

Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S1043-951X(17)30098-6
DOI: doi: [10.1016/j.chieco.2017.07.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2017.07.007)
Reference: CHIECO 1079
To appear in: *China Economic Review*
Received date: 30 October 2015
Revised date: 23 June 2017
Accepted date: 23 July 2017



Please cite this article as: Guangjie Ning, Wei Qi , Can self-employment activity contribute to ascension to urban citizenship? Evidence from rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, *China Economic Review* (2017), doi: [10.1016/j.chieco.2017.07.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2017.07.007)

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Can Self-employment Activity Contribute to Ascension to Urban Citizenship? Evidence from Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in China

Abstract: The ascension to urban citizenship and assimilation into urban life for rural to urban migrant workers is a pressing mission during the current process of rapid urbanization in developing China. However, the issue of how self-employed migrants, who account for up to 25 percent of total migrant workers in 2009 (Meng, 2012), acquire urban citizenship remains understudied. Using a unique sample from the 2009 Rural to Urban Migrants in China (RUMiC) survey, this paper explores whether self-employment choice contributes to migrant workers' ascension to urban citizenship and integration, and uncovers the underlying mechanisms. We find that although self-employed migrants are capable of earning a higher income, and improving their living conditions, their tendency to reside permanently in the city is not significantly different from their counterparts of wage workers. We argue that self-employed migrants, who are less covered by urban social securities and are more discriminated against by current urban household registration (Hukou) system, tend to lose faith in ascension to urban citizenship. It implies that a social security system with self-employed migrants being covered as well as an urban Hukou admission system favoring diverse human capital (especially taking into account entrepreneurship) would help accelerate the urbanization process.

Key Words: Urban citizenship; Self-employment; Rural to urban migrant worker; Public service

Acknowledgments

The research is supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 71473135) and Collaborative Innovation Center for China Economy. We thank the helpful comments from the three anonymous referees, Dr. Shihe Fu, Dr.

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