

Social Assimilation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Citizenisation, Participation, and Identification

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Abstract: Since the Reform and Opening-up in China, workers from rural areas have increasingly flooded into cities with the expectation of earning more money. However, there is a considerable gap between migrant workers and native citizens. As a result, the government, researchers, and the public have attached great attention to the social assimilation of migrant workers and have taken a range of measures to eliminate discrimination against this group in order to build a harmonious society. In the Chinese context, social assimilation theory has been applied in studies on migrant workers, who are often regarded as a vulnerable group in political, economic, cultural, and ideological aspects. This paper aims to review Chinese migrant workers from three perspectives of social assimilation theory. First, social fairness impacts migrant workers' citizenisation. Second, exclusion indicates low community participation. Finally, resocialisation influences the formation of migrant workers' identities. These three aspects are closely connected during social assimilation.

Keywords: migration studies, social assimilation, citizenisation, participation, identity

1. Introduction

Since the Reform and Opening-up, the floating population in China has continuously increased. There are differences between inflow places which are caused by various push-pull factors. Rural-urban migrant workers refer to those who have flooded from rural areas into cities to seek fortune since the late 1980s. However, under China's urbanisation and urban-rural structure, these migrant workers face political and economic constraints, cultural discrimination, and identity difference during migration. Besides, they must abandon their traditions to some extent and adapt to new contexts of receiving cities, which can be regarded as assimilation. In this case, various factors contribute to this process and the degree of social assimilation, such as politics, economics, and culture. Researchers and the public have attached great importance to the social assimilation of rural-urban migrant workers, leading the government to take a range of measures to break down barriers between migrant workers and citizens.

In the 1920s, R. Park and E. Burgess proposed the social assimilation theory while studying European migrants to America. Social assimilation refers to the process of mutual interpenetration and fusion of individuals or groups where they share history and experience and eventually integrate into a shared cultural life by acquiring each other's memory, emotion, and attitude [1]. Pluralism or multiculturalism describes a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual society while segmented

assimilation theory emphasizes an interaction between the human capital of migrants. Although both of them challenge social assimilation theory, there is less controversy about using social assimilation theory to examine Chinese migrant workers [2,3]. Chinese scholars mostly use models, establish indicators, and examine the aspects of the social assimilation of migrant workers. Despite the differences between the aspects of social assimilation, most studies refer to politics, economy, public service, physiology, psychology, culture, and identity, and compare the degree of assimilation based on these aspects.

Moreover, there is a tendency to refine studies on different aspects of social assimilation in different industries and fields. Earlier studies emphasised the division of assimilation aspects but overlooked the differences among migrant groups, and thus, more specific indicators have been used in recent research. In the last five years (2018-2023), indicators such as urban sports public service, compulsory education law, medical insurance, rent increase, dialect mastery, vocational training, and regulatory points system for residence permits have been introduced, but they fall under the fundamental aspects mentioned above.

Apart from considering assimilation as a process, some anthropologists also incorporate space theory into floating population studies. Levevre sees space as a central element of capitalist production and social control. Then the main task of this paper is to examine the production of space rather than to observe the things in space, which deals precisely with the history and temporality of space [4]. Based on such theory, on the one hand, space, power, and identity interweave within the process of social assimilation; on the other hand, the social space created by the floating population in the inflow places challenges existing social order and government control, although such research is about business owners [5].

Early studies have examined Chinese rural-urban migrant workers through the lens of social assimilation, but there is considerable debate about it in the Chinese context. Therefore, this paper aims to review previous studies according to three main perspectives: social fairness, exclusion, and resocialisation. Obviously, most scholars are concerned about policy, community, and identity. After reviewing these three aspects, this paper can specify the research focus and tendency of the social assimilation of Chinese migrant workers and point out research limitations of migrant workers' daily activities and experiences

2. Social Fairness: Household Registration System and Citizenisation

2.1. Core Barrier: The Household Registration System

Contrary to Park and Burgess's view on social assimilation, some scholars think migration studies can date back to Durkheim's social solidarity theory [6]. The core of assimilation and integration is that members of society can actively and meaningfully participate in society, share experience, enjoy equality, and obtain basic social benefits [7]. Thus, the clear perspective is that every citizen should have equal rights and welfare, emphasising social fairness. Such a perspective is supported and applied to studies on Chinese migrant workers, referring to the political system and institutional aspects.

Systems and policies are vital aspects regarding migrant workers' social assimilation. Under the Chinese rural-urban dual structure, the household registration system (the *hukou* system) is regarded as the core barrier that hinders migrant workers from assimilating into receiving cities by economists, demographers, statisticians, and sociologists [8]. Through the strengthening of the regulations on household registration, Chinese farmers become rural *hukou* holders, which is called birth-ascribed stratification. Due to such a system, migrant workers find it hard to access urban social welfare and security, which means they are treated unequally at the political level with local people as the external reference [9].

Due to the rigid management of the household registration system and the local government's responsibility system for public services, it is challenging for migrant workers to obtain household registration at their inflow places and corresponding public services. For rural migrants who show a more urgent desire to get rid of their original residence and integrate into the city, the inaccessibility of local household registration and public services weakens their willingness to settle in their destination cities. Besides, other social aspects, such as employment and community participation, are also relative to the policy system. Thus, institutional fairness and factual equality are essential to the social assimilation of migrant workers [10].

2.2. Citizenisation

When examining the household registration systems and other policies in terms of the social fairness of migrant workers, many scholars refer to it as citizenisation. Citizenisation means the transformation and differentiation of social roles, reflecting the process of farmers transforming into citizens. Furthermore, the household registration system and relative policies distinguish migrant workers and citizens, somewhat hindering the transformative process, which is called "the household registration wall" by academics. According to different levels of impact paths and mechanisms of action on citizenisation, this wall hinders the process of the citizenisation of migrant workers explicitly (an institutional restraint on floating population mobility) and implicitly (institutional arrangements for discrimination against migrant workers and their rights brought about by the explicit household registration system) [11]. However, facing the *hukou* system, sometimes they are unwilling to obtain urban household registration by abandoning contracted land and homestead.

2.3. The Urgent Need for Reform

Under the Chinese rural-urban dual structure and urbanisation, scholars warn of the hidden barriers to the household registration system and point out the urgent need for reform [12]. Therefore, researchers claim that the government should take measures to break down the barriers between urban and rural household registration systems to achieve social fairness to some extent. Evidence shows that the household registration system reform can effectively improve the willingness of the rural floating population to settle in cities, enhance happiness, and benefit individual psychological assimilation. All of these indirectly promote social fairness. Despite the effectiveness of residence permit reform, such reform is transitional and does not realise a thorough reform of the household registration system [13].

However, several scholars point out that the household registration system should be partially to blame because the workers' flow migration pattern needs to be considered [14]. For example, some migrant workers want to maintain a circular flow between rural and urban areas or intend to return to their hometowns because it is not the best choice for them to move completely to the destination city. Besides, settled and unsettled migrant workers cannot wholly solve social assimilation in human-centred urbanization only by establishing a unified urban and rural household registration system. Researchers further indicate that the restrictive effect of the "explicit household registration wall" on the flow of urban and rural labour is gradually weakening. It is no longer the main obstacle to floating population mobility, while the "implicit household registration wall" constitutes the main obstacle in the process of citizenisation of migrant workers [15].

Discussion about the *hukou* system and citizenisation is continuing, but most researchers consider institutional factors as essential indicators [8,16].

3. Social Exclusion: Social Interaction and Community Participation

3.1. Exclusion from Full Social Participation

The second perspective of social assimilation theory is social exclusion. Admittedly, the household registration system and a series of related social welfare systems restrict and even exclude rural migrant workers, which fundamentally impacts their integration process. This phenomenon shows that social exclusion has an inner relationship with the policy system and institutional aspect. Nevertheless, social exclusion means that an individual or group is wholly or partially excluded from full social participation, which underlines that they do not participate in regular activities like other city residents [17,18].

In the Chinese context, some scholars have analysed the social assimilation of migrant workers from the perspective of social exclusion in EU countries [19]. Studies examine social exclusion in different fields, including politics (less political selection, less organisation activity), economy (low salary, long working hours, intense workload, bad working environment, and employment discrimination), and culture and identity (different value concepts, languages, behaviour methods) [20]. The deprivation theory indicates that Chinese migrant workers suffer absolute deprivation, relative deprivation, and multilevel deprivation, which result in unfairness in the economy, welfare, and other aspects [21]. Scholars are concerned about whether there is positive migrant workers' participation in the local environment and their interaction with residents. As a measuring tool, social distance can examine whether migrant workers are willing to interact with other people or social groups and measure how social members feel about the distance between others. According to Durkheim's theory, individual social assimilation is reflected in participation in a formal social organisation [22]. Therefore, social interaction and community participation effectively decrease such exclusion. Scholars increasingly focus on migrant workers' attitudes towards receiving cities, their interaction with local people, and their perceived social attitudes.

3.2. Interaction with Community and Native Citizens

Social assimilation involves constant interaction with other people. Apart from serving as an external reference point for migrant workers' rights, demographers argue that it is equally important to examine the interaction and construction of mutual relations between the native population and immigrants [23]. This has become another essential measure of social adaptation and assimilation. Community participation plays a crucial role in promoting the integration process, as a good community service and acceptance environment can effectively encourage community dependency. Surveys of migrant workers' participation in communities show that community work helps citizens (including migrant workers) participate in the decision-making process, allocate limited resources and deliver services, improve individual and collective welfare, strengthen community grassroots capacity building, and achieve social inclusion [19,24].

Furthermore, migrant workers' participation in the community and interaction with inhabitants are closely related to the political aspect, which means the degree of community integration benefits from government promotion and policy implementation. Based on social assimilation, some scholars propose a rural-urban immigrant social integration policy system model that emphasises the necessity of community work to limit nonstructural exclusion and develop immigrant social capital [25]. On the other hand, improving migrant workers' human capital can foster community involvement in turn [26].

As an important indicator of social assimilation, further studies conducted in various cities have put forward different dimensions of community participation and improved its structure. From a horizontal perspective, scholars compare different generations of migrant workers and further point

out that community conditions impact their social assimilation differently. Different types of migrant workers should be incorporated into the community management system, service, and security by establishing communities tailored to their specific needs [8].

3.3. Ethnic Migrant Workers

Besides, although Chinese ethnic migrant workers are not the focus of this review paper, many scholars examine their social assimilation from the perspective of social exclusion due to the particularity of their ethnic religions and cultures. As a minority group, ethnic identity has a substantial selectivity that is not conducive for migrant workers to integrate into urban society [27]. Evidence of Muslim and Uyghur floating populations shows that they gradually adapt to urban society but still face many obstacles, including the household registration system, single employment mode, low education level, and language and cultural differences. They are still in the predicament of being “marginalised” regarding employment, housing, and social security. Such a marginalised situation indicates spatial and psychological barriers between the mainstream urban culture, which results in the social exclusion of ethnic floating populations and hinders their social assimilation [28].

4. Resocialisation: Psychological Interaction and Identity

4.1. The Adjustment of Migrant Workers

The third perspective of social assimilation theory is resocialisation. Resocialisation occurs when an individual’s social status changes, requiring them to learn new behavioural norms to adapt to the new society [29,30]. This means that migrant workers must adjust to narrow the gap between themselves and the locals regarding cultures, values, and behavioural norms. In the context of Chinese urbanisation, “citizenisation” describes the process of migrant workers’ social assimilation.

There is a differentiation between migrant workers and native citizens and the adjustment of the former groups is difficult to some extent due to insufficient cultural reserve, unsuitability and resistance to urban culture, barriers to interacting with residents, and the lack of a security system. Evidence of such difficulty shows that migrant workers have a low salary, narrow social circle, low recognition of the residents and the government in the inflow city, and a weak sense of belonging to the city [31]. Several scholars have further examined the reasons behind such difficulties and found that migrant workers suffer the inequality of the contribution of economic growth and the sharing of benefits, the solidification of social relations and the rejection of urban institutions, and identity confusion, which lead to the complex transformation of living ways, social mobility, and citizenisation [29].

4.2. The Highest Level of Resocialisation and the Degree of Identity

Regarding differences between the two groups of people, it is generally agreed that psychological transformation is the highest level of resocialisation, and participation in a community is an effective way to achieve such transformation. Community participation can enhance the sense of belonging, security, and recognition. There is less controversy about psychological integration and identity as other aspects and indicators to measure the degree of social assimilation at the psychological level [10]. Psychological identity usually reflects the voluntary assimilation of migrant workers, specifically in cultural acceptance, psychological acquisition, and identifying oneself as a local citizen. Nevertheless, realising identity is complex and tends to be the ultimate goal of social assimilation. There is a difference between the degrees of identities of migrant workers in different cities.

Besides, scholars also point out differences among migrant workers. First, different generations of migrant workers have different degrees of identities. Economic integration is the main emphasis of

the first generation, while the new generation has a higher level of psychological integration than the older ones. However, their self-identities remain vague and show a tendency toward marginalisation. Second, gender is another essential factor contributing the psychological integration and forming identity. Compared with male migrant workers, an investigation of 1122 female migrant workers in Hubei Province shows that the personality and psychological characteristics of female migrant workers have a more significant impact on their social integration [32].

4.3. Interrelationship Between Different Aspects

Regarding the degree of psychological integration and self-identity, it is now obvious that migrant workers tend to be influenced by systems, policies, and social participation during the whole process of social assimilation, which shows an interrelationship between these aspects. Obtaining household registration in destination cities, frequent community participation, and higher cultural acceptance make migrant workers show a more positive sense of identity. Studies have used Logistic, SEM, and other models to analyse the specific manifestations of psychological integration and cultural acceptance regarding migrant workers' identification, including familiarity with local dialects and customs. Especially for the dialect distance, some scholars point out that such a factor has a passive impact on the willingness of migrant workers to migrate permanently, hindering the social assimilation of migrant workers in the inflow areas [33].

Based on these manifestations, researchers have established the patterns of migrant workers' identities, including fusion, assimilation, dissociative, and borderline. However, some scholars warn of an identity crisis in terms of citizenisation caused by blurred rural memory, relative system inequality or absence, and the new citizens' incompetence and system lag, which is more problematic regarding ethnic minorities [27,28].

5. Conclusion

There is further controversy about whether a progressive relationship exists between the aspects of social assimilation, including institutional system, economic condition, psychological integration, and identity, over an extended period. While most scholars generally agree that there is a relationship, there is no consistent agreement regarding the sequence of assimilation at different aspects. An earlier influential argument suggests that economic integration or incorporation, cultural acceptance, and behavioural adaptation or adjustment have a progressive, interdependent, and interactive relationship. However, later studies focus on the internal causal relationship among the four aspects and examine the tendency of social assimilation.

On the contrary, some scholars analyse economic, social, psychological, and identity aspects, and argue that assimilation at the economic level does not necessarily lead to assimilation at other levels. Supporters of this view regard the progressive relationship as a characteristic of linear fusion, which means that the social assimilation of immigrants experiences many steps in a new social environment. However, over time, their behaviour becomes more similar to that of native aborigines. In contrast, different aspects of social assimilation are parallel and multidimensional.

In conclusion, the social assimilation of Chinese migrant workers is a complex issue related to generations, gender, ethnicity, and district and it refers to political, economic, cultural, and physiological aspects. This paper mainly reviews three perspectives of social assimilation.

Firstly, social fairness is connected with the household registration system, which impacts migrant workers' citizenisation. Due to the dual urban-rural structure in China, the household registration system is the fundamental restriction for migrant workers to assimilate into inflow places. Based on this system, various policies set up different treatment between migrant workers and native people, reflecting political unfairness and further impairing salary, work condition, welfare, and community

participation. In this case, citizenisation is an effective way to realise social fairness for migrant workers, as emphasized by the government.

Secondly, social exclusion is the opposite situation compared to social interaction, indicating low community participation. Social exclusion is the multi-aspect, dynamic process of total or partial exclusion from the economic, social, and cultural systems that determine the degree of social integration. Migrant workers are often regarded as a vulnerable group and are in a state of social exclusion. Therefore, social assimilation means helping migrant workers who lack resources and cannot participate in the community, to restore citizenship, justice, and human rights and eliminate social discrimination against them.

Thirdly, resocialisation is more related to psychological interaction and cultural fusion, which influence the formation of migrant workers' identities. It is apparent that modernity is implicit in such a perspective that emphasises the modern characteristics of migrant workers after flowing to urban areas. During the process of resocialisation, migrant workers accept new cultures, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that citizenisation, community participation, and identity are not isolating concepts during social assimilation. Chinese rural-urban migrant workers are often considered as a vulnerable group in political, economic, cultural, and ideological aspects. When assimilating into inflow areas, they will likely experience citizenisation, interact with local people, and form identity simultaneously. Therefore, in the case of many migrant workers' floating and long-term residences, the social assimilation of this group is not only about household registration but also about the interaction with the local community and the recognition of self-identity.

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