

Migrant Workers' Housing: A Case Study of the Wuling Mountain Area

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Abstract

Migrant workers' urban housing meets their residential needs and represents their social rights and integration into the city. However, migrant workers live in poor housing conditions in cities with regional differences. The Wuling Mountain Area is located in the strategic intersection zone of the central and western regions. The area is highly attractive to migrant workers because of its economic and geographical location and low housing prices. It is a typical case to address migrant workers' urban integration. In this paper, migrant workers' urban housing was investigated in the Wuling Mountains area. It was found that their housing was in poor conditions, with inadequate housing facilities, an impoverished community environment, and insufficient supporting facilities. Given this, some policy recommendations were proposed. The government should make urban housing accessible to migrant workers and improve city housing conditions. In addition, migrant workers should be motivated to pay for urban housing and integrate into cities. Hence, it can provide practical implications for addressing migrant workers' urban housing.

Keywords: Migrant workers; Urban housing; Wuling Mountains Area

INTRODUCTION

As the most specific part of China's urbanization, migrant workers have contributed significantly to urban development. However, migrant workers are farmers and workers, and their work is highly mobile. Thus, they cannot be integrated into the city. As a result, they cannot benefit from the same social security as urban residents. Housing has special significance in China, where urban-rural dualism is solidified. It is considered a place for living and is closely related to social security systems such as household registration, education, rural land, and medical care. Because of this, housing is particularly crucial in urban social welfare and is the critical and challenging problem of migrant workers' urban integration (Gao and Liu, 2022). According to the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China will adhere to the principle that housing is for living in and not for speculation. Also, China will move faster to build a housing system featuring multiple suppliers and various support channels that encourage housing rentals and purchases (Xi, 2022). The critical point is to ensure people's access to housing. At this stage, migrant workers live in inadequate housing in cities.

On the one hand, about 60% of migrant workers have no stable housing in the city (Li and Ouyang, 2022). 20% live in group dormitories (Ren and He, 2022). The per capita living area of migrant workers is lower than the basic urban level. In addition, they live in a bad environment with poor living facilities, directly affecting their residential satisfaction (Zhao, Yu and Xu, 2022).

On the other hand, many migrant workers cannot access housing-related social benefits. About 70% of migrant workers do not follow housing-related policies (Li and Ouyang, 2022), and only 2% have affordable housing (Xie et al., 2020). The enrollment of children of migrant workers who live in cities with their parents is linked to stable housing. It has become a constraint for migrant workers to move their families to cities (Du, 2020). Due to the imperfect system of homestead replacement, rural residents move, but their land is not transferred. Migrant workers fear losing their rights and interests in their villages if they settle in cities (Cheng et al., 2022). At the same time, there are regional differences in migrant workers' urban housing. Migrant workers within the province mainly buy houses, while those who migrate across provinces mostly rent homes. Housing conditions of migrant workers have improved in small and medium-sized cities compared to first- and second-tier cities. There is room to release the housing affordability of migrant workers. Most migrant workers' housing expenditure accounts for less than 30% of their income and total spending (Ren and He, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the entry point for migrant workers' urban housing. We need to consider the affordability of housing for migrant workers and the provision of a sound social benefits system in the city (Chen and Yang, 2021).

Located at the strategic intersection of western development and the rise of central China, the Wuling Mountain Area has a well-developed economic policy system. It is highly inclusive for migrant workers in west and central China (Yue, Wang and Li, 2022), and its lower housing prices are affordable for them. It is highly significant to address migrant workers' housing by studying this area. Therefore, the paper examines the current urban housing problems for migrant workers in the Wuling Mountain Area. In addition, it will identify practical solutions to the housing problems, improve the current housing situation, promote migrant workers' urban integration, and accelerate their transformation into urban citizens.

STATUS ANALYSIS OF URBAN HOUSING FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE WULING MOUNTAIN AREA

We investigated the current housing conditions of migrant workers in the Wuling Mountain Area and analyzed the intrinsic link between housing and urban integration. In this way, we can contribute to solving migrant workers' housing and urban integration. The survey was conducted in August 2021. Huaihua City, which has a large resident population in the Wuling Mountain Area, was chosen as the base for the survey. One-on-one interviews were conducted with relevant persons in industrial parks, construction sites, marketplaces, and suburban villages. A total of 278 valid questionnaires were collected.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Migrant workers' personal information is closely related to their housing choice and willingness to integrate into the city. Therefore, we must analyze migrant workers' basic knowledge and financial situation. Firstly, we analyzed the basic information of migrant workers, such as gender, age, industry, education, marriage, and form of employment. The

male-to-female ratio was controlled at 6:4 according to the test report of national migrant workers in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022) when the questionnaires were distributed. As a result, it can minimize the bias of questionnaire quality due to the gender ratio. Migrant workers are mainly from the construction (31%), manufacturing (27%), and service (33%) industries. Migrant workers are aging significantly, with only 12% under 30 and 35% over 50. They are poorly educated. 31% have a primary school education, and below, 44% have a junior high school education, 23% have a high school education, and only 2% have a junior college education and above.

Regarding marital status, 68% were married, 32% were unmarried, and most of the available were men. The high marriage rate may be due to the control of gender ratio in this study, and it also coincides with the increasing rate of unmarried single men in rural areas (Wang and Wang, 2022). Regarding employment, 45% of couples work in the same place, 39% work alone, and 16% work with the whole family. This structure facilitates migrant workers from less economically developed areas into the city.

The survey revealed that migrant workers' revenues were reasonable based on their income, expenses and housing costs. Only 8% of migrant workers earn less than RMB 3,000 per month, and 4% make more than RMB 10,000 per month, with 38% earning between RMB 3,000 and 5,000 and 31% earning between RMB 5,000 and 7,000. Most high-income migrant workers are skilled construction workers, delivery workers, DiDi drivers, housekeeping workers and maternity matrons in the service industry. In industries and fields where the piecework system is used as a means of settlement due to the work nature, migrant workers have to work long hours of overtime for high income, while their income is unstable. The questionnaire was designed with five consumer spending options: food, clothing, housing, transportation, and entertainment. More than half of the migrant workers considered food the most considerable expense, and 23% considered housing the highest cost. 17% considered entertainment and travel as their significant expenses. 43% spent less than RMB 500 on housing, 24% spent RMB 500 - 1,000, 18% spent RMB 1,000 - 1,500, and 15% spent more than RMB 1,500. Most migrant workers pay less for housing, and their housing costs account for a lower proportion of their income. It indicates a great potential for improving migrant workers' housing affordability.

HOUSING STATUS

Migrant workers usually live in corporate dormitories, prefabricated houses at construction sites, rented houses and purchased homes. We referred to the findings on migrant workers' housing by Xi (2022), Ren and He (2022) and Tang (2021). Besides, we queried the indexes of housing status in the Report on the Monitoring Survey of Migrant Workers 2021 and the Technical Standard for Performance Assessment of Residential Buildings (GB/T 50362-2005) (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China, 2006). Based on this, we analyzed the current situation of migrant workers' housing from housing performance, facilities, community environment, and supporting welfare. It should be noted that in this paper, migrant workers' housing refers to their long-term residence in the city, and it does not distinguish between rental housing and purchased housing.

Firstly, housing performance means the safety of housing construction and the comfort of living, which is measured by the indexes of housing area, ventilation, light, sound insulation, and disaster prevention. According to the national monitoring data of migrant workers in 2021,

their living area per capita was 21.7 square meters. 65% lived in less than 20 square meters, and only 35% lived up to the per capita living area of migrant workers nationwide (Figure 1).

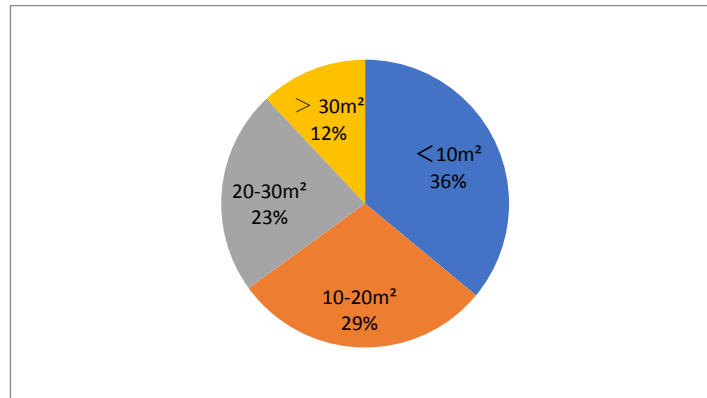


Figure 1 Living area per migrant worker

Due to migrant workers' heavy workload, their demands for residence are related to the area, quietness, and safety. 62% of migrant workers are dissatisfied with the current housing area and the most willing to improve it, followed by disaster prevention and sound insulation. However, they were not intensely interested in improving ventilation and lighting, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Survey results of housing quality properties

Housing quality properties	Satisfaction level		Need for improvement	
	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Needed	Not needed
Housing area	106(38%)	172(62%)	161(58%)	117(42%)
Lighting	183 (66%)	95(34%)	67(24%)	211(76%)
Disaster prevention	131(47%)	147(53%)	142(51%)	136(49%)
Sound insulation	120(43%)	158(57%)	147(53%)	131(47%)
Ventilation	164(59%)	114(41%)	89(32%)	189(68%)

Secondly, the housing facilities are the basic facilities of housing to facilitate residence. The corporate dormitories and prefabricated houses at construction sites where migrant workers live can hardly provide even basic living facilities. Therefore, we should examine five indexes to maintain basic living needs: kitchen, bathroom, utilities, communication facilities, and temperature control facilities. 82% of migrant workers' housing was equipped with utilities. However, only a few migrant workers had access to long-term and stable facilities, such as separate toilets, bathrooms, separate kitchens, communication networks and air conditioning for leisure and comfort. Overall, the housing facilities are poorly equipped (Figure 2).

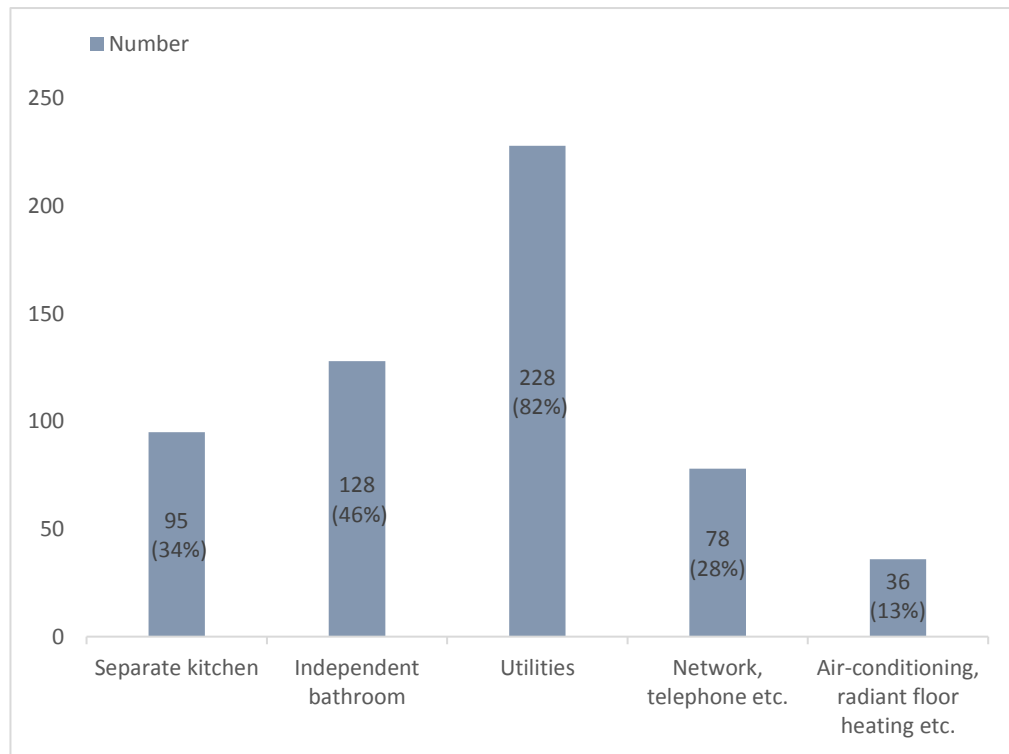


Figure 2 Survey results of housing facilities

Thirdly, the community environment refers to the living environment around the housing, such as greenery, sanitation, air, noise and security. Currently, migrant workers are the most dissatisfied with noise and safety in the community environment and have the most robust demand to improve them. They are satisfied with hygiene, air, and greenery, with weaker orders for improvement. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Survey results of community environment

Community Environment	Satisfaction level		Need for improvement	
	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Needed	Not needed
Greening	203(73%)	75(27%)	33(12%)	245(88%)
Sanitation	145(52%)	133(48%)	64(23%)	214(77%)
Noise pollution	100(36%)	178(64%)	150(54%)	128(46%)
Air quality	175(63%)	103(37%)	58(21%)	219(79%)
Security management	114(41%)	164(59%)	158(57%)	120(43%)

Fourthly, the ancillary benefits refer to the public facilities around the housing or the implicit benefits attached to the housing. Policies have been introduced to equalize the benefits of tenants and buyers. It is stipulated that housing is for living in and not for speculation. Based on this, the implicit benefits will eventually diminish in the future, but currently, they significantly influence migrant workers' urban integration. The importance of housing in migrant workers' urban integration is determined by factors such as their children's education,

medical care, transportation, recreational facilities, and community activities. The survey results showed that only vehicle is available around migrant workers' housing, with only 58% of migrant workers' housing equipped, followed by medical care, recreation, education, and community. In contrast, only 11%-13% of migrant workers' housing was equipped with supporting facilities such as children's education and community activities related to family-based migration, as shown in Figure 3 below.

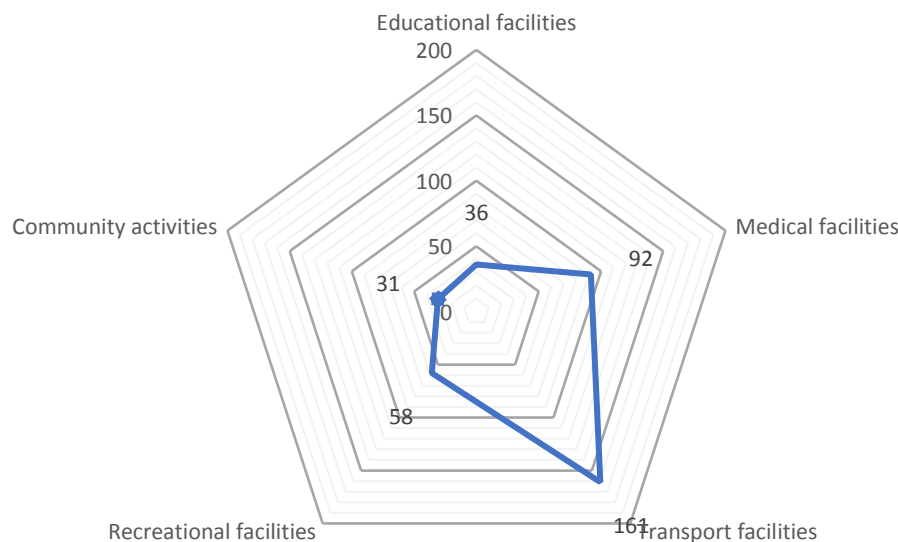


Figure 3 Survey results of housing facilities

CURRENT STATUS OF URBAN INTEGRATION

Migrant workers need to be integrated into social life in the city and psychologically identified. It means that migrant workers have some economic base in their place of work, and they can adapt to the local social and cultural customs and lifestyles. Moreover, migrant workers should be economically and behaviorally comparable to locals and eventually identify with their urban status (Li, 2021). Their urban integration is analyzed from cultural, economic, psychological and social aspects. Cultural integration means that migrant workers can adapt to the local cultural practices. Economic integration is defined as migrant workers' ability to afford all the expenses in the city. Social integration refers to the degree of acceptance of migrant workers by locals. Psychological integration refers to migrant workers' self-identification, meaning they see themselves as no different from locals. Migrant workers' urban integration was investigated based on these four dimensions. The results indicated that they were highly integrated into the social and cultural life in the city. Only 22%-23% of migrant workers perceived that they could not adapt to the local cultural practices and were less accepted by the locals. Only 35% of migrant workers considered that their income could not support their living expenses in the city.

Furthermore, migrant workers are less psychologically integrated. Most migrant workers considered themselves passers-by in the city (Table 3). Nearly half of the migrant workers thought they were different from locals and had a weak sense of ownership.

Table 3 Urban integration index system

Urban integration	Options		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Economic	95(34%)	86(31%)	97(35%)
Social	117(42%)	100(36%)	61(22%)
Psychological	58(21%)	92(33%)	128(46%)
Cultural	125(45%)	89(32%)	64(23%)

PROBLEM ANALYSIS OF MIGRANT WORKERS' URBAN HOUSING IN THE WULING MOUNTAIN AREA

According to the survey, migrant workers in the Wuling Mountain Area have a monthly income of RMB 3,000-5,000. However, the region's average housing price per square meter is about RMB 5,000, so migrant workers have strong housing affordability. However, 43% of migrant workers spend less than RMB 500 per month on housing and are less willing to pay for housing (Meng, Shangguan and Lin, 2020). Migrant workers' urban housing is generally unsatisfactory, with poor housing quality, inadequate housing facilities, poor community environment, and inadequate support facilities. These problems can be attributed to the housing function and the supporting benefits of housing.

Migrant workers' housing conditions are generally poor. They mainly choose to live in urban villages and shantytowns, and the indoor facilities can only meet their living needs with low safety and comfort. It is associated with migrant workers' dangerous jobs and humble willingness to pay for housing. On the one hand, migrant workers mainly work in manufacturing and construction industries, with high mobility, long working hours and heavy workloads. Given this, they are not concerned about the safety and comfort of housing because they only want to stay there for a short time. At the same time, migrant workers were less integrated into the city, even though they could afford higher housing costs with their working incomes. Especially after the COVID-19 epidemic, housing prices in economically underdeveloped areas were significantly lower than before. However, migrant workers primarily live in low-cost and temporary housing rather than permanent housing in the city. Therefore, they mainly live in urban villages and shantytowns with poor environments and aged buildings.

The survey found that migrant workers' housing had no support benefits. Due to China's particular urban-rural dual structure, housing is regarded as a city residence and a material basis for migrant workers to integrate and establish themselves in the city. While some policies reduce the accessibility of housing, the embedded benefits (schooling, medical care, and community activities) cannot be removed quickly. Migrant workers live in corporate dormitories and prefabricated houses at construction sites that do not support their children's education and medical care. Also, they are not qualified for schooling in the area by renting homes. It essentially restricts migrant workers' migration to the city with their families. At the same time, the residential sites with inadequate public facilities seldom cater to the residents'

living environment and social activities, reducing the interaction between migrant workers and locals. In addition, migrant workers are confined to their circle of friends due to the isolation of their work. It restricts their social and cultural integration into the city.

In conclusion, the current problems of migrant workers' urban housing have greatly hindered their integration into the city. The poor living environment causes migrant workers to have a shared sense of belonging to the city, making them reluctant to overspend in the city. As a result, they are not motivated to integrate economically into the city. The inaccessibility of housing benefits (mainly children's schooling and medical care) makes it more difficult for migrant workers to move to the city with their families. Most migrant workers have no access to the hidden benefits of housing (status symbols, social recognition, and community activities). They cannot integrate psychologically, culturally or socially into the city. Hence, migrant workers can only be integrated into the city economically, socially, culturally and psychologically if their housing problem is effectively addressed.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Migrant workers' urban housing significantly affects their urban integration. The government should resolve migrant workers' current housing problems and enable them to access the residential functions and benefits of housing. This way, migrant workers can integrate into the city economically, socially, psychologically and culturally. Currently, migrant workers live in houses with poor quality, inadequate facilities, poor community environment, and poor supporting facilities. We proposed the following countermeasures to improve the accessibility of housing for migrant workers and enhance the housing conditions:

Urban housing should be made more accessible to migrant workers, and migrant workers should be more motivated to pay for housing. First, we should increase access to housing information. Migrant workers work long hours and are mostly socialized with colleagues from their hometowns. Therefore, they are not informed about local housing resources and policies. For this reason, enterprises can create housing information groups for migrant workers to keep abreast of the latest housing resources. Second, the low-rent and public rental housing application process should be simplified. Most migrant workers are discouraged from settling in cities because of high housing prices. Low-rent housing and other preferential policies are the best options to address their settlement needs. However, migrant workers are rejected by the complicated application procedures due to their capacity constraints. Therefore, a simplified application procedure can make policy-related housing more accessible to migrant workers. Third, housing enterprises should be encouraged to offer appropriate discounts to migrant workers with rigid demand for housing. Housing prices have fallen sharply due to the epidemic and the housing policy, so it is the best time for migrant workers to buy their own homes. For this reason, housing enterprises might cooperate with enterprises to provide group purchase discounts.

Migrant workers' urban housing conditions should be improved to enhance their willingness to integrate into the city. On the one hand, enterprises should improve the quality of dormitories to meet the needs of migrant workers for safe and comfortable residences. At the same time, enterprises should provide appropriate housing subsidies to migrant workers for renting houses outside to enhance their economic strength. This way, these migrant workers may choose homes with better living conditions. On the other hand, the government should

further improve the rental market to meet the rigid needs of migrant workers by providing long-term rental apartments. In addition, the government should step up its efforts to promote the equal rights of tenants and buyers. It should protect migrant workers' social benefits, such as children's education and medical care, thus facilitating their urban integration.

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