

Employment and Citizenization of China's New Generation Migrant Workers in the Digital Economy Era

Xiangyi Hong^{1,a,*}

¹*Chongqing No.1 Secondary School, 2 Shan'an Street, Shapingba District, Chongqing, China
a. 1350573792@qq.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The diffusion of digital technology and business models globally has brought about new employment patterns, reshaping daily life and social relationships. Over the past few decades, the rapid growth of China's internet industry has fueled the development of the digital economy, giving rise to new forms of employment and labor relations. This has brought both new employment opportunities and challenges to migrant workers. As the primary labor force in modern society, the new generation of migrant workers is gradually engaging in new types of work in the context of digital development. However, as both migrant workers and new types of employees, they face issues related to the protection of labor rights and the process of citizenization in the city. This paper discusses the issues related to the citizenization of the new generation of migrant workers in the context of digitization and proposes recommendations and solutions.

Keywords: new generation migrant workers, citizenization, social security, flexible employment

1. Introduction

The process of urbanization and the citizenship of migrant workers are closely intertwined in China, as the government's clear scientific positioning of the New Urbanization was articulated during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. In 2013, New Urbanization was identified as one of the six key points, including issues related to support of industrial development and labor protection, aiming to achieve the modernization of individuals by facilitating their transition from rural to urban areas.

Compared with traditional urbanization, the New Urbanization places greater emphasis on humanism, justice, and harmony, with its core mission being the orderly promotion of the urbanization process for the agricultural workforce. The core challenge in advancing the New Urbanization is to accelerate relevant institutional reforms and promote industrial development. The most practical concern is addressing the questions of "where the funds come from" and "where the people go."

As a result of the nation's development and urban changes, the total number of migrant workers in urban non-agricultural industries has reached nearly 300 million. Although the growth rate has slowed down, the overall number is expected to continue to rise. This transition represents a leap from quantity to quality in the labor market and the coordinated development between urban and rural areas. For a long time, the educational level of migrant workers has influenced their employment

quality and corresponding social welfare. The majority of migrant workers who leave their hometowns have only completed junior high school education and have not participated in skills training. They are primarily engaged in manufacturing, construction, and service industries. These characteristics have created stereotypes about the migrant worker community during China's modernization process over the past four decades. In recent years, with the advancement of technology and the development of the digital economy, these stereotypes are gradually being shattered. Migrant workers from various industries are becoming active on various social and media platforms. Examples include Zhu Yanjun, a migrant worker who won second place in the 2023 Chinese Poetry Competition, the brick-moving youth whose construction site videos went viral across the internet. These diverse stories highlight the aspirations and happiness of this group in the new era of labor.

Unlike before, they now possess a richer spiritual world and have showcased their distinctiveness through technological innovation in the new era. They are not only builders of the city but also participants in urban life. From 2018 to 2022, migrant workers actively voiced their concerns and suggestions in the National People's Congress, advocating for issues such as "promoting the transition of migrant workers to new types of construction industry workers," "increasing industry training efforts," and "facilitating integration into the city," all of which are related to the vital interests of migrant workers.

The influence of migrant workers on society continues to expand, and their literacy levels are steadily rising, enabling them to pay attention to broader fields. In March 2006, the State Council issued "Several Opinions on Addressing Migrant Worker Issues," marking an important guiding document for comprehensive research and resolution of migrant worker issues in China. Over the past decade, policies have been continuously strengthened, encompassing issues such as promoting migrant worker employment, enhancing skills training for migrant workers, and strengthening the protection of their rights. Surveys indicate that the new generation of migrant workers remains hardworking, prioritizing self-improvement over salary considerations. They value career prospects and self-fulfillment, with most aspiring to integrate into urban life.

Enabling the new generation of migrant workers to integrate into the city is not only a requirement of the New Urbanization and rural revitalization strategy but also the aspiration of the migrant workers. 5G technology has a significant positive impact on China's economic and social development. Firstly, the development of 5G technology promotes the growth of China's digital economy. It provides robust technological support for the development of the digital economy and the Internet of Things, fostering the deep integration of informatization, intelligence, and networking, thereby driving the rapid development of the digital economy. Furthermore, the arrival of 5G technology promotes the development of new industries, offering faster, more reliable, and secure communication support for emerging industries such as virtual reality, intelligent manufacturing, autonomous driving, and smart logistics. In terms of industrial upgrading, 5G technology provides strong support for the digital transformation and upgrading of traditional manufacturing industries such as industrial Internet and intelligent manufacturing, achieving high efficiency and high quality in intelligent production and manufacturing.

In addition to these aspects, the development of 5G technology also supports the digital transformation of cities, thereby realizing the construction and management of smart cities and ultimately improving the level of urban intelligence and quality of life. The development of information technology propels China's socio-economic transformation into the era of intelligence, presenting new opportunities and challenges for both industries and employment under the digital economy model. In terms of economic development, digital platforms provide numerous job opportunities while giving rise to new labor protection and social issues. In terms of social governance, digital governance tools and systems facilitate the protection of the rights and interests of urban and

rural residents. This paper focuses on the employment and social integration of the new generation of migrant workers in the context of the digital economy.

2. Literature Review

As China advances in modernization and industrialization, population mobility and migration have shaped the distribution of labor in different regions, giving rise to a series of social governance issues. Existing literature has extensively researched and discussed the migrant worker population that moves from rural areas to urban employment, including the unequal treatment of migrant workers in employment and social security [1]. Using the concept of urbanization, the citizenization of migrant workers is divided into four stages. The first stage is the transition of surplus rural labor to urban migrant workers, which has mostly been completed in China. In the second stage, urban migrant workers transit to industrial workers and citizens, there remain some issues related to the citizenship of migrant workers. This group of migrant workers still faces barriers stemming from the household registration system and urban-rural social security system, preventing them from fully transitioning from rural to urban citizens. With the rapid development of urbanization and modernization in China, social security for the migrant worker population remains relatively underdeveloped. Government policies and social governance efforts have not provided adequate education, healthcare, and other social security measures for migrant workers. These factors make it difficult for migrant workers to integrate rapidly into urban life.

The citizenization of migrant workers refers to the process and phenomenon whereby rural workers who migrate to cities for employment or business gradually transform into urban citizens, encompassing four dimensions: First, their occupation shifts from rural farming to manual or service work in the urban non-agricultural sector, indicating a change in both work type and industry. Second, their social identity shifts from rural to urban. Third, their awareness of being the primary workforce elevates. Fourth, their ideological, lifestyle, and behavioral changes align with urban living. These four dimensions are interconnected and mutually constraining, with the first two dimensions primarily dependent on macro-system reform and related institutional innovations, exerting a decisive influence on the citizenization process of migrant workers [2].

Specifically, Shui Shuisheng [3] proposed three paths to the citizenization of migrant workers. First, migrant workers from rural areas need to transition from farming to work in manufacturing or service industries. Second, those who have already moved to urban areas for employment and have become permanent residents in towns or cities can be considered as urban citizens. Without settling in urban areas, these migrant workers will find it difficult to feel a sense of belonging to the city and may eventually return to their rural homes. Third, those who have settled in urban areas and are stably employed can only be truly considered as urban citizens if they enjoy equal citizenship rights. If, under the same conditions, migrant workers do not have equal citizenship rights, they will continue to be considered "second-class citizens."

The "new generation" of migrant workers primarily refers to rural laborers born in the 1980s and 1990s, also known as the second generation of migrant workers. They differ from previous laborers in terms of their relatively higher levels of education and culture. After graduating from school, they directly enter urban employment, with limited familiarity with rural life. Simultaneously, they aspire to integrate into the city and enjoy the modern civilization it offers. The new generation of migrant workers is eager to live in the city, with their thought processes and behaviors being shaped by urban life. They prefer to engage in intellectual work rather than manual labor. As the socio-economic landscape evolves toward greater intelligence, the new generation of migrant workers is entering technical industries such as intelligent manufacturing, textiles, and electronic information, moving beyond the primary goal of simply finding employment in the city.

On the other hand, due to significant disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of household registration, employment conditions, social security, and educational resources, the new generation of migrant workers is positioned within a new dualistic structure and continuously marginalized. The increasing fluidity and instability of migrant workers pose potential risks to the harmonious development of society. Currently, the number of new generation migrant workers is on the rise, but they face several challenges. First, they experience employment marginalization, as most of them have difficulty in job selection. They endure heavy workloads, low incomes, and often have to work overtime to complete tasks. Data shows that only 11.5% of migrant workers earn a monthly income above 2,200 yuan, while 69.5% earn less than 1,800 yuan. In the same or similar positions and working environments, the new generation of migrant workers often struggle to receive the same wages as urban residents. Second, their place of residence is marginalized, as most of them live in suburban or semi-urban areas with inconvenient and subpar living conditions. Over 80% of their housing facilities are inadequate, and only a very small fraction can afford to buy houses in the city. Third, their children face difficulties in enrolling in schools. Local governments and educational authorities set hurdles for children without urban household registrations, denying many migrant workers' children the same educational opportunities as urban children. This reflects political and policy imperfections and inequalities [4].

3. Employment of Rural Migrant Workers and Citizenization Issues in the Digital Era

3.1. The "Digital Divide" Between Urban and Rural Areas in the Digital Age

As digital information technology and industries rapidly advance, the process of citizenization for the new generation of rural migrant workers also faces new opportunities and challenges. Firstly, there is an unequal distribution of digital infrastructure resources between urban and rural areas. This has led to some individuals who were born and raised in rural areas being excluded from current network information systems. Additionally, rural migrant workers generally have lower levels of education and comprehensive skills, with over 70% of them holding educational qualifications at or below junior high school level. There are disparities between rural migrant workers and urban residents in terms of their usage and proficiency in digital information technology. According to data surveys, migrant workers primarily use mobile internet for social media and entertainment activities, with much lower frequencies of using it for learning and work purposes [3]. The "dual divide" in citizenization for rural migrant workers in the digital age is a challenge to overcome. In this digital context, both information resources and material resources are equally important. These resources are the two main pillars supporting modern economic development, but digital resources are not evenly accessible to everyone. This results in significant spatial and individual disparities, manifested as the "digital divide" between urban and rural areas in China. On one hand, rural migrant workers have lower levels of education. On the other hand, digital technology facilities and resources in Chinese rural areas are relatively scarce. This makes rural migrant workers a disadvantaged group in the information society and hinders their smooth transition to urban life and work. In the long term, this will pose new challenges to rural revitalization and high-quality coordinated development between urban and rural areas. For rural migrant workers, the advent of the digital era leads to an expanding gap between them and urban citizens. Their generally lower levels of education and comprehensive skills, with over 70% holding educational qualifications at or below junior high school level, hinder their effective use of digital information and services. Consequently, their citizenization process becomes slower compared to urban residents [5].

3.2. New Opportunities and Challenges in Rural Migrant Worker Employment in the "Gig Economy"

On the other hand, the emergence of digital platforms has also transformed employment patterns in various industries, providing diversified employment models and positions for urban and rural residents. The digital economy is characterized by economic activities based on digital technology and the internet, emphasizing data collection, analysis, and application, which facilitate innovation and the creation of new business models. Compared to traditional economies, the digital economy has several key features: first, it focuses more on economic activities related to digital technology, while traditional economies are primarily based on material wealth. Second, the digital economy is faster and more efficient. Production, communication, and transactions in the digital economy can be completed in an instant, whereas traditional economies require time and human resources. Third, the digital economy is highly competitive. Digital technology makes markets more transparent, allowing consumers to easily compare prices and quality, thereby compressing profit margins and encouraging companies to improve efficiency and innovation. Therefore, the digital economy has become an important policy and strategic goal for economic and social development in various countries and regions.

Furthermore, the development of digital platforms has also provided flexible employment opportunities for rural migrant worker populations in urban areas. In this digital age, with advanced internet infrastructure, the rapid growth of platform economies, and increasing demand for talent across various sectors, there has been a shift in the employment landscape for rural migrant workers. Particularly, digital platforms and flexible employment have not only increased the economic income and living standards of rural migrant workers but have also heightened the instability of their employment. In this regard, government policies actively support the employment and development of rural migrant workers. With changes in employment patterns, the rural migrant worker population has undergone transformations in their occupational identity and integration into urban life [3].

Various studies have provided different definitions and discussions of the digital economy. Digital platforms play an intermediary role in connecting users and digital gig workers. Content creation platforms or lifestyle service platforms offer a range of flexible employment opportunities, leading to new forms of employment within the digital economy, often referred to as the "gig economy" or "sharing economy." While the gig economy provides rural migrant workers with more employment opportunities, it also presents certain difficulties and barriers. These challenges can be categorized into three aspects. Firstly, platform companies responsible for managing and hiring rural migrant workers divide recruitment, labor contracts, daily work management, wage distribution, and personal tax payments among various secondary organizations. This results in unclear responsibilities for managing rural migrant workers, causing confusion in labor disputes between platform companies and workers. Additionally, some platform companies force workers to register as "individual businesses," making them self-employed rather than employees. Consequently, the relationship between workers and companies is defined as a partnership, relieving the companies of any social protection responsibilities. Secondly, rural migrant workers engaged in the gig economy are unable to access labor protection and social security when encountering labor disputes with platform companies. Thirdly, the dualistic social security system between urban and rural areas, combined with the instability brought by flexible employment, creates a dual rejection effect on rural migrant workers. In China's current dual "employee-resident" social protection system, rural migrant workers engaged in the gig economy are generally excluded from the employee social protection system. They have two options for social security: becoming self-employed participants in the employee social insurance system or participating in urban and rural resident social pension and medical insurance

systems. However, neither of these options adequately meets the welfare needs of rural migrant workers in urban areas [6].

Research on the work mobility of the new generation of rural migrant workers primarily focuses on different work mobility patterns. It has been found that their work mobility exhibits generational differences and internal differentiation. Compared to the older generation of rural migrant workers, the new generation experiences more frequent work mobility with limited upward mobility. Their work mobility patterns are characterized by "short-term employment," "horizontal mobility," and even demonstrate a "reverse U-shaped" trajectory. Generational differences in work mobility originate from the new characteristics that the new generation of rural migrant workers formed during their socialization and employment stages. The experience of leaving home has generally caused them to lack qualities such as endurance and a sense of responsibility. This has exacerbated their work mobility. On the other hand, the development of the digital economy has also had a positive impact on the citizenization process of rural migrant workers. An increasing number of new generation rural migrant workers are transitioning from traditional industries to new platform service sectors. Firstly, they have flexible working hours. Secondly, they earn higher incomes compared to traditional industries, where wage arrears and monotonous work can be issues. Data surveys show that when the new generation of rural migrant workers shift from traditional industries to emerging platform services, their income increases. About 78.2% of delivery workers and 79.4% of food delivery riders explicitly state that their income has improved after joining their current jobs [5].

4. Analysis of the Reasons and Strategies for Ensuring the Employment and Citizenization of Rural Migrant Workers in the Digital Economy

4.1. Analysis of Labor Protection Issues for Rural Migrant Workers in the Digital Economy

There are three levels of reasons for the issues concerning the protection of the rights and interests of new-format rural migrant workers in labor. Firstly, at the individual level of workers, most of them lack self-awareness for self-protection. Due to a lack of adequate education, rural migrant workers do not possess the knowledge to correctly protect their rights in labor disputes, and they have a limited understanding of the law. Taking social insurance participation as an example, some new-format rural migrant workers believe that participating in social insurance for flexible employment requires them to bear all the costs, which they find to be prohibitively high. Their low level of education contributes to their unclear understanding of social insurance. In the event of accidents or injuries, migrant workers who have not paid for insurance will have difficulty covering subsequent expenses. Therefore, many new-format rural migrant workers still lack long-term planning and awareness. Secondly, from the perspective of enterprise platforms, the majority of labor in new employment formats, such as gig work, is characterized by gig workers who are not formally employed by specific companies. In order to maximize profits, enterprises often avoid entering into formal labor contracts, and when labor disputes arise, they evade social responsibilities and the costs associated with worker social insurance. From a societal perspective, existing laws and regulations lack clear definitions and standards for flexible employment formats. Therefore, workers in diverse and variable work scenarios often lack awareness and ability to protect themselves [7].

As society develops, the sharing economy has created more job opportunities. However, this new format of flexible employment has brought new challenges to the protection of labor rights and interests for those involved. Most new-format laborers are young people and the primary contributors to their families' economic well-being. Their educational qualifications are typically at the level of junior college or below, and they tend to have lower educational levels compared to urban workers. As a result, they face more labor rights and interests protection issues compared to urban workers, mainly in the following aspects: First, rural migrant workers employed in cities face challenges in

verifying their labor relationships. In contrast to the employment models of traditional industries, the employment process in platform economies is more flexible and streamlined. Rural migrant workers often lack understanding of relevant labor laws and regulations when seeking employment. Second, the rural migrant worker population finds it difficult to participate in social insurance. In China's current social insurance system, there are significant differences between social insurance for urban residents and social insurance for workers. Workers enjoy more comprehensive social insurance benefits compared to urban residents. Third, due to the absence of written contracts between new-format enterprises/platforms and the new generation of rural migrant workers, these workers lack labor protections, leading to higher occupational risks in this group, such as accidents. Fourth, the labor rights and interests of new-format rural migrant workers are vulnerable to infringement due to their short rest times and long working hours [7].

4.2. Suggestions for Addressing the Labor Rights and Interests Protection Issues of New-Format Rural Migrant Workers

In response to the aforementioned problems concerning labor protection and citizenization for rural migrant workers, this article presents enhancement measures and suggestions from the perspectives of policy and regulations, as well as labor training.

Firstly, strengthening the recognition of labor relationships for new-format rural migrant workers. New-format enterprise platforms indirectly establish subordinate relationships with new-format rural migrant workers, and their working hours align with labor relationships. Therefore, there is a relevant labor relationship between new-format rural migrant workers and the new platform enterprises. Secondly, fostering the awareness of labor rights and interests protection among new-format rural migrant workers. These workers should enhance their awareness of labor rights and interests protection, place importance on labor contracts in their work, and understand the business model of the platform enterprises where they work. By increasing self-advocacy and legal awareness, they can avoid labor disputes. Thirdly, optimizing the social security system. The majority of new-format rural migrant workers do not participate in flexible employment insurance due to their non-local household registration, even though their work entails certain risks. Society should strengthen the social security system for new-format rural migrant workers and distribute social insurance costs between platforms and migrant workers to alleviate the pressure of social insurance payments for new-format rural migrant workers. Fourthly, expanding avenues for new-format rural migrant workers to protect their rights. Given the generally low educational levels of this population, they often lack knowledge on how to safeguard their rights. Expanding channels for laborers in new employment formats to protect their rights not only serves as a means of supervising new-format enterprise platforms but also better ensures the rights and interests of laborers [7].

5. Conclusion

In the context of the digital economy, the process of rural migrant workers becoming citizens has emerged as a new developmental trend in modern society. Rural migrant workers aspire to transit from rural to urban areas for their growth, gradually transforming into urban citizens. The new generation of rural migrant workers become a primary labor force in contemporary society. Under the development of the digital economy, the new generation of rural migrant workers is gradually integrating into society, engaging in flexible employment based on new employment formats, such as internet platforms or the "gig economy." This paper focuses on issues and solutions related to the new generation of rural migrant workers under the backdrop of new urbanization development. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of the social issues facing rural migrant workers in the digital economy. It discusses how the new generation of rural migrant workers integrate into urban areas, the challenges

they encounter, and the advantages and disadvantages of digital governance for this demographic. Subsequently, the paper delves into the employment patterns and citizenization of rural migrant workers and the causes of their employment and social security issues. Finally, it presents policy recommendations for addressing social security issues among rural migrant workers.

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