



Development of urban adaptation and social identity of migrant children in China: A longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

This study was a longitudinal investigation of the development pattern of urban adaptation, social identity and their dynamic relationship among migrant children within two different types of school settings in China. Six hundred eighty migrant children participated in two assessments over a period of one year. Migrant children in both types of school settings showed better psychological adaptation in the follow-up, but only migrant children in public school improved in sociocultural adaptation. Identification with the culture of origin declined among migrant children in public school and increased among children in migrant children school, while identification with the host culture was inversely affected. The strength of association between urban adaptation and social identity did not differ between the two types of school settings. Identification with the host culture positively predicted subsequent sociocultural and psychological adaptation; however, only sociocultural adaptation positively predicted subsequent identification with the host culture.

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1. Introduction

With the expansion of economic reform policy and the acceleration of urbanization in China, an increasing number of rural laborers are migrating into cities, resulting in a rapid increase in population mobility and family migration. Accordingly, the phenomenon of migrant children has emerged in China. According to the *Interim Measure of School Education for Temporary Migrant Children (1998)* issued by the State Education Committee, “migrant children” refers to children aged 6–14 years (or 7–15) who have temporarily lived as migrants for more than half a year with their parents or guardians. Additionally, the 5th Chinese National Census defined “migrant children” as youth under 18 years of age who have lived in a town/sub-district for more than half a year and whose household register (*hukou*) is in another town/sub-district (Zhang & Zhao, 2003). Based on the above definitions, this study defined migrant children as youth aged 6–18 who have lived as migrants for more than half a year with their parents or guardians. The number of migrant children in China has been rising sharply over the past twenty years. In Beijing, for example, there were 66,392 migrant children of school age in 1997, and that number increased to 240,000 by the end of 2003 (Xinhua News Agency, 2003) and to 418,000 by 2009 (Beijing News, 2010). In 2010, migrant children accounted for more than 43% of all students enrolled in elementary schools of Beijing (*Beijing Medium and Long-term National Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)*, 2011).

After migrating to the city, there are two different types of school settings for migrant children: public schools and migrant children schools. Public schools are established by the government for the majority of local urban children and have qualified teachers, good environmental facilities and adequate funds (Li et al., 2010). In public schools, migrant children study and live

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together with local urban children and experience more contact with the host society (Yuan, Fang, Liu, & Li, 2009). However, without a local urban *hukou*, migrant children can only temporarily enroll in public schools as transient students. Migrant children schools, on the contrary, are established specifically for migrant children by migrants themselves in response to the increasing demand for schooling among growing numbers of migrant children in the city. These schools are located in rural migrant communities, and the students are typically from families that have moved from rural areas in the various provinces of China (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2007). However, these migrant children schools are usually under-funded and inadequately staffed compared to public schools (Li et al., 2010). According to statistics provided by the Beijing municipal education commission in 2006, 61% of migrant children in Beijing enrolled in public schools (Xie, Zou, & Li, 2007).

It is important to distinguish the two types of school settings that migrant children attend in this study. According to the “interactional perspective,” the particular circumstances of the immigrant group within the new society play a moderating role on immigrant identity and adaptation (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). However, few empirical studies have identified distinct circumstances of the immigrant groups within the host culture, and even fewer studies have explored the different development patterns that immigrants in different circumstances may follow. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to use a longitudinal paradigm to explore the adaptation process of migrant children from the perspective of different school settings, which is one of the most salient circumstances facing migrant children in China. Our research is guided by three core issues in the field of immigrant studies: immigrant adaptation outcomes over time, development of social identity during the adaptation process, and the relationship between social identity and adaptation outcomes. As such, this study will explore the development of urban adaptation, social identity, and their dynamic relationship among migrant children within different types of school settings.

1.1. Cultural context of migrant children in China

As in most developing countries, large sociocultural differences exist between urban and rural areas in China due to the urban–rural dualistic structure. In the economic domain, the urban economy predominantly comprises industrial manufacturing. Infrastructure such as public roads, communication systems, sanitation and education are significantly developed; in contrast, the rural economy is typically a small peasant economy, and the infrastructure there develops more slowly. There is also a major gap in income and consumption between urban and rural people (Liu, 2008). As for the societies themselves, social relations in rural areas are based on individual interpersonal bonds such as friendship and kinship. Individuals within a rural community know each other well and interact frequently and intensely, and they share common values and traditional customs that maintain their relationships. However, in urban areas, social relations are more official, contractual, impersonalized and professional. Additionally, social structures in rural areas consist mainly of kin clans and neighborhoods, while social structures are far more complex in urban locales and take the form of community, political and economic organizations, associations, and other intermediary or unofficial organizations (Jiang, 2004). In the realm of cultural values, rural areas accumulate and retain traditional Chinese culture, and traditional customs and lifestyles are better protected. On the contrary, urban areas mostly represent the characteristics of modern industrial manufacturing (Zeng & Zhu, 2002).

Moving from rural to urban areas, Chinese migrant children share experiences and challenges that are similar to those of international immigrants. They experience various acculturation processes, including conforming to requirements of the new urban environment, integrating diverse values between urban and rural areas, and encountering prejudice and discrimination from local people (Chen et al., 2007). For instance, migrant children are required to study in mandarin rather than their regional dialect; familiarize themselves with urban organizations, facilities and transportation they never encountered in rural areas; and change their kinship and friendship-based mode of life to a more official and impersonal one. As for the development of social values, migrant children are primarily raised and socialized within rural areas where traditional beliefs and practices, such as encouraging self sacrifice for family and filial piety, are emphasized (Chen et al., 2007). Once they move into the city, migrant children need to adjust to the modern value system, which places more emphasis on individual development.

However, migrant children in China also differ from international immigrants in some ways. Contrary to the multiculturalism of Western societies (Berry, 1984), Chinese society is characterized by the opposing urban–rural dualistic structure. In the *hukou* system, residents are classified as having either agricultural status (almost all rural residents) or non-agricultural status (urban residents) (Li et al., 2010). Thus, it is possible that migrant children in China migrate in the context of more conflicting identity statuses compared to international immigrants. As for the institutional aspect, the *hukou* system, like a fort, divides urban and rural residents into two distinct social spheres. Rural people are not entitled to the same status and rights as their urban counterparts (Zhang, 2011). In the field of education, for example, migrant children are only allowed to finish elementary and junior middle school in the city and must to return to their hometowns to enroll in high school. They are also barred from taking college entrance examinations in the city to which they migrated (Chen et al., 2007). Culturally, rural people are often considered unsophisticated and are viewed as irrational and traditional, whereas urban citizens tend to be viewed as a source of culture and as proponents of social progress (Li, 2006). Thus, some migrant children in China might suffer more from institutional and cultural discrimination than international immigrants due to the unbalanced urban–rural dualistic structure. In addition, Chinese migrant children’s minority status is not as visible as that of international immigrants because of migrating within the same country. It is difficult to identify an individual as having migrant status if they are well assimilated into urban society, especially among migrant children within public schools, where migrant children study and live together with local urban children.

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