Domestic migrants in China (2018): trends, challenges and recommendations

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Domestic migration (of populations both with and without changes in their household registration, or *Hukou*) ranks among the core issues of population and development in China in the coming decades, and it is also a major factor affecting population and development and the associated challenges across the country (in provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions). The assessment of the characteristics and trends of population migration and its impact is a key step in formulating and improving population and development strategies, advancing social development and conducting social science studies in the future. Building on the 1% National Population Sample Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2015, this report summarizes the major characteristics and trends of domestic migration (simplified as migration hereafter) in China since 2000, analyzes the prominent challenges faced, and proposes corresponding recommendations and actions.

Definitions

Migrants: Migrants in statistical terms involves both the dimensions of space and time. For the space dimension, it consists of various types of migration, including inter-township (town and street), inter-county (district), inter-provincial migration. For the time dimension, it consists of various duration that people live outside their registered household residence, including a time duration of more than 3 months, more than 6 months, and more than 1 year. 'Migrants' in this report refers to the population whose current residence is not in the township, town or street of their registered household residence, and who have been away from their registered household residence for more than half a year. It excludes those who reside in a different district of the same city as their registered household residence.

New generation migrants: refer to the migrants born in and after 1980.

Older migrants: refer to the number of migrants aged 60 and above who have a different registered household residence than their current residence, excluding those who reside in a different district of the same city as their registered household residence.

***Hukou*:** also known as household registration, is an official document issued by the household administration of the public security authority to identify a person as a resident of a particular area and record basic information of the *Hukou* holder.

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Data Sources

Unless otherwise stated, the main data source of this report is the 1% National Population Sample Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2015, supplemented by historical data of previous population censuses. China has conducted six national population censuses in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010, and the current frequency is every ten years. The 1% National Population Sample Survey is conducted in between two population censuses, and it is known as the "mini-census". The two most recent mini-censuses were conducted in 2005 and 2015.

I. Main characteristics and trends of population migration in China

1.Size of migrant population shifting from fluctuation to stability

According to the 1% National Population Sampling Survey conducted in 2015, the size of the migrant population in China stood at 246 million, a decrease of 5.68 million compared with 2014.[1] For the first time in about 40 years, the size of the migrant population in China has experienced a decline. In 2016 and 2017, the size of the migrant population continued to decline, and it fell to 244 million by 2017.

The following formula has been employed to explore the factors behind the changes in the size of the migrant population, and to determine whether the decline is an accidental phenomenon or the turning point of a long-term trend:

Increments in the migrant population in a given year= first-time and new generation migrants + first-time middle-aged and older migrants - migrants who have obtained household registration in urban areas - migrants returning home + re-migrating population after returning home.

Building on the formula, a factor analysis was conducted to decompose the reduction in the size of the migrant population in 2015, and concluded with the following results:

A. The large-scale of the migrant population returning home could be associated with short-term causes and long-term considerations. On one hand, migrants returning home was associated with short-term economic fluctuations mainly caused by the sharp drop in the growth rate of fixed asset investment. This negatively affected the manufacturing and construction industries that most migrants work in. The majority of these migrants temporary returned home, with only a small number returning home permanently. On the other hand, migrants returning home may create some momentum and become a trend associated with the rise of in the number of older migrants within the migrant population. The uncertainties of social services for older migrants in the migration destinations may lead to a significant number of older migrants returning home.

B. More migrants are obtaining local household registration (*Hukou*) in urban areas and settling down in their migration destinations. Since the release of the Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of Household Registration System by the State Council in July 2014, cities have introduced policies that promote

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1. *The 2014 data come from the 2014 Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development.*

migrants to settle down in urban areas through granting local household registrations. The number of migrants obtaining household registration in their migration destination has thus increased dramatically. It is roughly estimated that there were 3-5 million more migrants who obtained local household registration in 2015 compared with 2014. With the advancement of the new type of urbanization, the continuing rise of migrants obtaining local household registration is inevitable, driven by the transfer and resettlement of 100 million agricultural population in cities, and the rise in urbanization rate of *Hukou* population. However, obtaining local household registration does not necessarily translate into becoming full "urbanites". Continuous efforts are required from government institutions involved in service provision and management of migrants.

C. There is a temporary reduction in the number of migrants. Calculations based on the summary data of the 2015 mini census indicate that there was a sharp drop of 9.54 million in the population aged 15-17 compared with the population aged 18-20 in 2015. According to the age structure of migrants, the temporary reduction in the number of younger age cohorts of the population contributed to around 2 million of the reduction in the size of the migrant population in 2015. With the advent of the fourth birth boom since 2010, the birth cohorts have rebounded and the aforesaid impact on the reduction in the size of the migrant population will be partly alleviated in a few years.

In summary, it is believed that the reduction in the size of the migrant population in 2015 and the subsequent years was a combined result of short-term economic fluctuations, accelerated transfer and resettlement of

Figure 1: Size of the migrant population and its proportions in the total population in China, 1982-2017
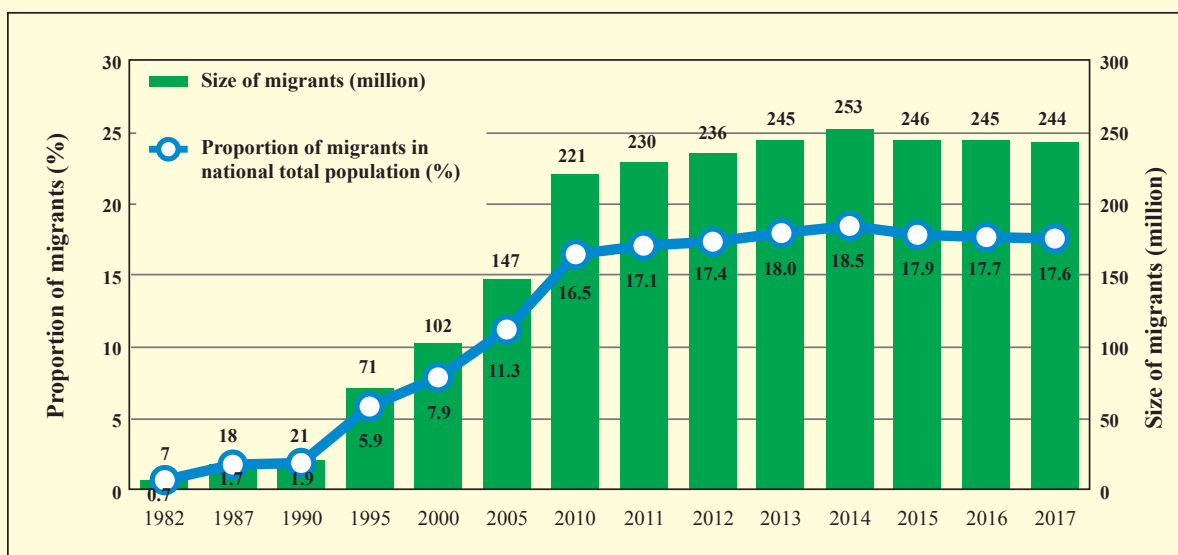
Data Source: The size of the migrant population between 1982 and 2000 was calculated by Prof. Duan Chengrong et al. based on respective national censuses and the 1% National Population Sample Survey of the same period, quoted from the *Nine major trends of migrants in China since the reform and opening up* by Duan Chengrong, Yang Ge, Zhang Fei and Lu Xuehe. Demographic Research, Issue 6 of 2008. Data between 2005 and 2017 are from respective Statistical Communiqués of the National Bureau of Statistics during the period.

agricultural populations to urban areas, and temporary reduction in the size of the migrant population. In the long run, the era of fast expansion of the size of the migrant population has halted. Going forward, it will primarily remain stable, though some fluctuations are expected.

2. The "ageing" of migrants

Overall, migrants in China have always been dominated by the working-age population (age 16-59), especially young adults, and the proportions of children and older people have been relatively small. Against the background of a rapidly ageing population in China, where the proportion of population aged 60 and over increasing from 10.5% in 2000 to 16.1% from 2015, the ageing of the migrant population has also taken shape. From 2000 to 2015, the mean age of migrants increased by 2 years, the median age increased by 4 years, the proportion of migrants aged 16-44 rose first and then decreased, and ended up with a decline of 1.7 percentage points during the period, and the proportion of migrants aged 45-49 increased rapidly from 9.7% to 15.6%.

3. Sex ratio of the migrant population first declined then rose, associated with the increasing trend of family migration

The sex ratio of the migrant population in China first experienced a declined and then rose significantly. In the 1980s and 1990s, young men made up the majority of migrants searching for employment opportunities, leading to a high sex ratio in 1990. The gradual increase in the number of women participating in migration contributed to a decline in the sex ratio of migrants in 2000. Subsequently, due to the increasing trend of family migrations where children migrated with their parents, and the high sex ratio among children and adolescents as a result of long-term sex imbalance at birth, the overall sex ratio of the migrant population in China rose. This constituted part of the reasons for the rebound of the sex ratio among migrant population in 2010 and 2015.

Table 1 Age composition of China's migrants, 1982-2015

Age group (%)	1982	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Ages 0-15	35.4	17.3	14.9	13.5	11.6	10.6
Ages 16-44	45.7	69.8	70.2	71.1	71.1	68.5
Ages 45-59	7.6	7.6	9.7	10.0	12.5	15.6
Ages 60 and over	11.3	5.3	5.3	5.4	4.8	5.3
Total	100	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean age (years)	28.2	27.2	29.0	30.4	30.8	31.0
Median age (years)	23	24	27	29	29	31

Table 2 Sex ratio of migrants, 1990-2015

	Ages 0-14	Ages 15-64	Ages 65 and over	Total
2015	119.0	117.5	103.8	117.2
2010	122.9	118.7	100.8	113.5
2000	114.5	106.5	100.3	107.3
1990	110.1	131.3	73.3	124.7

4. Improved educational attainment of migrants

The 15 years between 2000 and 2015 recorded a continued increase in educational attainment of migrants in China, with their average years of schooling increasing from 8.7 to 10.6 years. Generally, the proportion of migrants with an educational attainment at junior secondary school level and below continued to decline, and those with an educational attainment at senior secondary school level and above continued to increase. From the perspective of the composition by education stages: (1) the proportion of the illiterate population continued to decline from 4.8% in 2000 to 2.1% in 2015, and those with primary and junior secondary education continued to decline as well; (2) It is worth noting that between 2000 and 2010, those with an educational attainment at junior secondary school level accounted for the majority of migrants at more than 40%, by 2015, those with an educational attainment at senior secondary school level and above became the majority with a proportion of 45.3%, indicating a transformation of educational composition among migrants; and (3) In 2000, migrants with an educational attainment at junior college level and above constituted only 4.8% of migrants, by 2015, the proportion rose to 23.3%, accounting for about one-quarter of migrants.

Table 3a Composition of migrants aged 6 and above by educational attainment, 1982-2015

Educational attainment	1982	1987	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Illiterate	28.6	16.1	12.5	4.8	4.8	2.2	2.1
Primary school	39.3	35.2	32.5	26.3	23.3	18.4	15.6
Junior secondary school	22.7	34.0	41.4	45.4	47.4	43.8	37.1
Senior secondary school	8.4	12.7	11.6	18.8	17.2	20.6	22.0
Junior college and above	1.0	2.0	2.0	4.8	7.2	15.0	23.3

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Technical/speci	—	—	—	3.5	4.9	8.7	11.4
Undergraduate	—	—	—	1.2	2.2	6.0	11.2
Graduate	—	—	—	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Average years of schooling of migrants	5.6	7.0	7.4	8.7	8.9	9.9	10.6
Average years of schooling of the total population	5.5	5.9	6.3	7.6	8.3	8.8	9.1

Increasingly more young migrants are enrolled in school (see Table 3b). In 2000, majority (91.2%) of the young migrants aged 18-24 had graduated from schools, and the proportion of those studying in schools was only 3.8%. Since 2000, the proportion of migrants aged 18-24 who are enrolled in schools continued to increase: it increased to 48.2% in 2015, corresponding to 22.53 million young migrants, of which 85.1% were enrolled at colleges or higher education institutions, 14.1% were enrolled in senior secondary schools, and 0.8% were enrolled in junior secondary schools. The emergence of this large group of young migrants enrolled in schools is one of the new characteristics of migrant population in China. Those with an educational attainment at colleges or higher education institutions level and above have different expectations of social services provision and therefore have different policy implications.

Table 3b Educational status of migrants aged 18-24

Educational status of migrants aged 18-24 (%)	2000	2005	2010	2015
In school	3.8	7.5	31.5	48.2
Graduated	91.2	88.9	67.0	50.6