

China's Internal Migrants: Processes of Categorisation and Analytical Issues

CINZIA LOSAVIO

ABSTRACT: This article reveals the malleability of the boundaries between political and analytical categories related to internal migration in China. The author analyses the iterative process of categorisation, which, far from being neutral, settled, and objective, comes within government intervention strategies. Statistical categories, media practices, and the scientific understanding of migration by social sciences all dovetail with each other, showing themselves to be subject to evolving political, economic, and urban landscapes. This paper shows that the categories of spatial mobility do not correspond to those of urban integration, with implications that are not only of an administrative, material, and spatial nature but also concern identity issues.

KEYWORDS: internal migrations, categorisation, peasant-workers, new urban migrants, selling labour migrants, talents, off-site personnel, people coming from elsewhere, China.

Introduction

Within the field of migration research, studies on international migrants (particularly South-North migration) hold a dominant position today, despite the fact that migrations within national borders are quantitatively more significant than the flows of people from one country to another (King and Skeldon 2010; Wihtol de Wenden 2012; Skeldon 2017). China has been one of the most significant examples of this internal mobility ever since the start of the economic reform process (1978). The transition from a planned economy to a market economy paved the way for unprecedented spatial mobility, with the rate of urbanisation going from 18.5% in 1980 to 59.58% by the end of 2018 (NBSC 2019). However, in China as elsewhere, the limited number of studies reflecting on the processes of the categorisation and stratification of internal migrants feeds the misconception that individuals who migrate within their home province or to the major cities of another province constitute a homogenous socio-economic category. Quite the opposite is true: whatever the type of migration considered, its construction as a public problem is inevitably bound up with a process of differentiation and categorisation of the populations involved, thereby legitimising intervention by the authorities and the interest of political analysts and researchers.

In the literature on international migrations, a number of studies have detailed the key issues at stake in the categorisations of migrants (Kévonian 2005; Labridy 2008; Crawley and Skleparis 2018), in particular the way in which the legal, political, and administrative categories determine the analytical categories used by researchers (Bakewell 2008; Martiniello and Simon 2006). These categorisations, which are created *from above* on several territorial levels (Frigoli 2010), and which are often determined by statistical

categories (Asal 2010), contribute to circumscribing migrations in such a way that they appear to be a completely controlled and controllable phenomena. The process of categorisation therefore serves the purpose of the "institutional adaptation of the social" (Bourdieu 1993) and it ends up locking individuals into a "dead end status" (Wihtol de Wenden 2010). But can social science researchers think that the society they analyse is reducible to categories constructed by technicians in administration and statistics? Can academics' formulation of the issue of migration be based solely on categories of public intervention that were themselves created in the first instance by organs of power? In other words, is it normal to merge political and analytical categories without allowing any room for a social reading detached from institutional arrangements?

Studies on international migrations have demonstrated the extent to which the processes of categorisation of migrants reveal themselves to be politicised (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). They have consequently stressed the need for researchers to assert their role as critical thinkers grappling with processes of classification set up by the authorities (Turton 2005; Martiniello and Simon 2006; Bakewell 2008). Social science research requires political categories to be deconstructed and unpacked, and that goes for analysis of all migration phenomena, international and internal alike.

This article espouses a reflexive approach that emerged out of the author's doctoral research. It aims to highlight the limits caused by the malleability of boundaries between political and analytical categories related to internal forms of migration in China. Drawing on data gathered during an ethnographic fieldwork in Zhuhai (Guangdong) between 2016 and 2018, the author analyses the iterative process of categorisation that falls within the social policies and government intervention strategies. However, this process is not neutral, settled, and objective. The genesis of official categories, their

use by the media, and the scientific understanding of migration by social sciences all dovetail with each other, and are subject to the evolving political, economic, and urban landscapes. For the purpose of the demonstration, this study calls upon the semi-directed interviews conducted by the author with more than 120 migrants, as well as with a dozen key actors involved in the decision-making process and the construction of affordable housing in Zhuhai. This empirical data will be supplemented with an analysis of public policies, newspaper articles, and censuses concerning the internal migrant population.

The first part of the article examines the socio-political context that saw the emergence of a grammar of internal migrations' categories within the People's Republic of China (PRC) as early as 1978. The second part analyses the *statistical categories* of spatial mobility by showing their blurred outlines and their overlaps. The paper presents then the range of terms used in the *media* and in the *political sphere* to designate, classify, and manage internal migrants since the 1980s, showing how the migrant categories are being continually renegotiated and redefined. The fourth and final part will present the example of the categories of social housing in Zhuhai, to reveal the way in which stratification within the migrant groups fosters, in the urban context, a process of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the evolving political agenda. This process affects migrants' individual hopes for upward mobility, but it especially serves the growth objectives set by the Chinese state.

The emergence of a grammar of migrant categories within the PRC

The rise of urbanisation in China starting in the 1980s is mainly due to internal waves of migration. In the initial stages, these migrants moved from disadvantaged areas in the west and centre of the country to the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and coastal cities. Over the past fifteen years, however, they have been less likely to venture beyond the borders of their home provinces, favouring the provincial capitals instead (Su *et al.* 2017). In the first decades of the reform process, decollectivisation and the introduction of the household responsibility system brought about a surplus rural workforce,¹ which was encouraged to engage in non-agricultural sectors. However, no social reform was provided for these peasant farmers "who leave the soil but not the village" (Lin 2002). The basic social services for rural migrants remained rooted in the place of registration of their home address and depended on the *agricultural* status institutionally assigned to them by the *hukou* (戶口), the households registration system (Solinger 1999; Wang 2005).

From the 1980s onwards, the intensification of internal migration forced the government to regulate the uncontrolled and potentially dangerous presence of "peasant-workers" (*nongmingong* 農民工) or more generally of the so-called "floating population" (*liudong renkou* 流動人口) in the cities. In parallel, a new discriminatory lexicon designating this group of people sprang up in the language of politics, the media, and statistics before finding its way into Chinese, and later Western, academic studies. The institutionalisation of the issue of peasant-workers and the central place this came to have in public discussion contributed to the spread of a uniform representation of individuals *floating* between the countryside and the city. Over the past forty years, issues associated with the *nongmingong* have been among the most widely studied research subjects, but it was only in the early 2000s that certain studies began shining a light on the difficulty involved in defining the actors and the modes of internal migration in China

(Liu and Chan 2001; Goodkind and West 2002). This consciousness emerged alongside the debate on the representative nature of the statistical data (Scharping 1997, 2001; Liu and Chan 2001), which showed the incoherence of having just one single category for internal migrants.

Migration research generally defines migrants based on spatiotemporal criteria, or according to the causes of migration (Lee 1966; Todaro 1976; Massey 1999). These criteria are, however, inadequate for defining individuals who are on the move, particularly in the case of China (Scharping 1997). The analysis of the phenomenon of migration is made more complex by the institutional system for managing the population, its evolution over time, and the way it is applied in the various levels of the administration, as well as by the statistical censuses and the existence of a rich political and media terminology. The upshot is a range of socially constructed categories that are contingent on the speaker and the context. The role played by these categories is never neutral, either in the process of urban stratification or the representation of the internal migrants.

Overlapping statistical categories of spatial mobility

In China, the official demographic censuses are conducted every ten years by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC). The resulting data, which since 1987 have included information about internal migration, are complemented by interim estimates drawn up by the administration responsible for registering households, and by various offices at the provincial, municipal, and district levels. Other official data are released through the Xinhua News Agency. In this documentation, two categories apply to internal migration: the "migrant population" (*qianyi renkou* 遷移人口),² comprised of individuals who settle permanently in a new administrative unit following a transfer of *hukou*; and the "floating population," made up of individuals moving temporarily (Chan and Zhang 1999) without obtaining a permanent residence permit (Goodkind and West 2002). This second category, mainly concentrated in urban areas, raises issues insofar as different types of census-taking do not use equivalent or consistent definitions of the term "floating population" (Chan 2013). Moreover, the very definition of a Chinese city, which may easily lead to confusion between administrative unit and demographic unit or the downtown area and the overall administrative area that depends on it (Sanjuan and Fayolle-Lussac 2017), contributes to further complexifying the understanding of internal migration.

The NBSC defines the floating population based on a very broad category, namely the "population separated from the official place of residence" (*renhu fenli renkou* 人戶分離人口), which designates the whole set of individuals who have left their official place of residence³ (township, town, or subdistrict) for at least six months to move either within the borders of their county/district or beyond, to remain within their province or to leave it. Within this category one finds reference to the floating population, which includes individuals who have left their official place of residence, but only in cases where they move beyond their home district.⁴ This means that

1. This accounted for over 30% of the active agricultural population in the mid-1980s (Davin 1999; Aubert and Li 2002).

2. During the Maoist era, only migration through official channels was considered to be legitimate, while all spontaneous forms of spatial mobility were judged to be irrational.

3. In the article, this term refers to "the official place of household registration" (*hukou suo zaidi* 戶口所在地).

4. According to the NBSC (2019), in 2018 there were 286 million people separated from their official place of residence, while the floating population was 241 million.

the calculation of the size of the floating population ignores movements – without transfer of *hukou* – within the district in which the official place of residence is located.⁵ Although the two definitions are distinct, commentators and researchers only rarely refer to the category of people who are separated from their official place of residence, channelling any move of at least six months' duration (either inside or outside of the home district) into the category of floating population. Further, the NBSC also distinguishes between the "incoming floating population" (*liuru renkou* 流入人口) and the "outgoing floating population" (*liuchu renkou* 流出口口), as it does between the "long-term floating population" (*changzhu liudong renkou* 常住流動人口) – who have resided outside of their official place of residence for at least five years – and the "short-term floating population" (*duanqi liudong renkou* 短期流動人口) – living outside their official place of residence for a variable period of time.

Another approximate definition of the floating population comes up in official press accounts (Chan 2013). It includes a set of migrant typologies that vary in relation to the nature of the stay (leisure, study, or work) and concerns different types of movement beyond the provincial, municipal, and district boundaries (city-to-city, countryside-city, or countryside-countryside migrations). The length of stay, which is sometimes neglected, can vary from a minimum of three days – a period beyond which any movement must be registered with the local police – to six months, one year, or even up to five years.

In addition to this general use of the expression "floating population," there are other more restrictive terms, which form new categories that appear in the provincial and municipal censuses. These categories result from a system of "temporary residence permits" (*zanzhuzheng* 暫住證). This is not a nationally unified system, but rather one that has been subject to ongoing adjustment ever since its release (in 1984), differing from one municipality (or province) to another. Among these categories, which sometimes replace that of floating population without being equivalent categories, there is also that of "temporary population" (*linshi renkou* 臨時人口). This has appeared in demographic counts in Shanghai as far back as 2008, in the wake of the adoption of a renewable "temporary residence card" (*linshi juzhuzheng* 臨時居住證), which grants the right of abode in Shanghai for a period of six months to all those who take up residence there for more than three days.⁶ In Shenzhen, the municipal and district censuses make a distinction between the "population with a regular place of residence" (*changzhu renkou* 常住人口), which includes residents benefiting from the local *hukou* (*Shenzhenren* 深圳人) and those who have held a long-term residence permit (*changzhuzheng* 常住證) for at least five years, and the "administrative population" (*guanli renkou* 管理人口), which refers to tenants who are registered with the local district police. The figures concerning the administrative population are thus used in press releases to designate the floating population, whereas the two categories are not equivalent at the national level. This fragmented system of temporary residence permits thus complicates in turn any assessment of internal movement that does not involve a transfer of *hukou*. Although the State Council (SC) has since 2010 stated its intention to apply a system of "residence permits" (*juzhuzheng* 居住證) on a national scale, the responsibility for issuing the new permit – which would bestow on any migrant with a steady job and fixed address basically the same rights as local residents – falls to the provincial and municipal administrations. The new system, recently adopted by the most prosperous (*fada* 發達) cities and provinces,⁷ is still far from uniform throughout the country, which hardly simplifies the migrant population count or the interpretation of its data.

In the case of the prefecture-level city of Zhuhai, which, since its designation as a SEZ (1980), has attracted a great number of internal migrants,⁸ the floating population does not figure among the categories listed. The tables published on the site of the Municipal Bureau of Statistics (MBS) merely indicate "the population with a local *hukou*" (*huji renkou* 戶籍人口) and the "population with a regular place of residence," which refers to individuals who have been living in the city for at least five years and who hold a residence permit, or individuals registered with the local police. According to some researchers and officials in Zhuhai,⁹ the calculation of the floating population may be obtained by subtracting the number of people who hold a residence permit there from those who have a *hukou*. However, the fact that the floating population is not subject to any clearly stated definitional criteria raises doubts as to the reliability of these figures¹⁰ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Population data for the city of Zhuhai (Guangdong) in 2019

		3-1 人口主要指標					
指標	單位	2000 年	2010 年	2014 年	2015 年	2016 年	2017 年
Population with a regular place of residence	萬人	123.65	156.16	161.42	163.41	167.53	176.54
年末常住人口	萬人	123.65	156.16	161.42	163.41	167.53	176.54
男性比例	%	50.06	52.08		52.00		
女性比例	%	49.94	47.92		48.00		
0-14 歲人口比例	%	17.31	13.57		14.85		
15-64 歲人口比例	%	78.66	81.42		78.60		
65 歲及以上人口比例	%	4.03	5.01		6.64		
城鎮人口佔常住人口比例	%		87.65	87.87	88.07	88.80	89.37
人口密度	人/平方公里	758	913	936	943	967	1017
戶籍人口	萬人	20.64	29.41	30.66	30.96	31.76	32.50
年末總戶數	萬戶	73.9	104.74	110.22	112.45	114.78	118.87
年末總人口	萬人	106.4	104.1	104.1	103.9	103.4	101.5
性別比	女=100	106.4	104.1	104.1	103.9	103.4	101.5

Source: Table drawn up and translated by the author based on the Municipal Bureau of Statistics of the city of Zhuhai.

According to the criteria used to define the geographical limits, the minimal length of stay, and the incoming and outgoing population flows of an urban unit, as well as in relation to the temporary residence permits issued, each census calculates the floating population in an uneven manner. Furthermore, the statistics do not take into account a significant portion of internal migrants who move around without registering with the authorities of the city in which they work and settle and without obtaining a temporary residence permit. For example, in our sample of 128 migrants, 97 were not registered with either the local police or other administrative offices in Zhuhai. This population, an integral part of the country's floating population, does lie invisible in the censuses, contributing to an even fuzzier overall picture of internal migration.

5. According to the 2010 national census, the floating population was 261,386,075 and the population separated from their household was 39,959,423 (Lian 2013).

6. In 2018, this card was replaced by the residence permit.

7. Among these locations are Beijing and Shanghai, which claim to limit the incoming population, and the provinces of Zhejiang and Guangdong, which intend to use this permit to guarantee additional benefits to recruited migrants as a means of dealing with a shortage of workers.

8. In 2018, migrants are about one third of Zhuhai's total population stock.

9. Author's interviews, September 2017, Guangzhou; June, July 2018, Zhuhai.

10. According to the *Blue Book on Social Integration of the Floating Population*, the floating population of Zhuhai in 2017 represented 61.95% of the population whose regular place of residence was in the city (Xiao 2019). This proportion does not correspond to that extrapolated from the table of the MBS.

Analysis of the statistical categories has revealed their strong malleability, the overlaps between them, and their inadequacy for a rigorous quantification of the migrants concerned. Nonetheless, this analysis does not go far enough. Although the expression “floating population” has become a generic term, a panoply of not always equivalent expressions has been gradually put in place and it ends up constructing other migrant categories.

Political and media categories: Uses “from above” and stratification issues

Apart from the “floating population,” the term most commonly used by the Chinese media in the 1980s to refer to country-to-city migrants is *mangliu* (盲流), or blind flows (Jacka 2000; Florence 2006; Lee 2007). This expression, which hails from the Maoist era, was used by the Party for the first time in 1952, and in official documents ever since, to refer to the influx of peasants who “poured into the cities blindly and thoughtlessly” (Cui 2006; He 2009). The expression *mangliu*, with a pejorative connotation, is testament to the desire of Maoist China to limit all spontaneous movement of the population that was likely to mar the state’s rational and orderly plan for modernisation. Over the course of the 1980s, this terminology, in widespread use in the press, also entered the academic world, which in part strongly decried the use of the term *mangliu* showing that, on the contrary, these migrations were not irrational but rather spurred by economic needs (Zhao 1995) and rationally organised by social networks (*guanxi* 關係). In this context, the sociologist Zhang Yulin introduced the expression *nongmingong*, or “peasant-worker” – which had already been employed in its abbreviated form of *mingong* under the Maoist regime (Fei *et al.* 1950; Diao 2019) – to refer to the rural workforce that moved to the cities and engaged in non-agricultural work of various kinds (Zhang 1984). Before this term became officially part of the administrative lexicon in the early 1990s, other catch-phrases found their way into the press, such as *mingongchao* (民工潮), waves of peasant-workers, or *mingong langchao* (民工浪潮), tidal waves of peasant-workers (Florence 2006, 2008; Lee 2007). The use of these expressions evoked the unstoppable nature of rural-to-urban migrant flows, whose number was increasing – in spite of the government’s desire to put a brake on all long-distance migration – and thereby destabilising the social and spatial order of urban centres (Davin 1996). Alongside these expressions, another label with a pejorative connotation, *sanwu ren yuan* (三無人員), or the “three Nos,” found its way into official speeches in connection with the context of both economic instability (galloping inflation) and social instability (the Tiananmen protests) in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Biao and Shen 2005; Froissart 2013). The main thread interweaving these expressions was the restoration of order and the fact that all those who were illicitly present in the city were to be sent home. The *sanwu* category was perfect for this purpose: a borrowing from Maoist terminology,¹¹ this catch-all category (Florence 2008) designated all individuals who were not in possession of the three documents that could certify the *bona fide* status for their presence in the city (identity card, temporary residence permit, and work permit) (Pils 2007). While the expression *sanwu* continues to be used by the authorities in the major urban centres as the goal of police cleansing campaigns,¹² in the same period *nongmingong* entered the administration vocabulary to designate migrants legally allowed into the cities. Indeed, after Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour in 1992, which reasserted the direction of the economic reforms, internal migration was no longer synonymous with disorder (*luan* 亂), but represented, once channelled and controlled, a resource for urban growth. In order to legitimise an orderly mobility (*youxu*

liudong 有序流動), the State Council invoked the expression “contractual peasant-workers” (*nongmin hetong gongren* 農民合同工人) – which was subsequently simplified to *nongmingong* – to refer to rural people recruited on a contract to work in the city for more than a year (State Council 1991a). Nonetheless, the ambiguity of public policies with respect to internal migrants contributed to transferring the stigma that had been attached to the blind flows and *sanwu* to the term *nongmingong*, which eventually affected the original meaning of the expression “floating population” (Mallee 2000; Florence 2006).

This lexicon is even more stratified in the Pearl River Delta, and particularly in the SEZs, where the migrant population outnumbers the permanent population. The analysis by Florence (2008) of articles that appeared in the Shenzhen press points out the distinction between the illegal category of *sanwu*, which refers to beggars and roving vendors, the intermediate category of *mingong*, who are in search of work in the SEZs, and the *dagongzhe* (打工者), migrants with a regular job. This last expression, still employed by migrants working in the informal sector to self-designate and distinguish themselves from “contractual workers” (*hetonggong* 合同工),¹³ and which I translate here as “piecework personnel,” is a word that has become synonymous with worker. The word *dagong* is composed of two characters: *da* (打), associated with several meanings, including that of *constructing*, which refers to manual labour, and that of *hitting*, which evokes the arduous nature of these types of jobs; and *gong* (工), which designates any type of manual work. The emergence of the term *dagong* in the language of politics and the media of the SEZs, which are the symbol *par excellence* of the new socialist market economy (Crane 1994), is not fortuitous. According to Pun, *dagong*, literally “selling one’s own labour” (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2016), would be the antithesis of the term *gongren* (工人), which refers to the workers in state-owned enterprises of the Maoist era who had a stable job and a privileged status. The gendered variants *dagongmei* (打工妹) and *dagongzai* (打工仔), respectively piecework “little sisters” and “boys,” signal the introduction of the categories of gender into the Chinese industrial world, thereby testifying to a usage beyond Maoist socialism, which stressed the concept of class rather than gender difference (Pun 1999). These workers are called upon to be the blue-collar workers of a new regime of industrial production considered vital for the construction of a modern urban world. To take part in this construction would, for the *xiangxiamei/zai* (鄉下妹/仔), the uneducated young men and women from the villages, be an opportunity to become modern urban workers, as long as they worked hard and committed to a process of personal improvement. The official discourse no longer emphasises the strength of the masses, but rather everyone’s individual competencies, by asking them for an unfailing commitment to the project of economic development, thereby nourishing people’s hopes of upward social mobility.

The attitude of the Chinese state towards internal migrations has always been influenced by the ebb and flow of the country’s politics and economic situation. However, while there was an overall antagonistic attitude towards migrants before the 2000s, the rise to power of the Hu-Wen administration in 2003 turned things around by introducing a people-oriented rhetoric (*yirenweiben* 以人為本) and by adopting a more conciliatory approach towards the needs of “vulnerable social groups” (*ruoshi qunti* 弱勢群體).

11. The *sanwu*, urban residents without work, income, or family support in Maoist times referred to the only category receiving of any real form of social welfare (Yang 2018).
12. We are referring to the “strike hard” anti-crime campaigns (*yanda yundong* 嚴打運動) aimed at sending the *sanwu* back to their official place of residence after a period of detention (Tanner 2005).
13. Author’s interviews, March 2017, May 2018, Zhuhai.

That same year, Document No. 1 put the issue of migrants at the top of the list of national priorities. Henceforth, it became a matter of providing for the needs of the *waidiren* (外地人) and *wailairen* (外來人), respectively *people from outside* and *those who came from elsewhere*, and of defending their rights. These terms, which are derived from the more bureaucratic expression of "population coming from elsewhere" (*wailai renkou* 外來人口), employed from the 1990s to make an administrative distinction between those people without a local *hukou* and "local residents" (*bendi jumin* 本地居民), took on more accommodating connotations in this new context. The work of researchers and the media played a decisive role in bringing about this paradigm shift (Sun 2014). As Shen and Biao (2005) explain, a triangular relation was established from the start of the new century between researchers, the media, and political decision-makers. The publication of articles denouncing the abusive treatment meted out to peasant-workers¹⁴ brought to the fore the issue of inequalities (in terms of access to public services) between those living in the city and those from the countryside, and it unleashed a wave of actions in defence of migrants' collective rights. In this context, a new and more positive terminology with respect to internal migrants emerged in the political, media, and academic arenas. The press celebrated local initiatives encouraged by the Party-state and led by district communities and migrant support organisations, referred to as the "new city residents' movement" (*xinshimin yundong* 新市民運動) (Xu and Sun 2011). This was about creating schools, organising professional training courses, and setting up legal aid and employment centres in order to improve the "quality" (*suzhi* 素質) of rural people working in the city and to turn them into new citizens. Researchers pointed to a process of "depeasantisation" that would supposedly transform peasants into migrant workers, as well as a process of "civilisation" that would convert migrants into "new citizens" (Liu 2006; Shen and Li 2009; Wen 2009). In 2006, the authorities of Xi'an and Qingdao were the first to introduce a root-and-branch change to all local regulations by replacing the terms *waidiren* and *dagong* by the expression *xinshimin*. Peasant-workers were no longer to be treated as if they were just passing through (*guoke* 過客) the city, but rather were to be integrated into it as *new citizens*. In other words, it was time to put an end to the Maoist era categories that pitted urban residents against rural residents. In this sense, the organisations defending the rights of migrants planned to put an end to the distinction between the "urban working class" (*zhigong* 職工) and the *dagong*, proposing instead the more neutral term of "worker" (*laodongzhe* 勞動者) (Froissart 2011).

The official discourse promoting migrants as new citizens has gradually been clarified, showing that their urban integration fell under a strategy combining urbanisation, economic growth, and social control. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the grammar of internal migrants' categories has become more complex. As the economy is shifting towards domestic demand, mainly through the growth of the middle class, the entry of internal migrants into this class has become crucial to consolidate the new growth model.¹⁵ The launch of the 2014–2020 urbanisation plan accordingly injected new expressions into political discourse, as well as into the media and academic scholarship. Two of these expressions had a strong impact on the overall view of internal migrations: the first was "talent" (*rencai* 人才), a term that had already been in official use as far back as the start of the reform programme, yet without making any reference to internal migrants; and the second was "new urban migrants" (*chengshi xinyimin* 城市新移民), a term that appeared in the early years of this century both in academic circles (Zhang and Lei 2008; Lian 2013; Zhou and Yang 2014) and in politics, and which was reminiscent of the expression *new city residents*.

This emerging terminology aimed to stress a renewed image of the

floating population that could no longer be synonymous with *nongmingong*. The new generation of migrants bore little resemblance to that of their parents, being younger, more educated, completely detached from the agricultural professions, and above all keen to *integrate* into the urban ecosystem, not merely to stay there on a short-term basis. The term *chengshi xinyimin* shifted the emphasis away from the rural origin (*nongmin*) of the workers to their transformation and their urban aptitudes (*chengshi*), and to their new image (*xin*) as young qualified people with socio-professional diversity.¹⁶ In 2012, eight lawyers and researchers sent a citizen's initiative proposal to the SC calling for the removal of the term "peasant-workers," judged to be discriminatory, from all administrative regulations.¹⁷ The Party secretaries of several provinces – Henan, Guangdong, and Zhejiang – joined in the appeal, hoping that deletion of the term would be backed up by measures promoting a genuine integration of migrants into the host cities.

Although the willingness to replace the term "peasant-workers" with that of "new urban migrants" seems a positive one, the creation of a new category boasting more educated and qualified migrants, who are hence able to find a steady job and a stable residence, did not cause the disappearance of peasant-workers without a contract. However, stressing the migrants' ability to fit into a new "civilised" (*wenming* 文明) urban population proved to be an effective means for the state to establish its legitimacy with respect to them. The shift from the paradigm of exclusion to that of inclusion enabled it to show its desire to build a "harmonious society" through a model of "people-focused governance" (*weimin zhizheng* 為民執政). Concretely, the rhetoric around the "new city residents," and subsequently the "new urban migrants" and the measures flowing from that, marked a move towards a new structure for the category of internal migrants, one that no longer saw them as a homogenous and uniformly dangerous group but rather one that was fragmented and of some usefulness for urban development. While during the first two decades of the reform process any political, media, or academic document on the subject contrasted the bulk of peasant-workers with urban residents, the early 2000s saw the introduction of a new urban hierarchy of internal migrants, setting up distinctions between these different groups of migrants themselves. In order to encourage the development of a technologically innovative industrial sector, the municipal governments laid out public and social policies, together with specific programmes targeting "high-end personnel" (*gaoduan renshi* 高端人士). This was about ensuring urban integration via the promotion of a new mode of production, one of the principal objectives of the recent phase of urbanisation being a focus on "quality" (*zhiliang* 質量) based on individuals and social issues, and for which talent and the new urban migrants are an important resource (Aveline-Dubach 2020).

14. The Sun Zhigang affair is an emblematic example of this (Pils 2007; Froissart 2013).

15. According to Liu (2013), the average monthly income of new urban migrants is higher than that of city-born residents, but their consumption is lower. In improving the income-consumption ratio, these "migrants" would become the country's main consumers.

16. Sociologist Lian Si's team interprets the expression *chengshi xinyimin* differently. The term city (*chengshi*) purportedly refers to the actual place in which the migrants, aged 16 and above, carry out their lives and their work. The new character (*xin*) would be synonymous with *young*, indicating the generations born after 1980. The term *migrants* would evoke the prospect of transferring (*yi* 移) the *hukou* from the official place of residence to the place of migration as well as, through the character *min* (民), their role as citizens (*gongmin* 公民) and their civic rights (*gongmin quanli* 公民權利). Following this definition, there would be about 147 to 189 million new urban migrants. This interpretation, particularly of the term *yimin*, seems very strained (Feng 2013).

17. Xiao Yuanyuan 肖媛媛, "八位律師學者致信國務院建議改變農民工稱謂" (Bawei lvshi xuezhe zhixin guowuyuan jianyi gaibian nongmingong chengwei, Eight Chinese Researchers and Lawyers Made a Plea to the State Council for the Term *Nongmingong* to be Abolished), *China News*, 12 January 2012, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/01-12/3598443.shtml> (accessed 20 August 2019).



Photo 1. The opening page of the "Notice Concerning the Printing and Distribution of the Measures for Guaranteeing Access to Housing for High-level Talents" in Zhuhai, published in 2014 by several municipal departments, including the Organisation Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, the Department of Finance, the Department of Human Resources and Social Security, as well as the Office for Housing and Construction and the Office for Urban and Rural Planning. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

The migrant categories of social housing in the era of the new urbanisation plan

From the very inception of the economic reforms, the process of urban construction has contributed to fostering inter-city competitiveness and the transformation of local governments into entrepreneurial entities tasked with harnessing all kinds of resources needed for urban progress. While recourse to foreign capital was an important element during the 1980s, the local authorities soon realised that internal resources – economic, social, and those related to the land – were just as crucial. In the mid-1990s, in order to stimulate growth, the authorities of Chinese megacities deployed strategies to attract the categories of internal migrants most useful for urban development. From 1992, these cities saw the introduction of the "blue chop hukou" (*lanyin hukou* 藍印戶口) (Li *et al.* 2010), which allowed highly qualified personnel from elsewhere, who were settled in cities on a stable basis and ready to invest significantly in real estate or in high-tech industries, to have easier access to a local *hukou*. The subordination of the social goals to the economic ones is obvious. The plan for urban development, which is conceived as essentially material, commodified, and technological, relies on the selection of individuals who are capable of contributing to its construction at the same time as consuming the goods and services derived from it. This selection process of key significance rests on a number of ever more refined instruments, of which "the points-based *hukou* system" (*jifen ruhu* 積分入戶)¹⁸ is an excellent illustration. Furthermore, access to social benefits, now treated like essential consumer items, is stratified and therefore contributes to locking in new categories. Social housing (*baozhangxing zhufang* 保障型住房), which has become one of the main tools for stimulating internal demand since the crisis of 2007, is a very eloquent case in point.

In spite of their difficulties in gaining access to affordable housing in the cities, internal migrants were completely excluded from the supply of social housing until 2010 (Huang 2012). This had, however, improved since the 1990s, primarily for holders of an urban *hukou*. Following the publication of a directive by the Minister of Housing and Rural and Urban Development (2010), some municipal governments – Xiamen and Chongqing – have granted eligibility for public housing to migrants who have a steady job and are able to show proof of their participation in local development over several years. From the very outset of the new urbanisation plan, which in 2014 accompanied the recent strategy for innovation-based development (Lyu *et al.* 2019), the system of affordable housing was directed at new categories of internal migrants. An analysis of the social policies of housing in place in Zhuhai shows that just three migrant categories can lay claim to any type of guaranteed housing: those who have had a local *hukou* for at least five years, "off-site personnel" (*yidi wugong renyuan* 異地務工人員), and "talents." The first category is covered by the policy on "affordable housing" (*jingji shiyong fang* 經濟適用房), a typology of social assistance that confers a partial entitlement to a deed of title.¹⁹ Only migrants who have had a local *hukou* for at least five years are included in this category, that is, the official migrant population that we have analysed above. The second category, the *yidi wugong renyuan*, literally off-site personnel and generally translated as "migrant-worker" (term that easily leads to confusion), appears in the regulations relative to "public rental housing" (*gonggong zulinfang* 公共租賃房).²⁰ Those eligible are migrant-workers who have been under contract for at least one year, who lack a local *hukou* but have a diploma from a professional school, as well as one of the certificates of assessment of the qualified talent. Migrant-workers who apply for this programme are therefore qualified technicians with a sought-after profile who have been contributing for at least a year to Zhuhai's economic development. For the others, also contributors to urban growth and holders of an employment contract, but without the requisite qualities of excellence, the only alternative apart from the private rental housing market is to receive one of the scarce places provided in the work unit's dormitories. The third and final category benefitting from many social housing programmes is that of the *talents*.



Photo 2. Photos of the first residential complex of 2,311 public rental housing for talents inaugurated in Zhuhai in September 2016. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

18. Adopted by several Chinese municipalities (Beijing in 2018) and provinces (Guangdong in 2011), the points-based system aims to integrate into the cities the most qualified categories of internal migrants (Losavio 2019).

19. Launched in the 1990s, it was the first typology of social housing for sale for a reasonable cost (State Council 1991b, 1998).

20. Introduced in 2010, it was aimed at the so-called "sandwich" group (*jiaxinceng* 夾心層) including households with a middle-to-lower income who experienced difficulties in finding accommodation (State Council 2010).



Photo 3. A group of "shadow workers," Zhuhai (Guangdong), October 2017. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

The term "talent," of Confucian origin, appeared in the official press in the 1980s and 1990s, to refer to young people with a diploma whose expertise was recognised as a necessary resource for the construction of a modern nation. However, at that time only urban residents having access to higher education were eligible to become talents (Bakken 2000; Hoffman 2001). Since the early 2000s, this term resurfaced in the political arena to refer to highly qualified contractual personnel who had arrived in the city without changing their original *hukou*, who contributed to the local social security scheme, and who had an impeccable academic and professional profile. As explained by Mr. Lin, an official from the Centre for Housing Security in Zhuhai, this category brings together "qualified technicians, senior executives of industry, and all those who hold at least one intermediate level professional qualification, such as university lecturers. For them, the restrictions associated with the local *hukou* and income do not apply."²¹ In official documents and speeches seeking to emphasise the degree of excellence sought, the word "talent" is often accompanied by laudatory epithets such as "exceptional" (*youxiu* 優秀), "high-level performance" (*gaocengci* 高層次) or "high-end" talent (*gaoduan* 高端) (Photo 1). As Mr. Zheng (Department of Social Housing in Zhuhai) puts it pithily: "We are talking about the quintessence (*jingying* 精英) of the talents."²² All talented migrants are entitled to housing support and to participate in the public rental housing programmes, including the highly targeted "dedicated housing for qualified personnel" (*rencaifang* 人才房) (see Photo 2). Since 2015, they have also been the target group for pilot projects such as the "shared housing" (*gongyou chanquan fang* 共有產權房) and "long-term rental housing" programmes (*changzu gongyu* 長租公寓).

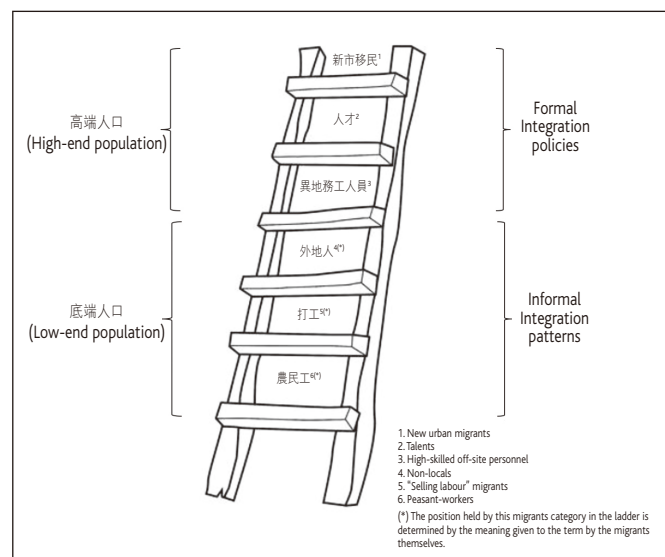
In order to earn the label of "new urban migrant" and to benefit from the rights reserved for holders of a local *hukou*, at the top end of the new social ladder of internal migrants in urban areas (Figure 2), one must therefore prove one's claim to being a talent or a qualified migrant-worker. Those who cannot do so continue to find themselves toward the bottom of the ladder. These are the "shadow workers" (*youling gongren* 幽靈工人) (Wu 2017), who are for the most part from a rural background, staying in the city without having registered, and working in the informal industrial sector, also known as the "low-end" sector (*diduan chanye* 低端產業), which has recently entitled them to the new and ostensibly discriminatory label of "low-end population"

(*diduan renkou* 低端人口)²³ (Photo 3). Without making any explicit reference to the migrant population, this expression, employed in the wake of a fire that broke out in 2017 in a block of flats housing low-income migrants in a suburb of Beijing, recalls the category of the *sanwu*. According to Beijing's urban planners (Municipality of Beijing 2017), the "low-end population" designates tenants who have been expelled from illegal forms of accommodation, such as the "large shared courtyards" (*dazayuan* 大雜院)²⁴ or "apartments" (*gongyu* 公寓),²⁵ mainly located in urban villages or on the city fringes, which for "security" reasons are slated for demolition (Photo 4). The label *diduan renkou*, with a negative connotation, categorises these migrants as being undesirable inhabitants of the country's megacities, and subject to policies of exclusion under the guise of urban reclassification.

The process of stratification of internal migrants is carried out based on the model of a spatially hierarchical urbanisation, which in an effort to adjust territorial disparities in terms of demography and development, seeks to direct migrant flows towards small and medium-sized cities while drastically reducing them in megacities (over ten million inhabitants) and large cities (five to ten million).

Although this kind of urbanisation is promoted by dint of its inclusive character,²⁶ its implementation occurs through mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion, depending on the demographic importance of a city, its economic ambitions, and the attributes of the migrants. This way of managing migrants by differentiating between them reveals a double hierarchical spatial organisation: at the inter-urban level, where the cities are put into competition with each other to increase their performance level and prestige; and at the intra-urban level, where local districts try to outdo one other in their attractiveness. In both cases, the place occupied by a particular city or district in these hierarchical spatial arrangements depends on its economic resources as well as on its capacity to develop a supply of services that would make it more or less competitive and

Figure 2. New social ladder of internal migrants in cities in the PRC



Source: Figure drawn by the author.

21. Author's interview, 7 March 2018.

22. Author's interview, 22 March 2018.

23. Sun (2014) reminds us that the rural migrants are often referred to as members of the *diceng* (底層) community, literally the bottom of the heap, or the lowest rung of the social scale.

24. The expression *dazayuan* refers to the transformation of Beijing's traditional courtyard houses (Audin 2013).

25. In the private rental market in Beijing's urban villages, *apartments* represent a more modern and spacious alternative to *dazayuan* and single storey houses (*pingfang* 平房), symbolising a slight upgrade of housing conditions for the least well-off.

26. Since the publication of the urbanisation plan 2014-2020, the media have been emphasising the objective of increasing to 45% the proportion of the population that has an urban *hukou*, which would mean providing it to 100 million migrants.



Photo 4. In the aftermath of the demolition of a peri-urban village between Beijing's fourth and fifth ring roads, June 2019. Credit: Photograph taken by the author.

attractive in the eyes of *talents*. In both cases, the result is a socio-spatial fragmentation of the urban spaces, which transforms the territorial disparities without necessarily adjusting them.

From the time they first appeared, the internal migrant categories in China, much like international categories of migration, have been constantly redefined in relation to changing political, economic, and urban circumstances, and especially in relation to the way in which the actors of internal mobility are presented "from above" so they might measure up to the new image of technologically advanced world-cities (Cartier 2002). These categories, firmly implanted in the political and media worlds, modulate and are modulated by analytical categories, while their creation produces a stratification that makes them visible or spuriously invisible in terms of public action.

Conclusion: The "transnational" logics of categorisation

This article has shown the complex grammar of migrant categories within the PRC by drawing up a framework of their uses, the issues at stake, and how they overlap in different contexts and at different levels.

The logic of demographic classification, which became an issue of importance for the authorities as far back as the 1980s, aims at quantifying the floating population all the better to control it, through the elaboration of categories of spatial mobility. However, having recourse to uneven definitions that change over time and are likely to be confused and used erroneously does not facilitate matters. In addition to these constraints, a portion of migrants does not feel the need to register with the authorities in the host city, remaining invisible.

By showing the malleability of these categories as a function of contexts and speakers, this article has pointed to the way in which the processes of construction and the use made of migrant categories in politics, the media, and academia exert a mutual influence on each other, giving rise to a hierarchy that affects the social imaginary and consolidates the criteria of migrants' inclusion or exclusion within the city. The categories of spatial mobility do not correspond to the categories of urban integration. This in turn produces a number of effects of different orders: administrative (granting or denying a status), material (bestowing or withholding rights and social services), and spatial (spatial relegation in urban settings), as well as symbolic and identity-related (making certain migrant groups visible or invisible).

This stratification suggests a formalised grammar of internal migrations in China, reminiscent of the "biopolitical" technologies (Foucault 2001) and technologies of "readability" (Scott 1998) deployed by states to

classify, control, and manage populations. This stratification, which is made evident in a fragmented lexicon of migration, takes on concrete form in the differential treatments applied in the spheres of public and territorial action. This overlaps with various logics at work elsewhere, in contexts of international migration, where the host societies put in place mechanisms of labelling and hierarchical classification of migrants. "The way in which migration becomes a subject of public action" (Frigoli 2010), whether in China in the context of internal migration, or elsewhere in the context of international migration, is determined by what could be called "transnational" logics, in the sense that these can be investigated and analysed in the same manner as they play out in comparable interconnected power relations. However, examining both internal and international migrations in a similar fashion calls for great vigilance regarding the historical, political, and economic contexts in which they occur, and which may well produce effects that vary widely depending on the actors involved.

In France, and more generally throughout Europe, the period from 1960 to 1980 – during which the institutional mechanisms for the inclusion and exclusion of immigrants were designed according to an "economic logic" of growth – gave way, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, to a management of migration carried out according to a "logic of public order" (Streiff-Fénart 2013). The economic stagnation that began in the 1970s with the oil shocks, aggravated by the financial crisis of 2008, job insecurity as well as the trend of states to move away from the role of service provider, have all contributed to the migrant "issue" turning into a migration "crisis." Immigrants, who previously were a resource for growth, have become, in the eyes of society, a threat to the security and the development of nation-states.

In China, we are witnessing a partially opposite logic: there has been a shift from the dangerous *blind flows*, perceived as a threat to the public order of cities, to a reconfiguration of internal migrants that sees the most capable of them selected and rewarded in order to serve a project of urban modernisation that is essentially economic. Since the 1980s, the *economic logic* has remained centre stage, while being articulated around a *logic of control* and *public order*, which has been refined and adapted to different modes of development. This has contributed to redefining the role of internal migrants by means of a ladder – at the top of which are the new urban migrants and talents – that all actors of internal mobility, including the least well-off, are keen to climb no matter what. The mechanisms of competitiveness produced by this new stratification of migrants underpin China's urban development while promoting the illusion of a *civilised society*.

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■ Cinzia Losavio is a contractual Phd candidate (LabEx Dynamite) at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, affiliated to the UMR 8504 Géographie-cités (CRIA), Campus Condorcet, Research Building South (Bâtiment de recherche Sud), Level 2, Room 2.115, 5, Cours des Humanités, 93322 Aubervilliers Cedex, France (cinzia.losavio@etu.univ-paris1.fr).

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