



## From hometown to the host city? Migrants' identity transition in urban China

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**Abstract:** Identity transition is a key process of migrant social integration into the host society. Inspired by acculturation theories on international immigrants, this study investigates migrants' self-identification changes in urban China. We find that most migrants retain their rural identity, revealing the difficulty of identity transition and failure to achieve identity assimilation. The pattern of identities also shows the lack of multiple identities, that is, possessing both hometown identity and the host city identity. Both individual and neighbourhood factors are significantly associated with migrants' identities. Longer length of residency does not necessarily lead to successful identity transition, with many migrants failing to establish a host city identity. The neighbourhood environment also affects their identity transition process. Migrants who live in local-resident dominant neighbourhoods, who participate in neighbourhood affairs, and who live in commodity housing neighbourhoods are more likely to form a host city identity. This result implies that living in a mixed neighbourhood (with both migrants and local residents) and neighbourhood social activities may help migrants achieve successful identity transition.

**Keywords:** Identity, Migrant, Neighbourhood, Social integration, Urban China

## **Introduction**

The very first *Blue Book of Migrant Social Integration in China* pointed out that even with migrants' longer residency and willingness to stay in the host city, their social integration level might still be low (Xiao et al., 2018). Migrants are often referred to as “floating population (*liudong renkou*)”, or “outsiders (*wailai renkou*)” (Fan, 2008; Du et al., 2018), living in marginalised urban space (Wu, 2002; Lin and Gaubtaz, 2017). On the other hand, they also cannot return to their hometown due to a lack of farming skills and no longer fitting into rural life (Chen and Wang, 2019; Yin et al., 2020). Although there is growing scholarly interest in the social integration of migrants, most studies focus on socio-economic changes and *hukou*-based discrimination, while less is known about migrants' psychological integration, particularly migrants' self-identification changes during migration (with exceptions such as Wang and Fan, 2012; Gui et al., 2012). Since 2014, along with the release of “National New Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020)”, the goal of the Chinese government has thus transformed from promoting fast urbanisation to “people-centred urbanisation”. Recently, the Chinese government also pledged to integrate migrants into urban life not only legally but also socially and attitudinally (Mobrand, 2015). That is, besides legally holding urban household registration, migrants should also obtain the same identity as urban citizens, emphasising their self-identification, belongingness and affective bonds with the city (Nguyen et al., 2012; Kochan, 2019). Thus, a deeper understanding of migrants' identity changes has profound policy implications.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, this study sheds light on the variations in migrants' identities and the dynamics of identity change. Existing identity studies often focus on the host city dimension. It is assumed that migrants' identity change is either to assimilate or not to identify with the host city. Migrants will eventually abandon their original identity and substitute it with a local urban identity (Xie et al., 2016). However, existing studies of multi-ethnic contexts show

that migrants may have multiple identities or different identification patterns depending on how they think and feel about their ethnic and national group memberships, as well as the religious, local, racial and supranational groups to which they belong (Phinney, 1990; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Although, unlike international immigrants in Western countries, most migrants in China are of the same ethnicity, they may differ from local residents significantly in terms of social, economic and cultural characteristics, which are caused by the different social environments between the host city and migrants' places of origin (Wang and Fan, 2012). Therefore, the change in identification with their place of origin could be a pivotal dimension for the process of migrants' identity change. By taking this dimension into consideration, this paper provides a contextualised understanding of how migrants negotiate their identity under the co-influences of the host society and their place of origin. Accordingly, this study contributes to the international debate on migrants' identity transition processes, extending current acculturation theory by considering the specific migrant situation in Chinese cities.

The second contribution is the exploration of the relationship between neighbourhood-level factors and migrants' identity changes. The international literature on identity is largely dominated by the field of psychology, which overwhelmingly focuses on the influence of individual characteristics and of the receiving society, while less attention has been given to the neighbourhood context (Verkuyten et al., 2019). This is because migrants' identity formation is often considered as an intrapersonal process which depends on migrants' strategies towards culture maintenance and participation in the wider society (Ward et al., 2010). However, the neighbourhood is the place where many acculturation processes occur and the level at which the "other" culture is potentially encountered (Ward et al., 2010). For example, assimilation studies suggested that residing in neighbourhoods with a high number of co-ethnics or a largely homogeneous mainstream group may indicate different stages of assimilation processes (Massey and Denton, 1992).

Moreover, while the relationships between neighbouring activities, neighbourhood social ties and migrant social integration in urban China are examined (Wu and Logan, 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Liu, 2019), little is known about how these neighbourhood factors influence migrants' identity changes.

The classic understanding of social identity was developed by Taifel (1981), who defines social identity as both awareness of (perceptual) membership in a social group (social groups) and emotional attachment (evaluation) to that membership (Berry 1997). In this empirical study, we focus on the first dimension of social identity, which is migrants' awareness of membership in social groups. Using the 2014 China Migrants Dynamic Survey data collected in eight Chinese cities, this paper presents an empirical investigation into migrants' identity transition through migration and its determinants. We attempt to address the following two questions: do migrants formulate different identities through the way they think and feel about their membership of their place of origin and their local urban society? How do migrants' socio-economic characteristics and neighbourhood attributes influence their identity change? The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews existing theories on immigrant identities and provides an overview of migrant identity studies in urban China. Section 3 discusses our methods of data collection and the analytical framework. Section 4 presents the empirical results and main findings from statistical analysis. The last section concludes with policy implications.

## **Literature review**

### ***Understanding identity change in the context of migration***

Identity change is one of the essential indicators for immigrants' social integration in the host society and it has been widely studied by scholars from a variety of fields (Phinney, 1990; Berry, 1997; Hernández et al., 2007; Verkuyten et al., 2019). In the classic assimilation theory, Gordon (1964, p.71) defined identification assimilation as the "development of sense of people-hood exclusively on host society". That is, the

realisation of identity assimilation of ethnic groups is a one-way process where identification with mainstream society is at the cost of the original cultural and ethnic identity. Besides successful assimilation into the mainstream white middle-class, Portes and Zhou (1993) pointed out that there might be diverse possible outcomes, including being stuck in permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass, or achieving rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity. Although segmented assimilation theory revised the understanding of the possible directions of assimilation, it still assumes that immigrants can only have one identity – ethnic identity or acculturated local identity. In other words, identity assimilation to the host society indicates a loss of ethnicity, while a strong ethnic identity indicates little involvement in the mainstream society (Phinney, 1990; Berry, 1997).

In contrast to the above theories, alternative frameworks have revealed that immigrants can have multiple identities depending on their relationships with the country of residence and the country of origin or the ethnic group, and these two relationships may be independent (Hutnik, 1986; Phinney, 1990; Berry, 1997; Verkuyten et al., 2019). One of the well-explored frameworks considers identity formation as a two-dimensional process. According to the degree of identification with both one's own ethnic group and the majority group, Berry (1997) suggested four strategies of ethnic self-identification, namely assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation. An exclusive identification with the mainstream host society indicates assimilation, whereas identification with only the ethnic group demonstrates separation. Strong identification with both groups is 'indicative of integration', while weak identification with both groups shows marginality. This framework and related extensive empirical studies have shown that there may be different identification categories besides assimilation and marginalisation. In particular, numerous studies demonstrate that immigrants who belong to the integration category experience fewer sociocultural adaptation problems and have the best outcome in terms of subjective

well-being, health, self-esteem, etc. (Berry and Sabatier, 2011; Gui et al., 2012; Ward, 2013; Fleischmann and Verkuyten, 2016). In contrast, those who belong to the marginalisation category have the worst social adaptation outcome (Berry, 1997).

Research has found that individual characteristics and the context of the receiving society play significant roles in constructing immigrants' identity (Lafromboise et al., 1993; Phinney et al., 2001). Immigrants' individual characteristics, including age (cohorts), gender, education, language skills, ethnicity and social capital, may affect identity formation (Berry, 1997; Phinney et al., 2001; Colic-Persker and Walker, 2003). The context of the receiving society also matters to immigrants' identity formation (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Based on a comparative study, Svensson and Syed (2019) found that youth immigrants in the USA were more likely to identify themselves using racial and multi-ethnic categories, whereas those in Sweden tended to label themselves with national identity. Societal macro-level factors including countries' macro ideologies regarding immigration and race/ethnicity as well as immigration policies are clearly visible in the way immigrants define and negotiate their personal identities. Liu-Farrer's (2012) research on Chinese immigrants in Japan explored the identity label of "New Overseas Chinese", which is different from both "immigrant" and a simply Chinese ethnicity. It is a collective identity constructed by both the unwelcoming receiving society and immigrants' strategy towards maintaining their Chinese identity. The above studies on international migrants have revealed that immigrants' identity formation is a complicated and (possibly) divergent process, which is influenced by interwoven individual and larger societal factors. Examining different contexts potentially enriches identity and social integration studies.

### ***China's internal migrants and their identities***

'Domestic/internal migrants' in China refers to individuals who have resided in the city for a certain period of time (which may vary depending on different definitions)

without an official change of *hukou* (household registration) from the origin to the destination, including both urban-to-urban and rural-to-urban migrants (Wu, 2002). After years of living and working in the host city, migrants may successfully achieve economic integration, though they may still bear a rather vague urban identity and show a low level of psychological integration (Wang and Fan, 2012; Yue et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2020). They have become the “floating population” (Fan, 2008), “sojourners” (Nguyen et al., 2012), or “outsiders” in the city (Du et al., 2018). In 2014, the “National New Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020) was released, and one of its goals is to promote the settlement of 100 million non-resident population in cities. Accordingly, the Chinese government constantly relaxed urban settlement thresholds, particularly in small and medium-sized cities, to help rural migrant acquire urban hukou. However, recent scholars have revealed that simply lowering the household registration threshold may not necessarily lead to higher demand of urban hukou, if without social integration, that is, the degree of social integration reduces the positive effect of the household registration threshold for rural migrants acquiring urban hukou (Lu and Wu, 2020). Thus, to promote migrants’ social integration, or more specifically for this study, to help achieve migrants’ identification with local society has significant policy implications for China to achieve its recent national strategies (Kochan, 2019).

Similar to international migrants, China’s domestic migrants also face notable difficulties in overcoming institutional, social and cultural barriers in adopting a local urban identity (Wang and Fan, 2012; Qian and Zhu, 2014). Firstly, the *hukou* system is one of the most widely recognized institutional barriers that hinder migrants’ identity change and integration into host cities (Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Wang and Fan, 2012; Du et al., 2018). *Hukou* divides people into local and non-local, urban and rural, resulting in a *hukou*-based identity (Jiang et al., 2012; Niu and Zhao, 2018). Without a local *hukou*, migrants are often excluded from urban welfare and social services, working in marginal, low-paid and often informal jobs (Solinger, 2006).

They have very limited housing choices and often rent housing in villages in the urban fringe (Wu, 2002). Although migrants are permitted to buy ‘commodity housing’ through the market in most cities, the majority of them cannot afford to do this. Accordingly, migrants tend to have higher intra-city residential mobility compared with locals (Li and Zhu, 2014). They are often forced to move due to frequent job changes (Lin and Gaubatz, 2017), or the demolition and redevelopment of urban villages (Wu, 2004). Such social exclusion and “unsettled” conditions caused by *hukou* negatively influence migrants’ sense of belonging and local identity formation in the host city (Wang and Fan, 2012; Du et al., 2018).

Secondly, migrants’ identity change may be affected by individuals’ socio-economic status, such as age (cohort), education, gender, marriage status, income and language proficiency (Kwong, 2011; Yuan et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2016). For example, migrants with proficiency in the local dialect are more likely to formulate a local identity (Chen et al., 2014). Moreover, individuals’ social capital such as social ties with local urban residents is positively related to migrants’ local identity formation (Yue et al., 2013; Wissink et al., 2014). Length of residence is another important factor that may affect migrants’ local identity formation. Migrants with longer length of residence in the city are more likely to establish non-kin resident ties (Yue et al., 2013), and this helps to strengthen neighbourhood sentiment (Wu and Logan, 2016), thus leading to a higher sense of belonging to the local population.

Extensive studies have explored the relationships between neighbourhood-level factors (e.g. neighbouring activities, neighbourhood social ties) and social integration, while few have explicitly addressed the impacts on migrants’ identity change. The neighbourhood is a crucial space where migrants spend their everyday lives, encounter social activities, and accordingly experience complex processes of meaning-making and identity formation (Wu and Logan, 2016; Qian and Zhu, 2014). Migrants living in different types of neighbourhood may have distinctive residential



experiences and neighbourhood relations (Li et al., 2012). Lin et al. (2020) found that migrants who lived in commodity housing neighbourhoods tended to have the highest level of psychological integration, which refers to strong settlement intention, attachment and local identity recognition, while those who lived in urban villages had the lowest. A similar result revealed by Du et al., (2018) is that living in an urban village does not help migrants' psychological change, and the dominance of indigenous villagers is the major obstacle to migrants developing attachment to urban villages. Other possibly related factors are neighbourhood composition and participation (Zheng et al., 2020). Social network studies suggest that homogeneous personal ties with family members and people from one's place of origin are associated with exclusive ethnic self-identification and vice versa (Yue et al., 2013; Liu, 2019). Moreover, compared with local residents, migrants rely on social contact and social trust to build attachment to their neighbourhoods (Wu et al., 2019). Thus, we expect that migrants who live in local-resident dominant neighbourhoods and participate in neighbourhood activities tend to achieve local identity. The higher the chance of contact with local residents and involvement in local activities, the more likely it is that migrants will adopt the local identity.

Despite the increasing interest in migrant identity change and its determinants, existing studies have only looked at whether or not migrants identify with the host society without regard to the variations in migrant identity and identity formation processes (Gui et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2016). For example, Wang and Fan (2012) used the survey question to define whether or not the migrant identifies himself/herself as an urban resident. Such measurement assumes that the identity change of migrants in the host city results in assimilation, which means that migrants have to abandon their hometown identity and substitute it completely with a local urban identity (Xie et al., 2016). Moreover, existing studies have also neglected migrants' attitudes towards membership of their place of origin. However, limited research suggests that migrants may formulate various identifications through migration (Qian and Zhu, 2014), or

they may lose their original identity but fail to build a local one (Gui et al., 2012). In particular, young migrants from rural areas may no longer know how to work on a farm or even have no farmland in their home village, thus facing the loss of rural identity. As a result, they are caught between the rural and urban (Nguyen et al., 2012). As such, it is urgent to understand the complexity of migrants' identity change and reconstruction during migration, which is not only necessary for achieving the goal of China's *shiminhua* policy, but also important for individuals' health and subjective well-being (Jiang et al., 2012; Afridi et al., 2015).

## **Data and methodology**

### ***Data***

This study draws on the 2014 China Migrants Dynamic Survey collected by the National Health Commission of China in eight pilot cities, including Beijing, Jiaxing, Xiamen, Qingdao, Zhengzhou, Shenzhen, Zhongshan and Chengdu, for promoting migrants' social integration and mental health. These eight cities are located in Eastern, Central and Western China, with distinctive characteristics in population sizes, migrant composition and development stages. The survey adopted a stratified three-stage probability proportionate to size (PPS) sampling method in each city. This sampling method guaranteed the consistency of sample structure and heterogeneity within each city. The respondents of this survey are between 15 and 59 years old, have lived in the host city for more than one month, and do not have local *hukou*. The sample size of migrants in each city is 2000, and the total sample size is 16000.

### ***Measuring migrants' identity***

In order to better understand the variations in migrants' identity, we applied Berry's (1997) two-dimensional model to sort different categories of migrants' identity, which has also been attempted in a few other studies on migrants' acculturation (Gui et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2018) and social integration (Xie et al., 2016). The reason for drawing on the theory of international migration is that scholars have suggested that internal migrants are often generated by similar forces (i.e. inequalities in

development) as international migrants, facing similar social, cultural, linguistic and institutional barriers to achieve social integration in destination cities/countries (King and Skeldon, 2010). As such, scholars called for theoretical transfer or convergence in internal and international migration studies, for example, apply “integration theory, traditionally applied with international migrants, to internal migrants” (King and Skeldon, 2010, p. 1640). Particularly due to rural-urban hukou division, China’s internal migrants face identity issues who can neither integrate into the city nor regard themselves as “hometown person” (*laojia ren*) (Wang, 2006). Berry’s two-dimensional model provides an important stepstone for understanding migrants’ identity change by considering both receiving society and the place of origin. However, it is important to note that while immigrant ethnicity is one of the pivotal reasons that cause diverse identification patterns in Western countries, this is not applicable to the dominant group of internal migrants in China. Identity change for China’s internal migrants mainly happens through migration from their place of origin (hometown) to the host city. As such, we adapt the two-dimensional model to fit China’s actual situation. In a nutshell, inspired by the theory of international migration, this study contributes to the international debate on migrants’ integration/assimilation processes, extending the current integration theory by considering the specific migrant situation in China.

Specifically, we use two questions to measure migrants’ identity: “do you think you are a native/local person (of the host city) (*bendi ren*)?” and “do you think you are still a hometown person?” with the answers being “yes” or “no”. *Laojia*, or hometown in English, has significant and symbolic meanings for migrants, which relates to the ancestral home of one’s family and constrains individuals’ identities and sense of belonging to an unchanging spatial location and social collective membership (Kochan, 2016). Thus, changing identification with *laojia* is an important dimension for understanding migrants’ identity change and reconstruction. According to the different answers, we can divide migrants’ identity into four patterns (Table 1): (1)

integration indicates migrants’ strong identification with both the host society and hometown identity; (2) assimilation means that migrants have been acculturated with the host society; (3) separation indicates that migrants retain hometown identity without forming a local identity; (4) marginalisation indicates identification with neither the host city nor the hometown.

Table. 1. Four migrants’ identification patterns

Identification with local identity	Identification with hometown identity	
	Yes	No
Yes	Integration	Assimilation
No	Separation	Marginalisation

Note: Adapted from Berry’s (1997) two-dimensional model.

### ***Independent variables***

As reviewed above, migrants’ identity formation can be influenced by both individual factors and neighbourhood factors. For individual factors, two sets of variables show migrants’ demographic and socio-economic status. The demographic variables include migrants’ age, gender and marital status. Migrants’ socio-economic status not only includes several often-tested variables such as monthly income (in thousand yuan), educational attainment (in years) and employment status (simply differentiated into employed and unemployed), but also *hukou* status, which is another major factor affecting migrants’ identity change. In theory, compared with those from rural areas, urban migrants (migrants from other cities) may be more likely to adapt to local identity, not only because they are often ‘elite’ migrants with better education and a stable occupation (Fan, 2002), but also due to the similarity of culture of their city of origin to the local society, as well as less attachment to rural land (Yang et al., 2016). Years of residence are another important factor that may affect migrants’ identity (Xie et al., 2016). Being with or without homeownership in the host city may also greatly influence migrants’ local identity formation (Wang and Fan, 2012). Moreover, language skill was found to be one of the most significant factors in previous studies (Phinney et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2014). Here we differentiate migrants’ language skill into four levels depending on their proficiency in speaking and listening, from

very poor to very good.

As for neighbourhood-level factors, three variables were selected, which are neighbourhood types, perceived neighbourhood composition and neighbourhood participation. For neighbourhood types, we have grouped the answers into four categories to maintain consistency with existing studies (Li et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2020). Commodity housing neighbourhoods are often gated and equipped with privileged amenities such as landscaped gardens and fitness facilities, catering primarily to the middle class. 'Work-units' refers to the type of housing that is usually provided by employers. 'Old neighbourhoods' refers to old and usually physically dilapidated housing in the city centre. Rural and urban villages share similarities in collectively owned rural land. Due to their low-cost housing and loose residency requirements, they have become the major means of accommodating rural-to-urban migrants. As such, these types of neighbourhood represent spaces of distinctive physical environment and socio-economic mixes (Li et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2016). For neighbourhood composition, there is a question asking "who are your neighbours?" with the choices of "not sure", "mostly are migrants", "equal number of migrants and local residents", and "mostly are local residents". The third variable is neighbourhood participation, showing whether migrants have or have not participated in any neighbourhood activities.

In order to analyse the determinants of migrants' identity change, we employ multinomial logistic regression to assess the influence of individual and neighbourhood factors. A Hausman test was conducted for Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) before we ran the multinomial logistic regression. The test result shows chi-square equals 76.47 ( $p=0.0003$ ), which validated the IIA assumptions. Collinearity tests were also conducted, showing no significant multicollinearity among variables. In the following, we use both descriptive statistics and modelling to explore the characteristics and mechanisms underlying migrants' identification patterns.

## Results

### *Descriptive findings*

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 show that the dominant number of migrants belong to the ‘separation’ pattern, which accounted for 72.19 percent. Migrants who belong to ‘integration’, ‘assimilation’ and ‘marginalisation’ accounted for 14.92 percent, 7.06 percent and 5.83 percent respectively. This result reveals that migrants cannot be easily ‘assimilated’ into the host city in terms of identity change, which is consistent with existing studies on China’s internal migration (Wang and Fan, 2012; Du et al., 2018). Migrants may achieve economic integration (Lin et al., 2020), become familiar with the city (Du et al., 2018) or express strong willingness to stay (Yang et al., 2016), but few establish a local urban identity (Xiao et al., 2018). The results also confirm that rural migrants tend to maintain their identity from their place of origin. Only a very small proportion (just over 10 percent) had lost their rural identity.

Four identification patterns vary significantly in migrants’ demographic and socio-economic characteristics, particularly between the assimilation and separation patterns. Migrants who formed a separated identification pattern tend to be relatively younger and unmarried, in contrast to those who belong to the assimilation pattern. They are also the least likely to hold an urban *hukou*. In terms of socio-economic status, migrants who formed the separated identification pattern have the least years of education and monthly income. They have stayed in the host city for the shortest time, and are mostly likely to be renters. Their language skills are also relatively poor by comparison with the integrated and assimilated group. By and large, the descriptive findings reveal different levels of socio-economic status among the four identification types: that is, migrants who belong to the assimilation type possess the highest level of socio-economic status, while migrants of the separation type have the lowest level of socio-economic status, with migrants of integration and

marginalisation types in between.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the ‘marginalised’ group is not the same as the economically marginalised group. They are in fact better educated and have the highest income (4.24 thousand yuan per month on average). Their average length of residence in the city is about 4.78 years, which is longer than members of the integration and separation types. This finding indicates that when migrants stay in the city longer, they may be more likely to identify with the local society or to lose their original identity without forming a local one.

Table. 2. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of four identification patterns (percentage and mean value)

Variables	All samples	Integration	Assimilation	Separation	Marginalisation
Identity type (percentage)	100.00%	14.92%	7.06%	72.19%	5.83%
Identity type (number)	15997	2386	1130	11548	933
Age (year)	32.69	33.03	34.44	32.46	32.61
Gender					
<i>Male</i>	55.00%	54.44%	56.73%	54.75%	57.45%
<i>Female</i>	45.00%	45.56%	43.27%	45.25%	42.55%
Marital status					
<i>Unmarried</i>	26.82%	25.50%	21.10%	28.10%	21.70%
<i>Married</i>	73.18%	74.50%	78.90%	71.90%	78.30%
Hukou					
<i>Rural hukou</i>	86.00%	78.80%	76.40%	88.60%	84.20%
<i>Urban hukou</i>	14.00%	21.20%	23.60%	11.40%	15.80%
Monthly income (1,000yuan)	3.59	3.69	3.94	3.49	4.24
Educational attainment (year)	10.38	10.88	10.82	10.21	10.58
Employment status					
<i>Unemployed</i>	8.32%	7.90%	8.80%	8.10%	10.90%
<i>Employed</i>	91.68%	92.10%	91.20%	91.90%	89.10%
Years of residence (year)	4.21	4.56	5.35	3.98	4.78
Homeownership					
<i>Renter</i>	90.10%	81.31%	75.31%	93.50%	88.42%
<i>Owner</i>	9.90%	18.69%	24.69%	6.50%	11.58%
Language skills					
<i>Very poor</i>	14.89%	7.12%	5.31%	17.27%	16.93%

<i>Poor</i>	22.99%	16.26%	15.04%	24.62%	29.58%
<i>Good</i>	22.69%	22.84%	21.42%	22.70%	23.79%
<i>Very good</i>	39.43%	53.78%	58.23%	35.41%	29.70%

Table 3 shows that the majority of migrants live in rural and urban villages (58.67 percent). Large percentages (21.38 percent) still live in commodity housing neighbourhoods. 43.46 percent of migrants perceived themselves living in migrant-dominated neighbourhoods, 29.46 in neighbourhoods with equal numbers of migrants and local residents, and 20.65 percent in local-resident–dominated neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood participation is not popular among migrants in general, as 62.73 percent of them have never participated in any neighbourhood activities.

Migrants of the four identification patterns live in their respectively distinctive social and physical neighbourhood environments. Members of the integration and assimilation patterns appear to live in similar neighbourhood environments. A noticeable group of them live in commodity housing neighbourhoods, compared with the majority members of the separated and marginalised identification types, who live in rural and urban villages. There was also a considerably higher rate of them living in local-resident–dominated neighbourhoods in comparison with their counterparts, with most living in migrant-dominated neighbourhoods. There is a significantly higher rate of neighbourhood participation in integrated and assimilated groups. In addition, it is worth noting that the marginalised identity group also lives in a marginalised environment, with the highest rate of them living in rural and urban villages and migrant-dominated neighbourhoods, in comparison with migrants of the other three identification patterns. Together with the previous findings regarding this group’s socio-economic status, we may conclude that living in migrant enclaves significantly hinders migrant identity transition, even though they have achieved socio-economic integration (Du et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2020).

Table. 3. Neighbourhood characteristics of four identification patterns (percentage)

Variables	All samples	Integration	Assimilation	Separation	Marginalisation
Neighbourhood type					



<i>Commodity housing</i>	21.38%	32.23%	34.07%	18.12%	18.65%
<i>Work unit</i>	4.71%	4.99%	7.26%	4.55%	3.00%
<i>Old neighbourhood</i>	15.24%	15.00%	17.17%	15.41%	11.25%
<i>Rural and urban villages</i>	58.67%	47.78%	41.50%	61.92%	67.10%
Neighbourhood composition					
<i>Mostly are migrants</i>	43.46%	32.02%	28.67%	46.92%	47.91%
<i>Equal</i>	29.46%	33.65%	26.02%	29.46%	28.62%
<i>Mostly are local residents</i>	20.65%	29.00%	38.32%	17.60%	15.54%
<i>Not sure</i>	6.43%	5.33%	6.99%	6.02%	7.93%
Neighbourhood participation					
<i>Yes</i>	37.27%	45.85%	47.88%	34.63%	35.26%
<i>No</i>	62.73%	54.15%	52.12%	65.37%	64.74%

### ***Factors affecting migrants' identification patterns***

Model results are presented in Table 1. Based on immigrants' experience in Western countries, we assume that 'integrated identification pattern' has the best outcome (Berry and Sabatier, 2011; Ward, 2013; Fleischmann and Verkuyten, 2016). Thus, this was selected as the reference group. Firstly, the results show that individuals' demographic characteristics are not statistically significant for migrants' identity change, except for age. In comparison with the integrated pattern, the identity of migrants of older age is more likely to be assimilated and less likely to be marginalised. This result echoes studies on generational differences which showed that the older generation tends to have a more stable social network and occupation in the city, while the younger generation often experiences higher mobility and uncertainty, which contributes to their different identity formations (Yang et al., 2016).

Secondly, individuals' socio-economic attributes are significantly related to migrants' identity change. Looking at *hukou* status, migrants who hold rural *hukou* are 1.435 times more likely to be in the 'separation' group than in the 'integration' group. This confirms our hypothesis that migrants from urban areas are more likely to be

acculturated and form a local identity while keeping their original identity, while migrants from rural areas find it difficult to lose their rural identity and to achieve identity conversion. Migrants with better educational attainment are less likely to be in the 'separation' group, but more likely to be in the 'marginalised' group. This indicates that better education pushes migrants away from living in their hometown and towards losing their original identity. Moreover, the effect of employment status is only significant between the 'marginalised' group and the 'integrated' group. Compared with employed migrants, unemployed migrants are 1.562 times more likely to be in the 'marginalised' group. That is, being without a job in the host city may hinder migrants' local identity formation.

Number of years of residence is unquestionably an important factor that influences migrants' identity conversion. When migrants have lived in the host city longer, they are more likely to belong to the 'assimilation' group and the 'marginalisation' group, indicating the loss of original identity, but are less likely to be in the 'separation' group. To some extent this reflects the process of migrants' identity change, that is, migrants may gradually lose their original identity when they have stayed in the host city for a longer time. However, in the process of new identity formation, they may be successfully assimilated and form a local identity, or they may fail to build a local one, thus becoming marginalised in identification. Du et al. (2018) suggested that the different impacts of length of residence on identity formation are due to where migrants live. For example, living in an urban village for a longer time does not have a significant effect on migrants' local identity formation, thus leading to a marginalised identity.

As far as homeownership is concerned, it is clear that migrants who are renters have a higher propensity to be in the 'separated' and 'marginalised' group and are less likely to be in the 'assimilated' group. This confirms that homeownership can greatly promote or is associated with migrants' social integration (Lin et al., 2020). On the one hand, homeownership in the city reflects migrants' determination regarding

permanent settlement and investment, indicating their identification with local culture (Wu and Logan, 2016). On the other hand, it also demonstrates migrants' socio-economic achievement in the host city, which may enhance their identification with the local society (Wang and Fan, 2012). Moreover, proficiency in the local language exhibits positive effects on migrants' identification with the host city. But after migrants have formed a local identity, their language skill is no longer a significant factor that differentiates the 'assimilation' group and the 'integration' group. That is, language does not affect the loss of original identity.

Concerning neighbourhood attributes, all three selected variables are strongly associated with migrants' identification patterns. Compared with migrants living in commodity housing neighbourhoods, migrants who live in work-units are more likely to be in the 'assimilation' group, while migrants who live in old neighbourhoods are more likely to be in the 'separation' group, and migrants who live in rural and urban village areas are mostly likely to be in both 'separation' and 'marginalisation' groups. This result indicates that the work-unit often symbolises a stable living condition and a formal association with the state and can help migrants form a local identity, while living in informal housing such as rural and urban villages has a negative impact on migrants' local identification formation. Secondly, turning to the effects of perceived neighbourhood composition, it is found that for those living in local-resident-dominated neighbourhoods, this increases the propensity to form an assimilated identity while decreasing the propensity to be in both the 'separation' and 'marginalisation' groups. Thirdly, neighbourhood participation also has a significant influence on migrants' identity conversion. Migrants who have never participated in any neighbourhood activities are less likely to form a local identity, and thus more likely to belong to the 'separated' or 'marginalised' group.

Table. 4. Multinomial regression of identification patterns

Integration (as reference)	Assimilation	Separation	Marginalisation
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	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Age	0.011*	1.011	0.000	1.000	-0.013*	0.987
Male (reference=female)	0.089	1.093	0.012	1.012	0.139	1.150
Unmarried (reference=married)	-0.061	0.941	0.122	1.130	-0.204	0.816
Rural <i>hukou</i> (reference=urban <i>hukou</i> )	-0.061	0.941	0.361***	1.435	0.137	1.147
Monthly income	0.013	1.013	0.012	1.012	0.033***	1.034
Education attainments	-0.014	0.986	-0.029***	0.971	0.017	1.107
Unemployed (reference=employed)	0.192	1.211	0.071	1.074	0.446***	1.562
Years of residence	0.020**	1.021	-0.014*	0.986	0.024**	1.025
Renter (reference=owner)	-0.251*	1.653	0.797***	1.308	0.301*	1.351
Language skills (reference=very good)						
<i>Very poor</i>	-0.240	0.786	0.949***	2.582	1.150***	3.159
<i>Poor</i>	-0.099	0.906	0.653***	1.922	1.001***	2.721
<i>Good</i>	-0.106	0.899	0.299***	1.349	0.559***	1.749
Neighbourhood types (reference=commodity housing)						
<i>Work-unit</i>	0.503**	1.653	0.189	1.208	0.100	1.105
<i>Old neighbourhood</i>	0.194	1.214	0.269***	1.308	0.187	1.206
<i>Rural and Urban villages</i>	-0.001	0.999	0.282***	1.326	0.610***	1.841
Neighbourhood composition (reference=mostly are migrants)						
<i>Not sure</i>	0.326*	1.385	0.138	1.159	0.416*	1.516
<i>Equal</i>	-0.213*	0.808	-0.316***	0.729	-0.338***	0.713
<i>Mostly are local residents</i>	0.321***	1.379	-0.576***	0.562	-0.652***	0.521
No neighbourhood participation (reference=yes)	-0.046	0.955	0.304***	1.355	0.206*	1.228
-2 Log likelihood	26099.365***					
Sample size (valid cases)	15999					
Nagelkerke R Square	0.125					

Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001.

## Conclusion

Identity transition is a key dimension of migrants' social integration in the host society (Gordon, 1964; Hernández et al., 2007). Inspired by Berry's (1997) identity model, this study uses the China Migrants Dynamic Survey to examine migrants' social identities in China. First and foremost, the study finds that the majority of migrants do not manage to change their original identities. Their extent of

assimilation, in terms of identity transition, is quite limited. They remain in a condition of ‘separation’, indicating a low level of identification with the host city. This finding is different from the assumption that transnational immigrants eventually achieve assimilation (Gordon, 1964) or possess multiple identities (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Few Chinese migrants achieve dual identities (so-called ‘integration’). Chinese migrants are mainly internal rural-to-urban migrants. Hometown identity, particularly for rural migrants, not only indicates the social collective membership of a certain group, but also practically reflects economic connections such as collectively owned rural land (Kochan, 2016). Their possession of rural assets reinforces their hometown identities. On the other hand, migrants are reluctant to go back to rural areas because they may get used to urban life and social norms (Chen and Wang, 2019; Yin et al., 2020). Even when having lived longer in the city, migrants still fail to attain an urban identity. Thus, we see a high concentration of migrants with the identity of “separation”, retaining their rural identity. The exercise of identity classification helps to reveal the lack of social identity integration. It also contributes to the international debate on migrants’ identity transition processes, extending current acculturation theory by considering the specific migrant situation in Chinese cities.

Secondly, the study reveals the ‘constraint’ of the living environment on migrants’ development of an integrated identity. Our study suggests that migrants with four different identification patterns show different socio-economic statuses and respective neighbourhood environments. In general, migrants with the assimilation pattern attain the highest level of socio-economic status and are more likely to live in formal housing with locals. This does not suggest that the environment determines such an identity but rather indicates the difficulty of switching identity without changing where one lives. The process is probably self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing. That is, living in different environments represents the results of a separated or assimilated identity. It is interesting to note that the ‘marginalised’ group is not the same as the economically marginalised group. Although living in an informal environment, this

group is in fact better educated and has the highest income. This is a small group who lost their original identity but did not manage to obtain a new identity, accompanied by longer living in the city, without formal association with the local economy and prolonged staying in rural or urban villages as 'sojourners'. Their 'failure' has already been revealed by the fact that they did not manage to improve their living conditions by moving into commodity housing neighbourhoods. Further research is required to understand whether they have developed a new identity in relation to their own group, or whether they are facing an identity crisis. Notwithstanding the contributions of this study, we wish to acknowledge the methodological limitation. The data comprise a cross-sectional survey, preventing us from making inferences about causality.

Longitudinal investigations and detailed ethnographical studies are recommended to solve a possible reverse causality bias. While it is possible to argue that migrants who lack integration identity may choose to live in urban villages, in reality, migrants' residential selection is rather constrained. From field experience, we know that urban villages are attractive mainly because of their cheaper rents. The lack of identity integration is an outcome rather than a cause of residential location. Here it is more appropriate to point out the co-existence of living in urban villages and the lack of identity integration.

Thirdly, the study identifies both individual and neighbourhood attributes affecting migrants' identity changes. Four individual factors, age, length of residence, homeownership and language skill, are significantly related to migrants' identity changes. For example, our findings suggest that length of residence in the city has reduced migrants' identification with their place of origin. Migrants may gradually lose their hometown identity with longer migration experience. However, having lived longer in the host city does not necessarily lead to assimilated or integrated identities – successful identity conversion. This result is similar to Du and Li's (2010) discovery that longer stay in the urban village is associated with weaker community attachment. Without engaging with the mainstream society, these migrants may face

difficulties in cultural adaptation and move further into marginalised identities.

Regarding neighbourhood factors, the social composition of the neighbourhood is strongly associated with migrants' identity changes. Migrants who live in local-resident-dominated neighbourhoods, who participate in neighbourhood events and who live in commodity housing neighbourhoods are more likely to be assimilated or integrated, although both groups are relatively small. This result confirms previous findings that living in urban villages reflects a lack of social integration (Du et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2020). It also echoes the findings of internal migration studies in other developing countries that although migrants living in the informal settlement in the city possess more social capital than the immigrants and local residents, it does not lead to advantages in livelihood outcomes (Myroniuk and Vearey, 2014). The limited social network within the same social group (Yue et al., 2013), isolated everyday life (Du et al., 2018) and informal setting (Lin and Gaubatz, 2017) inhibit migrants from establishing social bonds with the host city, while living in a local-resident-dominant neighbourhood provides more chances for migrants to establish non-kinship ties within the neighbourhood. They actively seek to befriend and interact with local neighbours (Wang et al., 2016), which greatly promotes migrants' psychological integration in the host city (Liu, 2019).

This result confirms assimilation studies which show that ethnic enclaves serve important roles in preserving ethnic culture, and thus help immigrants with maintaining ethnic identity (Massey and Denton, 1992). As suggested earlier, the enclave, although it helps residents socially interact with each other (Liu et al., 2014; Wu and Logan, 2016), reduces the possibility of changing migrants' identity to integrated or assimilated. Regardless of whether this is positive or negative for migrants, the study confirms that migrants in urban China are in a disadvantaged physical living environment and have separated identity status.

Taken together, the findings from this research have practical implications for policy makers. First of all, considering the slowed down urbanisation process, to promote social integration of the existing migrants in the city has become the primary goal of the state. Most migrants fail to achieve a new identity in the host city. The policy of social integration still needs to help migrants to achieve identity change. Second, the current hukou reforms focus on relaxing the threshold for settlement, such as by lowering the requirements for settlement years, and the years required for purchasing social insurance in the city. However, our research reveals that migrants' transition to urban identity is very difficult and cannot be solved by the removal of hukou constraint. The lack of urban identity is originated from hukou but further made by living in a migrant concentrated area such as urban villages. It implies that housing and living environment are the major obstacles for migrants to achieve identity transition. Transition to an integrated identity may accompany change in both homeownership and residential neighbourhoods. This may eventually mean that migrants live in a formal and local residents-dominant living environment. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to implement policies that provide formal and affordable housing for migrants in the city instead of simply relaxing the settlement threshold.



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