



# The trends of migration in China, 1949–2019

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## Abstract

Based on relevant policy documents and census data, the authors analyze the characteristics and trends of China's population migration since the founding of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The study finds that over the past 70 years, population migration in China has exhibited distinct stage-specific characteristics. From the founding of PRC to the period of reform and opening-up that got underway in 1978, China witnessed a shift from free population movement to restricted population movement, as well as a shift from population movement driven by the recovery of national economy to that driven by political reasons. With the launch of the reform and opening-up policy, China's population migration entered an entirely new stage of development, exhibiting the following trends: (1) population migration was highly active, and there were changes in the size of the migrant population; (2) with regard to the direction of migration, rural to urban migration remained the dominant pattern, but the proportion of urban to urban migrants also rose; (3) with regard to the choice of destination, inter-provincial migrants were increasingly concentrated in the coastal areas of Eastern China, whilst the large cities in the Central and Western China were more favored by intra-provincial migrants; (4) the distances inter-provincial migrants traveled increased; (5) migration was motivated mainly by economic factors, yet the importance of social factors was on the rise; and (6) the educational level of migrants went up significantly and the sex ratio gradually became balanced. Accordingly, we must gain a deeper understanding of the trends and characteristics of population migration, taking into consideration the interrelationship between population migration and socioeconomic development. To begin, the equalization of basic public services and thorough-going reform of the household registration system can contribute to the development of a new urbanization strategy.

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During the 70 years since the founding of the PRC, China has witnessed a number of tortuous transitions of population migration. Based on the development trajectory and stage-specific characteristics of population migration, the past 70 years can be roughly divided into two stages: the first stage was from the founding of PRC to the launch of the reform and opening-up policy, and the second stage began with the launch of the reform and opening-up policy and continues to this day.

From the founding of PRC to the early stage of the reform and opening-up, China's population migration witnessed a shift from free movement to restricted movement, and these can be divided into two periods, 1949–1958 and 1958–1978.

## **1 1949–1958: the period of free population movement, driven by political changes and recovery of the national economy**

After the founding of PRC, the national economy recovered gradually. In order to heal the wounds of war and restore industrial and agricultural production, the central government implemented a loose policy on population migration. The political program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which was adopted in 1949 and played the role of an interim constitution, regarded free migration as one of the rights of citizenship. In 1951, the central government promulgated the "Provisional Regulations on Urban Household Management" to further clarify the need to "protect the safety of the people and their freedom to migrate". This period can be divided into the following two stages: (1) The years 1949–1953 when population migration was driven by the recovery and development of the national economy and political changes; migrants included cadres and their dependents who went south and other migrants who moved due to the recovery and development of industrial and agricultural production; and (2) During the years 1953–1958 population migration was driven by the First 5-Year Plan. During the First 5-Year Plan, the central government focused its efforts on industrialization by setting up new industrial bases in the northeastern provinces, northwestern provinces, and Hubei, Anhui, Henan and Inner Mongolia provinces, leading to massive population inflow to these areas.

## **2 1958–1978: the period of rigid control over population movement that was dominated by political migration**

During this period, while the national economy continued to recover and develop, the central government also tightened its policy on population movement. In 1958, the government promulgated the "Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Household Registration", and the dual household registration

management system that restricted the migration of peasants to the cities came into being. Political reason became the main driver of population movement in this period.

Relocations of institutions of higher learning to different parts of China, student recruitment, and job placements after college or university graduation also resulted in a certain amount of population migration. Prior to the founding of PRC, most colleges and universities were located in coastal provinces and large cities. In order to make higher education better adapted to national development, starting from 1952, the central government began large-scale adjustment and relocation of colleges and universities to realize the goal of enabling all provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions to have industrial, agricultural, medical, normal and comprehensive universities. This initiative also introduced substantial numbers of new people into many areas. In 1952, the central government kicked off a reform for arranged recruitment of students and the arranged job placement of graduates. According to statistics, from the founding of PRC to the 1980s, more than 6 million students graduated from Chinese colleges and universities, an average of more than 100,000 graduates each year. Unified recruitment of and job placement for college students promoted the flow of talent across the country.

With the beginning of the reform and opening-up policy, China's population migration entered an entirely new stage of development. The second stage is characterized by the following six trends:

1. Population migration was highly active and the size of migrant population grew significantly.

After the reform and opening-up began, the number of inter-provincial migrants in China increased significantly from no more than a few million in the early years of reform and opening-up to 247 million in 2015. Since then, the size of migrant population has declined slightly, dropping to 241 million in 2018.

2. With regard to the direction of migration, rural–urban migration was still the prevalent pattern, while the proportion of urban–urban migrants also rose.

In the early years of the reform and opening-up, migrants flowed from rural to urban areas. In 2010, nearly 20% of inter-provincial migrants were from urban areas, and nearly 46% of the intra-provincial migrants were from urban areas. Although rural–urban migration still played a dominant role, the proportion of urban–urban migrants was rising significantly. The experiences of other countries and research data suggest that in the upcoming years, the proportion of urban–urban migrants will continue to climb.

3. With regard to the choice of inflow areas, inter-provincial migrants became increasingly concentrated in the coastal areas of Eastern China, whilst the large cities in Central and Western China were more favored by the intra-provincial migrants.

In the 1980s, inter-provincial migrants were concentrated mainly in the old industrial bases of Northeast China and in Central China. In the 1990s, the coastal areas in Eastern China became increasingly attractive to migrants. According to the National Survey Report on Migrant Workers in 2018, the net inflow of migrant workers into Eastern China reached 53.98 million, with the Central, Western and Northeastern regions all seeing net outflows. During the period from 2000 to 2010, the size and proportion of the migrant population in major cities of Central and Western China, such as Taiyuan, Wuhan, Xi'an, Zhengzhou and Hefei, all witnessed significant increases.

4. With regard to the distance people migrated, that of inter-provincial migrants increased, but with obvious regional differences.

The distance inter-provincial migrants migrated increased from roughly 870 km in the early years of reform and opening-up to 994 km in 2010. During the period from 2000 to 2010, the per capita migration distances in Eastern China and Central China decreased from 758.51 km and 738 km to 742.16 km and 713.87 km, respectively. In the same period, the per capita migration distances in Western China and Northeastern China increased from 1329.48 km and 1006.8 km to 1373.92 km and 1102.58 km, respectively.

5. With regard to motivation, the decision to migrate was motivated mainly by economic factors.

In the early years of the reform and opening-up, people generally decided to migrate for social reasons such as marriage, family reunion or to seek shelter with relatives. Since the 1990s, the proportion of migrants who migrated in search of work or business opportunities has gradually gone up, reaching 45.12% in 2010. According to data from the dynamic monitoring of migrant population in 2017, the proportion of work and business related migration had reached 63.1%.

6. With regard to the characteristics of migrants, the educational level of migrants went up significantly and the sex ratio gradually became balanced.

In the early years of the reform and opening-up, migrants were dominated by primary school graduates, who accounted for nearly 40% of the migrant population. In the 1990s, the educational structure of migrants witnessed changes, with junior middle school graduates becoming the largest group. Since 2010, the proportions of junior middle school, senior middle school and junior college (or above) graduates have all increased significantly. According to the data from the dynamic monitoring of the migrant population in 2017, the proportion of senior middle school (or above) graduates accounted for 45.07%, suggesting a substantial improvement in the educational level of migrants. The sex ratio of the migrant population has also undergone a shift from a severely imbalanced structure to an almost balanced structure: in the early years of reform and opening-up it was less

than 85, then moved to more than 120 in the 1990s, and then to around 110 in 2010. In 2017, the sex ratio became balanced at around 104.

Presently, in regard to population migration, China still faces a number of risks and challenges that need to be taken seriously.

Firstly, we must pay close attention to the impact of population movements on migration inflow and outflow areas. While they bring vitality to the social and economic development of the inflow areas, migrants also face difficulties in the inflow cities, resulting in a myriad of problems. Meanwhile, some rural areas have been hollowed out by population outflow, and the problems that have resulted need to be addressed. Most migrants are of working age, and population outflow has led to an imbalance of age structure in outflow areas. Moreover, ensuring the healthy growth of left-behind children is a challenge, as is providing old-age support for left-behind elderly.

Secondly, we must also keep an eye on the interrelationship between population migration and socioeconomic development. Population migration and socioeconomic development support each other and interact as both cause and effect. On the one hand, population migration provides the inflow areas with a massive work force, thereby injecting new vitality into regional economic development. On the other hand, regional economic development also has a profound impact on population migration, as more migrants are attracted to places where the economy is booming. Therefore, we must fully understand the development situation of China's regions and the characteristics of the migrant population. Both are needed to engage in reasonable planning for industrial structure that takes into consideration the concentration characteristics of migrants, and also recognizes the impact of regional socio-economic factors on the migrant population.

In coping with the risks and challenges of population migration, we should start with the following efforts:

Firstly, we must gain a deeper understanding of the trends and characteristics of population migration, and make this the basic starting point for developing policies to manage services. A full understanding of the development trends and laws of population migration is the basis for formulating policies to manage the migrant population. We must combine existing research results and leverage new data and new methods to analyze the development trends of population migration. On the basis of recognizing the status quo and prospective trends of population migration and in light of the drawbacks and potential problems facing service management, we must further improve the migrant population service system in order to effectively address future problems and challenges relating to population migration.

Secondly, we must promote the equalization of basic public services. We must gradually establish regional management and coordination mechanisms, promote the cross-regional construction and sharing of basic public services, set up basic public service institutions and facilities in accordance with unified construction standards, gradually remove institutional barriers, and promote system integration and the mutual recognition of benefits. These measures contribute to the integration of basic public services within regions, help migrants better integrate into the cities where they live and enhance the quality of citizenship.

Thirdly, we must deepen the reform of the household registration system and guide the orderly movement of population. In April 2019, the National Development and Reform Commission promulgated the “Key Tasks for New Urbanization Construction in 2019”, which specifically calls for further strengthening of the reform of the household registration system, completely lifting the restrictions on household registration in big cities, and adjusting and improving household registration policies for extra-large and mega cities. This document will have a major impact on population migration and population redistribution in China. Through the deepened reform of the household registration system, we can guide and facilitate the flow of inter-provincial migrants to the small and medium-sized cities that surround big cities, guide intra-provincial migrants to settle down in large, medium and small cities pursuant to the respective development conditions of these cities, and bolster the implementation of the strategy for nearby and local urbanization for intra-provincial migrants.

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