparing to other youth groups' housing. Among young urbanites, 75.3 percent report relying on parental support to purchase housing. This implies that the impacts from intergenerational relationship are more and more significant in China's megacities. The phenomenon of social stratification in residential is increasingly obvious. While established urban families are better able to provide financial support for their adult children to purchase housing in the city. Comparing to the "political family" (*guan'erdai* 官二代) or "the second generation of the rich" (*fu er dai*) provide more financial support, the urban new migrants are largely cut off from such sources of funding belongs to "poor second generation (*qiong'er dai* 窮二代)" and "the second generation of peasant (*erdai nong-mingong* 二代農民工)" cannot get financial support from their families, which results the difficulties in purchasing housing. These are the so-called "hereditary difficulties in housing" (II, pp. 12, 107–109).

In addition, migrants are not eligible for low-income housing allocated to low-income residents with a local hukou (II, p.30). Thus housing

is an important factor of exclusion that distinguishes between new immigrants and new residents. Living space reflects the 'occupant's social class, and migrants tend to occupy extremely crowded rental housing or company dormitories, while others squat in informal housing arrangements in ex-urban areas. Those with higher degrees of education may have access to university housing, while others live in dirty and unsafe industrial areas (I, pp. 10–13). The physical condition of their living space is a stark indicator of their social vulnerability. Moreover, rent accounts for a high proportion of their total living expenses, so there is little left over for other necessities (I, p.43). The housing rental markets in China's big cities are inefficient and poorly regulated, leaving migrants vulnerable to arbitrary rent increases and other abuses, with little recourse (II, pp. 29–37). This chronic insecurity leaves migrants unable to fully commit to their new lives in their adopted cities (II, pp. 131–151), thus limiting their ability to fully develop their professional potential.

2. *Urban Residents: "Necessity for Stable Life," "Balancing Price and Location," "Taking a Broad View for the Future"*

Interviewees noted that housing is "the basic requirement for a stable life in the city" (BJ3, 4, 5, 9), "a requirement for raising a family" (SH8, BJ7, 8), and "the way to economic and social success" (SH8, 12, 13, 14). Prior to purchasing their own dwelling, the interviewees lived in rental housing or company dormitories. Their sense of urgency in purchasing an apartment was driven by the limited availability of affordable housing along with rapidly increasing real estate prices. In recent years, municipal governments have established occupationally based quotas and lotteries to provide "residents" with access to affordable housing, allowing such residents to establish the foundations of a stable middle-class life (BJ4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 20).

However, such schemes are open only to residents with a local hukou. Migrants without a local hukou frequently rely on financial support from their parents to purchase housing. One interviewee without a local hukou said he was not worried about securing housing, but he was unmarried and had yet to decide whether he would remain in Beijing (BJ 17). This stood in contrast to another interviewee, who arrived in Beijing in the early 1990s and still lacked a Beijing hukou. Without local residency, his teenage children were unable to attend high school in Beijing, so his family moved back to his hometown, leaving

him behind in Beijing to work. However, he also plans to eventually leave Beijing to rejoin his family in his hometown (BJ 7).

Other interviewees without a local hukou indicated that they were accelerating their efforts to buy a house before prices increased yet further (SH1, 2, 14; BJ2, 5, 7) or have otherwise given up on buying an apartment (BJ6, 8, 9, 11). Under such economic pressure, they emphasized the need to maintain flexibility when seeking housing. Their apartments tend to be far away from their workplaces, thus incurring higher transportation costs. Furthermore, housing affordable to these people tends to be in “compensation housing” — that is, second-rate housing built as compensation for residents displaced by new developments in other parts of the city. The social dislocation and lack of a sense of community in such developments promote social problems, and the interviewees complained about the poor living habits of their neighbors and the general lack of quality of their living environment. However, overall they expressed considerable satisfaction at having purchased their own homes in Beijing and Shanghai, and expressed belief that traffic conditions and their living environment would gradually improve. This impression was partly fueled by the regret experienced by their peers who had hesitated to buy homes only to see prices soar far beyond their means (BJ7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 17; SH12, 14).

Location is the key consideration in interviewees’ home-purchasing decisions, specifically the need to maintain flexibility. Migrants don’t have local relatives in the city, which might otherwise influence their decision on where to look for housing. SH11 chose to live in the Zhabei District in north Shanghai, an area she finds to be convenient but which is seen by Shanghai locals as a traditionally unattractive place to live (SH11, 13, 14). While some interviewees admitted to being susceptible to local prejudices for or against certain locations, most prioritized convenient transportation (BJ12; SH5, 12, 13, 14). Due to their economic circumstances, many residents seek housing in areas that are perceived as less desirable, but take a broader view in the expectation that such areas will eventually become better developed (BJ7, 8, 12, 17; SH14).

c. Building Wealth through Investment

1. New Urban Migrants: Tenants versus “Second-Generation Landlords”

Among urban new migrants, 5.4 percent owned their own housing

without a mortgage (II, pp. 28). This suggests that, while most migrants are cut off from the housing market, some are “the second generation of landlords” who inherit their parents’ property without bothering to secure a local hukou.

The authors of *Blue Book II* conclude that housing is an important factor affecting social differentiation among young urban populations in China, but the intergenerational transfer of wealth is the main source of housing. Politically or commercially established parents usually provide their children with significant assistance in securing housing (II, pp. 110–112). By contrast, migrants are excluded from housing welfare and security, and are relegated to low-quality rental housing.

2. *New Urban Residents: “Moderate Investment,” “Using a Rental to Purchase New Housing”*

Several residents in Shanghai reported buying a second home as an investment (SH1, 2, 4, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14), often renting out the second unit to pay the mortgage. Such arrangements are seen as an important means by which residents can accumulate wealth (SH1, 2, 11, 13, 14; BJ4). Based on real estate trends over recent decades, they expect that housing prices in China’s major cities will continue to increase, and thus see their investment property as a practical means of storing and growing capital. The second property can later be sold to help the migrants acquire housing in a more desirable location. Housing, thus, becomes not just a life necessity for urban residents, but also an important means of improving their social status.

Some interviewees reported obtaining financial support from their families to purchase an initial home, which established a foundation for the accumulation of further wealth (SH1, 2, 4, 13). Some respondents reported purchasing their first apartments by combining personal resources with funds raised from friends and relatives, following a similar pattern to purchase a second property to earn rent and to speculate on rising property prices (SH11, 12, 14). While living in affordable housing provided by her work unit, respondent BJ4 also purchased an apartment in Beijing, which she later sold at a profit. She used the proceeds of the sale to purchase a commercial property in her hometown, which she now rents out. Given the rapid increase in property prices in Beijing and Shanghai, those who missed opportunities to buy early on are increasingly pushed to the periphery, while their bolder counterparts now own

multiple properties that they can leverage to accumulate further wealth, thus increasing their chances to secure upward social mobility.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigates how the social mobility of urban migrants in China is influenced by the household registration system (hukou), while seeking to determine whether spatial mobility can help migrants overcome institutional obstacles to accumulate various kinds of capital. From the above analysis, we find that urban migrants are relatively vulnerable. While society generally expects them to assimilate but achieve upward social mobility, the hukou system limits their access to social welfare and security. The social benefits they desire are readily apparent to them, but largely remain beyond reach. Meanwhile, urban residents, who have access to these advantages, consider themselves lower-middle class in terms of consumption, and maintain a certain flexibility to further establish their social and economic status.

Beyond these narratives, analysis of respondent interviews reveals “opportunity” as a significant theme. Urban residents strive to leverage their urban resident status into individual wealth. They have high expectations of social advancement, and see themselves as hard-working and self-reliant, as opposed to established residents, whom they see as largely indolent and entitled.

Purchasing housing is a critical issue for urban migrants, and such migrants would be more incentivized to establish roots in their adopted cities if housing were more readily available. However, the hukou system remains a significant barrier to the acquisition of housing, subjecting migrants to significant restrictions, income insecurity, and inconvenience. However, they tend to be optimistic that future urban development will provide opportunities to secure housing in the major cities. Affordable housing programs have provided some urban new residents with access to the housing market, giving them optimism about their chances to accumulate further wealth.

Migrants must rely on financial assistance from their families to establish themselves in the cities, which reduces the potential for social mobility. While residents with local hukou also rely on family assistance, they have access to a wider range of social supports and opportunities, providing them with additional opportunities to accumulate wealth and social capital.

Comparison between migrants and residents indicates that the greatest difference between the two groups is access to “opportunity,” specifically in terms of access to housing and employment, and the subsequent accumulation of wealth. Both groups bring rich cultural capital to the cities, and have spatial mobility, but this disparity of “opportunity” is the key mitigating factor determining the relationship between spatial and social mobility, and the hukou system is the key obstacle to accessing opportunity.

Without an urban hukou, migrants are heavily reliant on financial support from their parents to achieve social mobility. While they may have accumulated cultural capital (including education and expertise) through spatial mobility, a local hukou provides access to resources critical to achieving social mobility. Without an urban hukou, migrants have difficulty leveraging their accumulated cultural capital to overcome institutional barriers and thus achieve upward social mobility despite playing a significant role in the urban economy and society. Given limited social and economic opportunities, such migrants have difficulty moving from the periphery of urban society, with many ultimately abandoning their adopted cities to return to their hometowns.

In recent years, China’s hukou system and welfare policies have undergone revision to extend benefits to migrants. For example, the Beijing municipal government launched a “residence permit” system that allows skilled migrants access to social welfare benefits similar to those available to official residents. In addition, attempts have been made to extend availability of affordable housing to migrants, substantially reducing prices for entry-level housing.

However, such policies are still insufficient to eliminate the physical and psychological gap between urban migrants and residents, or to significantly increase opportunities available to migrants. While migrants possess considerable cultural capital, they continue to be relegated to the social periphery, thus limiting the ability of China to harness and exploit this capital. A phased abolition of the hukou system should be implemented as soon as possible so as to reduce social costs and meet China’s goals for social development and fairness.

Appendix: Profile of Interviewees

	Gender	Age	Education level	Individual annual income	Household annual income	Location of present housing (district)	Arrival time	Time of first housing purchase	Number of houses
SH-1	Female	31-40	Master's	160,000 and over		Pudong	2003	2009	2
SH-2	Female	21-30	Bachelor's		320,000 and over	Minhang	2003	2009/2011	2
SH-4	Male	31-40	Bachelor's	80-99,000		Minhang	2002	2004	2
SH-5	Male	31-40	Master's	80-99,000	160-199,000	Jiading/ Putuo	2001	2005	1
SH-6	Male	31-40	Ph.D.	160,000 and over	320,000 and over	Zhabei	2002	2006/2010	2
SH-8	Female	31-40	Master's		320,000 and over	Xuhui	2001	2004	2
SH-11	Male	31-40	Ph.D.	80-99,000	160-199,000	Hongkou	1996	2001	2
SH-12	Male	31-40	Bachelor's	160,000 and over		Pudong/ Xiaolujiazui	1989	1998	3
SH-13	Female	21-30	Master's	80-99,000	160-199,000	Minhang	1998	2002	2
SH-14	Female	31-40	Master's	160,000 and over		Pudong/ Xiaolujiazui	2001	2002	2
BJ-1	Male	31-40	Ph.D.		80-119,000	Haidian	1998	2005	1
BJ-2	Female	31-40	Master's		80-119,000	Haidian	1996	2003	1
BJ-3	Female	31-40	Ph.D.		240-279,000	Chaoyang	2004	2007	1
BJ-4	Female	31-40	Ph.D.		120-159,000	Haidian	1995	2004	2
BJ-5	Male	31-40	Ph.D.		200-239,000	Chaoyang	2000	2008	1
BJ-6	Female	31-40	Ph.D.		80-119,000	Haidian	2003	2010	1
BJ-7	Male	41-45	Partial college		Under 80,000	Fengtai	1990	1995	1
BJ-8	Female	21-30	Master's		80-119,000	Haidian	2006	2011	1
BJ-9	Male	31-40	Ph.D.	80-99,000		Haidian	2002	2011	1
BJ-10	Female	31-40	Master's		80-119,000	Haidian	1997	2008	1
BJ-11	Male	21-30	Master's		80-119,000	Haidian	2004	2011	1
BJ-12	Female	31-40	Ph.D.		160-199,000	Chaoyang	1998	2004	1

Cont' Appendix								
BJ-14	Male	31-40	Ph.D.	80-119,000	Chaoyang	1998	2003	1
BJ-15	Female	31-40	Bachelor's	140-159,000	Haidian	1995	2001	1
BJ-16	Male	31-40	Ph.D.	320,000 and over	Haidian	1994	2005	1
BJ-17	Male	31-40	Bachelor's		Fengtai	2001	2005	1
BJ-20	Female	31-40	Ph.D.	80-119,000	Chaoyang	1994	2001	1

Notes

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