

# Domestic migrants in China (2018): trends, challenges and recommendations



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# Domestic migrants in China (2018): trends, challenges and recommendations



Domestic migration (of populations both with and without changes in their household registration, or *Hukou*) ranks among the core issues of population and development in China in the coming decades, and it is also a major factor affecting population and development and the associated challenges across the country (in provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions). The assessment of the characteristics and trends of population migration and its impact is a key step in formulating and improving population and development strategies, advancing social development and conducting social science studies in the future. Building on the 1% National Population Sample Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2015, this report summarizes the major characteristics and trends of domestic migration (simplified as migration hereafter) in China since 2000, analyzes the prominent challenges faced, and proposes corresponding recommendations and actions.

## Definitions

**Migrants:** Migrants in statistical terms involves both the dimensions of space and time. For the space dimension, it consists of various types of migration, including inter-township (town and street), inter-county (district), inter-provincial migration. For the time dimension, it consists of various duration that people live outside their registered household residence, including a time duration of more than 3 months, more than 6 months, and more than 1 year. 'Migrants' in this report refers to the population whose current residence is not in the township, town or street of their registered household residence, and who have been away from their registered household residence for more than half a year. It excludes those who reside in a different district of the same city as their registered household residence.

**New generation migrants:** refer to the migrants born in and after 1980.

**Older migrants:** refer to the number of migrants aged 60 and above who have a different registered household residence than their current residence, excluding those who reside in a different district of the same city as their registered household residence.

**Hukou:** also known as household registration, is an official document issued by the household administration of the public security authority to identify a person as a resident of a particular area and record basic information of the *Hukou* holder.

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## Data Sources

Unless otherwise stated, the main data source of this report is the 1% National Population Sample Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2015, supplemented by historical data of previous population censuses. China has conducted six national population censuses in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010,

and the current frequency is every ten years. The 1% National Population Sample Survey is conducted in between two population censuses, and it is known as the “mini-census”. The two most recent mini-censuses were conducted in 2005 and 2015.

## I. Main characteristics and trends of population migration in China

### 1. Size of migrant population shifting from fluctuation to stability

According to the 1% National Population Sampling Survey conducted in 2015, the size of the migrant population in China stood at 246 million, a decrease of 5.68 million compared with 2014.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in about 40 years, the size of the migrant population in China has experienced a decline. In 2016 and 2017, the size of the migrant population continued to decline, and it fell to 244 million by 2017.

The following formula has been employed to explore the factors behind the changes in the size of the migrant population, and to determine whether the decline is an accidental phenomenon or the turning point of a long-term trend:

Increments in the migrant population in a given year = first-time and new generation migrants + first-time middle-aged and older migrants - migrants who have obtained household registration in urban areas - migrants returning home + re-migrating population after returning home.

Building on the formula, a factor analysis was conducted to decompose the reduction in the size of

the migrant population in 2015, and concluded with the following results:

- A. The large-scale of the migrant population returning home could be associated with short-term causes and long-term considerations. On one hand, migrants returning home was associated with short-term economic fluctuations mainly caused by the sharp drop in the growth rate of fixed asset investment. This negatively affected the manufacturing and construction industries that most migrants work in. The majority of these migrants temporary returned home, with only a small number returning home permanently. On the other hand, migrants returning home may create some momentum and become a trend associated with the rise of in the number of older migrants within the migrant population. The uncertainties of social services for older migrants in the migration destinations may lead to a significant number of older migrants returning home.
- B. More migrants are obtaining local household registration (*Hukou*) in urban areas and settling down in their migration destinations. Since the release of the Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of Household Registration System by the State Council in July 2014, cities have introduced policies that promote

1. The 2014 data come from the 2014 Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development.

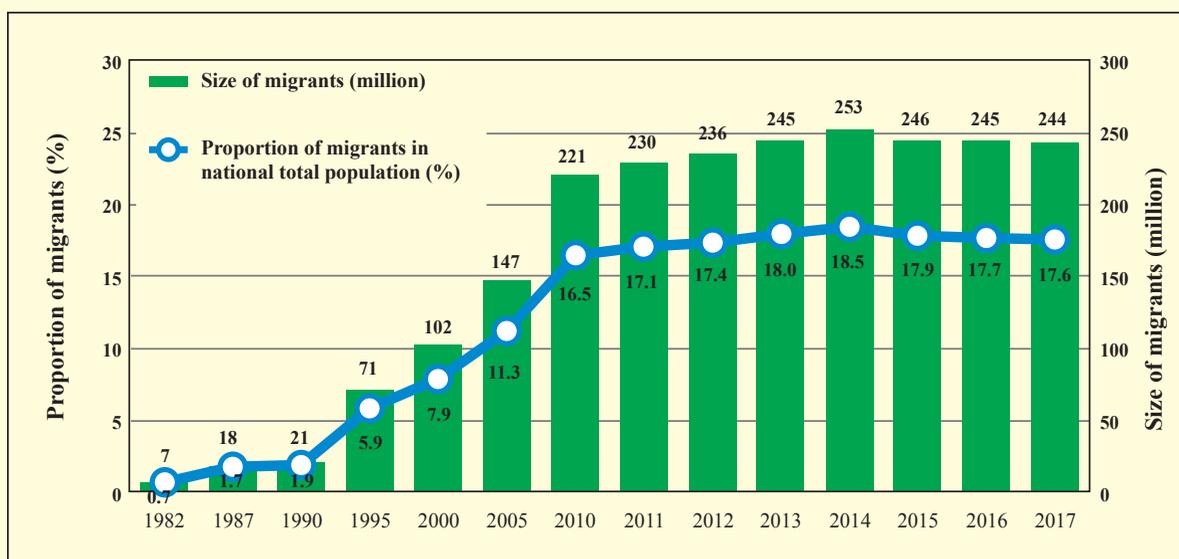
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migrants to settle down in urban areas through granting local household registrations. The number of migrants obtaining household registration in their migration destination has thus increased dramatically. It is roughly estimated that there were 3-5 million more migrants who obtained local household registration in 2015 compared with 2014. With the advancement of the new type of urbanization, the continuing rise of migrants obtaining local household registration is inevitable, driven by the transfer and resettlement of 100 million agricultural population in cities, and the rise in urbanization rate of *Hukou* population. However, obtaining local household registration does not necessarily translate into becoming full “urbanites”. Continuous efforts are required from government institutions involved in service provision and management of migrants.

C. There is a temporary reduction in the number of migrants. Calculations based on the summary data of the 2015 mini census indicate that there was a sharp drop of 9.54 million in the population aged 15-17 compared with the population aged 18-20 in 2015. According to the age structure of migrants, the temporary reduction in the number of younger age cohorts of the population contributed to around 2 million of the reduction in the size of the migrant population in 2015. With the advent of the fourth birth boom since 2010, the birth cohorts have rebounded and the aforesaid impact on the reduction in the size of the migrant population will be partly alleviated in a few years.

In summary, it is believed that the reduction in the size of the migrant population in 2015 and the subsequent years was a combined result of short-term economic fluctuations, accelerated transfer and resettlement of

**Figure 1: Size of the migrant population and its proportions in the total population in China, 1982-2017**



Data Source: The size of the migrant population between 1982 and 2000 was calculated by Prof. Duan Chengrong et al. based on respective national censuses and the 1% National Population Sample Survey of the same period, quoted from the *Nine major trends of migrants in China since the reform and opening up* by Duan Chengrong, Yang Ge, Zhang Fei and Lu Xuehe. Demographic Research, Issue 6 of 2008. Data between 2005 and 2017 are from respective Statistical Communiqués of the National Bureau of Statistics during the period.

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agricultural populations to urban areas, and temporary reduction in the size of the migrant population. In the long run, the era of fast expansion of the size of the migrant population has halted. Going forward, it will primarily remain stable, though some fluctuations are expected.

## 2. The “ageing” of migrants

Overall, migrants in China have always been dominated by the working-age population (age 16-59), especially young adults, and the proportions of children and older people have been relatively small. Against the background of a rapidly ageing population in China, where the proportion of population aged 60 and over increasing from 10.5% in 2000 to 16.1% from 2015, the ageing of the migrant population has also taken shape. From 2000 to 2015, the mean age of migrants increased by 2 years, the median age increased by 4 years, the proportion of migrants aged 16-44 rose first and then decreased, and ended up with a decline of 1.7 percentage points during the period, and the proportion of migrants aged 45-49 increased rapidly from 9.7% to 15.6%.

## 3. Sex ratio of the migrant population first declined then rose, associated with the increasing trend of family migration

The sex ratio of the migrant population in China first experienced a decline and then rose significantly. In the 1980s and 1990s, young men made up the majority of migrants searching for employment opportunities, leading to a high sex ratio in 1990. The gradual increase in the number of women participating in migration contributed to a decline in the sex ratio of migrants in 2000. Subsequently, due to the increasing trend of family migrations where children migrated with their parents, and the high sex ratio among children and adolescents as a result of long-term sex imbalance at birth, the overall sex ratio of the migrant population in China rose. This constituted part of the reasons for the rebound of the sex ratio among migrant population in 2010 and 2015.

Table 1 Age composition of China’s migrants, 1982-2015

Age group (%)	1982	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Ages 0-15	35.4	17.3	14.9	13.5	11.6	10.6
Ages 16-44	45.7	69.8	70.2	71.1	71.1	68.5
Ages 45-59	7.6	7.6	9.7	10.0	12.5	15.6
Ages 60 and over	11.3	5.3	5.3	5.4	4.8	5.3
Total	100	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean age (years)	28.2	27.2	29.0	30.4	30.8	31.0
Median age (years)	23	24	27	29	29	31

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Table 2 Sex ratio of migrants, 1990-2015

	Ages 0-14	Ages 15-64	Ages 65 and over	Total
2015	119.0	117.5	103.8	117.2
2010	122.9	118.7	100.8	113.5
2000	114.5	106.5	100.3	107.3
1990	110.1	131.3	73.3	124.7

## 4. Improved educational attainment of migrants

The 15 years between 2000 and 2015 recorded a continued increase in educational attainment of migrants in China, with their average years of schooling increasing from 8.7 to 10.6 years. Generally, the proportion of migrants with an educational attainment at junior secondary school level and below continued to decline, and those with an educational attainment at senior secondary school level and above continued to increase. From the perspective of the composition by education stages: (1) the proportion of the illiterate population continued to decline from 4.8% in 2000

to 2.1% in 2015, and those with primary and junior secondary education continued to decline as well; (2) It is worth noting that between 2000 and 2010, those with an educational attainment at junior secondary school level accounted for the majority of migrants at more than 40%, by 2015, those with an educational attainment at senior secondary school level and above became the majority with a proportion of 45.3%, indicating a transformation of educational composition among migrants; and (3) In 2000, migrants with an educational attainment at junior college level and above constituted only 4.8% of migrants, by 2015, the proportion rose to 23.3%, accounting for about one-quarter of migrants.

Table 3a Composition of migrants aged 6 and above by educational attainment, 1982-2015

Educational attainment	1982	1987	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Illiterate	28.6	16.1	12.5	4.8	4.8	2.2	2.1
Primary school	39.3	35.2	32.5	26.3	23.3	18.4	15.6
Junior secondary school	22.7	34.0	41.4	45.4	47.4	43.8	37.1
Senior secondary school	8.4	12.7	11.6	18.8	17.2	20.6	22.0
Junior college and above	1.0	2.0	2.0	4.8	7.2	15.0	23.3

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Technical/speci	—	—	—	3.5	4.9	8.7	11.4
Undergraduate	—	—	—	1.2	2.2	6.0	11.2
Graduate	—	—	—	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Average years of schooling of migrants	5.6	7.0	7.4	8.7	8.9	9.9	10.6
Average years of schooling of the total population	5.5	5.9	6.3	7.6	8.3	8.8	9.1

Increasingly more young migrants are enrolled in school (see Table 3b). In 2000, majority (91.2%) of the young migrants aged 18-24 had graduated from schools, and the proportion of those studying in schools was only 3.8%. Since 2000, the proportion of migrants aged 18-24 who are enrolled in schools continued to increase: it increased to 48.2% in 2015, corresponding to 22.53 million young migrants, of which 85.1% were enrolled at colleges or higher

education institutions, 14.1% were enrolled in senior secondary schools, and 0.8% were enrolled in junior secondary schools. The emergence of this large group of young migrants enrolled in schools is one of the new characteristics of migrant population in China. Those with an educational attainment at colleges or higher education institutions level and above have different expectations of social services provision and therefore have different policy implications.

**Table 3b Educational status of migrants aged 18-24**

Educational status of migrants aged 18-24 (%)	2000	2005	2010	2015
In school	3.8	7.5	31.5	48.2
Graduated	91.2	88.9	67.0	50.6
Did not graduate	2.0	1.3	0.6	0.3
Drop-out	2.8	2.2	0.7	0.5
Others	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Migrants aged 18-24 (10 thousand persons)</b>	883.8	1368.9	5050.5	4678.5
<b>Migrants aged 18-24 enrolled in school (10 thousand persons)</b>	33.8	102.9	1592.4	2252.7

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## 5. Changes in sub-populations of migrants

### (1) Increase in the number of ethnic migrants

While the national migrant population nationwide maintain sustained growth, ethnic minority groups in China are also increasingly involved in migration and show a faster increase than that of the Han population. This is mainly reflected in the following facts: China's ethnic minority migrants grew from 7.06 million to 19.36 million in the 15 years between 2000 and 2015, with an average annual growth rate of 6.9%, higher than that of Han migrants at 5.9%. During the same period, the proportion of ethnic minority migrants in the total ethnic minority population increased rapidly from 6.7% to 16.5%, and the proportion of ethnic

minority migrants in the total migrant population also increased from 6.9% to 7.9%.

We took a closer look at the recent migration trends of ethnic minority groups with a relatively large population size (see Table 3). In 2000, Zhuang was the only ethnic minority group with its number of migrants exceeding one million. By 2015, there were eight ethnic minority groups (Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uyghur, Tujia, Yi and Mongol) with more than one million migrants. During this period, the ethnic minority groups of Yi, Tibetan, Miao, Mongol and Uyghur recorded a strong growth in their migrant population, with an average annual growth rate of 10.6%, 9.3%, 8.7%, 8.1% and 7.1%, respectively, all exceeding the average growth rate of the ethnic minorities migrant population as a whole.

Table 4 Population size of ethnic minority migrants in China, 2000-2015

	2000	2005	2010	2015
Participation rate of Han majority population in migration (%)	8.4	11.6	16.8	18.0
Participation rate of ethnic minority groups in migration (%)	6.7	7.9	13.5	16.5
Proportion of ethnic minority migrants in the total migrant population (%)	6.9	6.6	6.9	7.9
Number of ethnic minority migrants (10 thousand persons)	706	978	1528	1936
Number of migrants by key ethnic minority groups (10 thousand persons)				
Zhuang	132	174	259	352
Manchu	86	115	153	153
Hui	82	91	151	180
Miao	55	87	153	194
Uyghur	43	35	91	121
Tujia	54	68	95	133
Yi	35	65	102	157

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Mongol	52	88	146	167
Zang	21	29	53	81
Buyi	13	24	51	59

## **(2) New generation migrants become the majority**

Due to continuous population replacement, the new generation migrants born in and after 1980 are gradually replacing the older generations to become the backbone of the industrial labor force, and the majority of new citizens in cities. From 2000 to 2015, the proportion of new generation migrants in the total population of working-age migrants increased

from 28.7% to 62.2%, and its size increased from 29 million to 150 million, quickly becoming the majority group among migrants. With older migrants gradually returning home and the continuous outflow of new laborers, the size of the new generation migrants in China will further increase in the future, and so will its proportion among the total migrant population. It is expected that by 2030, the inter-generational replacement of older generations of migrants with the new generation of migrants will be largely completed.

**Table 5 Population size of new generation migrants, 2000-2015**

	2000	2005	2010	2015
<b>Population size of migrants of all ages (10 thousand persons)</b>	10229	14735	22143	24597
<b>Of which, the proportion of those born in and after 1980 (%)</b>	28.7	40.2	53.6	62.2
<b>Of which, population size of those born in and after 1980 (10 thousand persons)</b>	2931	5929	11878	15289

\* New generation migrants born in and after 1980 correspond to ages 0-35 in 2015, ages 0-30 in 2010, and so on.

## **(3) Rapid increase in the population size of older migrants**

Driven both by the rapid development of ageing and migration, older migrants aged 60 and above have also recorded a rapid increase. The size of the older migrant population presented a trend of faster increase after 2000: from 5.03 million in 2000 to 13.04 million in 2015,

an average annual increase of 6.6%. The proportion of older migrants also witnessed a small increase from 4.9% in 2000 to 5.3% in 2015, an increase of 0.4 percentage points. Compared with the increase in the proportion of older persons aged 60 and above in the country, which increased from 10.5% to 16.1% in the same period, an increase of 5.6 percentage points, the population growth of older migrants was relatively slow.

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Table 6 Size of the older migrant population, 2000-2015

	2000	2005	2010	2015
Size of the elderly population aged 60 and above (10 thousand persons)	12998	14422	17760	22182
Size of the older migrant population aged 60 and above (10 thousand persons)	503	541	1061	1304
Proportion of older migrants in the total elderly population aged 60 and above (%)	3.9	3.8	6.0	5.9

#### **(4) Rapid increase in the population size of migrant children, with slight decrease since 2010**

The censuses and sample surveys before 2010 showed that the population size of migrant children presented a growing trend: from 2000 to 2005, the population size of migrant children aged 0-17 increased from 19.82 million to 25.33 million in five years, an increase of 27.8%, and the participation rate of children in migration rose from 5.7% to 7.7%. From 2005 to 2010, the population size of migrant children further increased to 35.81 million, an increase of 41.4%, with the participation rate of children in migration further climbing to 12.8%. However, according to the 1% Population Sample Survey in 2015, the population size of migrant children decreased by 1.55 million in 2015 compared with 2010, a decrease of 4.3%, and the participation rate of children in migration also

decreased slightly to 12.6%. This is opposite to the overall trends of migration for the country as a whole: from 2010 to 2015, migrants in China increased from 221 million to 246 million, an increase of 11.1%, and the participation rate of the whole population in migration increased from 16.5% to 17.9%.

The decline in the population size of migrant children from 2010 to 2015 can be mainly attributed to the changes in the age structure of the population: the size of the children population declined by 8.07 million, from 279 million in 2010 to 271 million in 2015. Multiplying the reduced 8.07 million children by the proportion (12.6%) of migrant children in the whole children population in 2015 produces a result of roughly one million, which can explain two-thirds of the decline in the number of migrant children between 2010 and 2015<sup>2</sup>.

2. Most of the remaining 1/3 decline in the size of migrant children can be explained by the variation in the participation rate of children in migration, and the rest minor portion will need further study to explain.

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**Table 7 Population size of migrant children by stages of schooling, 1982-2015**

Unit: 10 thousand persons

Stage of schooling	1982	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Young children (aged 0-2)	26	56	287	321	386	463
Pre-primary education (aged 3-5)	45	82	377	388	512	590
Primary education (aged 6-11)	104	139	709	764	929	934
Junior secondary education (aged 12-14)	46	66	332	361	464	412
Post-compulsory education (aged 15-17)	33	115	276	699	1290	1026
<b>Total population of migrant children aged 0-17</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>2533</b>	<b>3581</b>	<b>3426</b>

## 6. Regional characteristics of population migration

### (1) Urban-rural distribution<sup>3</sup>

Rural-urban migration has always been the largest share of migration, though with variations across different time periods. In the first decade since 2000, the absolute size of rural-urban migrants increased rapidly, and its share in the total population of migrants continued to increase to 63.3%. The year 2010 marked a turning point, after which the share of rural-urban migration dropped rapidly to 48.9% in 2015. The share of urban-urban migration increased

significantly between 2010 and 2015, which is attributed to the rapid urbanization in China in recent years, where urban-urban migration made up a larger proportion of the overall population migration. In terms of population migration between rural areas, the proportion of rural-rural migration had been declining. However, the proportion of urban-rural migration rebounded after 2010, which might be explained by the fact that in some rural areas, local urbanization has upgraded village committees to neighbourhood committees. Thus, from the perspectives of migration, rural-rural migration transformed into urban-rural migration.

3. Statistically speaking, the definitions of urban and rural areas in China is based on administrative divisions, classified by neighbourhood committees and villagers committees recognized by the civil affairs authorities in accordance with the actual constructions. Urban areas include cities and towns. Cities refer to neighbourhood committees connected with by the actual constructions of district or city governments in districts under the jurisdiction of a city with district establishment or cities without district establishment, and other areas. Towns refer to neighbour committees connected with by the actual constructions of government seats in county government seats and other towns outside cities, and other areas. Towns also include special areas such as independent mining areas, economic zones, research institutions, colleges and universities and others and field stations of farm and forest with which actual constructions of government seats are not connected but with a resident populations of more than 3,000 people. Rural areas refer to all other areas except for the urban areas.

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Table 8 Proportion of four types of migration, 2000-2015

Unit: %

Type of migration	2000	2005	2010	2015
Rural-urban migration	52.2	61.4	63.3	48.9
Urban-urban migration	20.9	21.2	21.2	37.9
Rural-rural migration	18.8	13.7	12.7	7.1
Urban-rural migration	8.2	3.7	2.9	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

## ***(2) Migration continues to be dominated by intra-provincial migration, with a slight increase in the proportion of inter-provincial migration***

Access to most social welfare in China is tied with *Hukou*, and social services such as education and health care are provided only where one's *Hukou* is registered. Thus, the distance of migration, especially when it extends across provincial administrative borders, has

important policy implications. Accordingly, regional and *Hukou* barriers for obtaining social services rise sharply when migrants move across provinces. According to historical population data, migration in China has been dominated by intra-provincial migration. Intra-provincial migration has accounted for 60-70% since 2000, and it stood at 60.6% in 2015, This was slightly lower than 2000, implying a small increase in the proportion of inter-provincial migration.

Table 9 The population size of inter- and intra-provincial migrants and their proportion in the total migrant population, 2000-2015

	2000	2005	2010	2015
<b>Percentage distribution (%)</b>				
Inter-provincial migration	36.4	32.4	38.9	39.4
Intra-provincial migration	63.6	67.6	61.1	60.6
Total	100	100	100	100
<b>Population size of migrants (10 thousand persons)</b>				
Inter-provincial migrants	3723	4774	8614	9691
Intra-provincial migrants	6506	9961	13529	14906
Total	10229	14735	22143	24597

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From a gender perspective, male migrants tend to undertake longer-distance migration, accounting for a higher proportion of inter-provincial migrants at 44.6%. On the other hand, female migrants undertake higher proportions of inter-district/county migration within a city and inter-township migration within a county.

### **(3) Coastal regions in southeastern China remain the main destinations for inter-provincial migrants**

According to China's fifth population census in 2000 and sixth population census in 2010, the proportion of migrants in the eastern region accounted for about 50-60% of the national total migrant population. The mini-census in 2015 showed that 54.8% of migrants in China headed to the eastern region<sup>4</sup>. From a regional perspective, between 2000 and 2015, the share of migrants in the eastern region fell by 2.15 percentage points; correspondingly, the share in the central region increased by 1.34 percentage points, and the share in the western region increased by 0.81 percentage points. It reflects that the spatial distribution of

migration destinations has been decentralized among the eastern, central and western regions, though the degree of decentralization is very limited. Inter-provincial migrants have always been concentrated in the southeastern regions of China, and this trend continues to persist.

The spatial distribution of inter-provincial and intra-provincial migrants shows distinctively different patterns. The vast majority of inter-provincial migrants move to the eastern region: according to the 2015 mini-census, 78.2% of inter-provincial migrants gathered in the eastern region, with the central region accounting for 8.7% and the western region accounting for 13.1%. Although intra-provincial migrants also make up a relatively larger share in the eastern region (39.6% in 2015), the overall situation in the eastern, central and western regions are fairly balanced, with the central and western regions both accounting for a proportion of 30%. From a longitudinal perspective, intra-provincial migration in the central and western regions has remained a trend since 2000.

**Table 10 Distance of migration by gender of migrants, 2015**

Distance of migration	Male	Female	Total
Inter-provincial migration	44.6	38.2	41.6
Inter-city migration within a province	24.7	25.3	25.0
Inter-district/county migration within a city	11.7	14.1	12.8
Inter-township migration within a district/county	19.0	22.3	20.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

4. The eastern region includes 11 provincial-level administrative regions, namely Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong and Hainan. The central region includes 8 provincial-level administrative regions, namely Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan. The western region includes 12 provincial-level administrative regions, namely Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Guangxi and Inner Mongolia.

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Table 11 Proportion of migrants absorbed by eastern, central and western regions

Unit: %

Region		2000	2005	2010	2015
Total migrant population	Eastern	57.0	64.6	56.9	54.8
	Central	20.4	17.2	20.5	21.7
	Western	22.7	18.3	22.7	23.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Intra-provincial migration	Eastern	44.8	47.5	41.3	39.6
	Central	28.1	27.2	29.4	30.2
	Western	27.1	25.4	29.4	30.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Inter-provincial migration	Eastern	77.8	84.6	81.4	78.2
	Central	7.3	5.4	6.5	8.7
	Western	14.9	10.0	12.1	13.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

#### ***(4) The main spatial locations of migrants in the eastern region are large city agglomerations, with the increasing trend of spatial continuum***

Mega-cities are especially appealing to migrants. In 2015, 13.9% of China's migrants gathered in the four cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Furthermore, 36.2% of the migrants congregated in the three city agglomerations of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, Yangtze River Delta region, and Pearl River Delta region that center around the four cities mentioned, whereas these city agglomerations are home to only 19% of the country's permanent residential population. Nationwide, there are 10 cities with a migrant population of more than 5 million, which are Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Guangzhou,

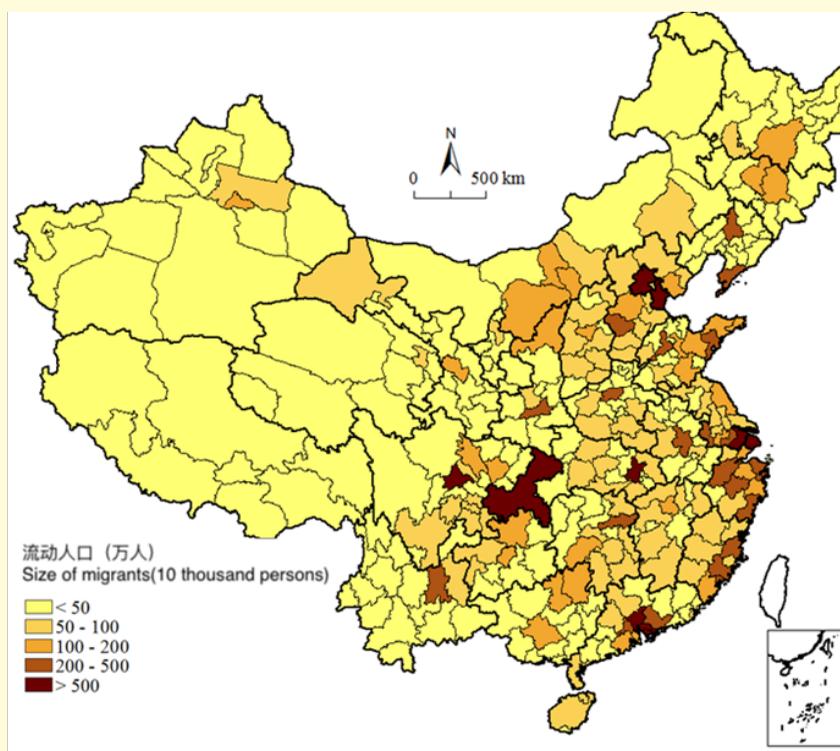
Chongqing, Wuhan, Suzhou, Chengdu and Tianjin. Migration to cities in central and western China such as Wuhan, Chongqing and Chengdu are dominated by intra-provincial migrants, while migration to mega-cities in eastern and southern China are dominated by inter-provincial migrants. In the foreseeable future, the three city agglomerations will remain the locomotive of China's economic growth and continue to present a strong appeal and absorption capacity for migrants. At the same time, regions such as the Shandong Peninsula and coastal areas of Fujian have also recorded rapid growth of migrants. In the future, these rapidly growing regions will merge with the existing three city agglomerations, and be further expanded into a coastal urban belt with a high concentration of migrants.

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Table 12 Top ten cities with a migrant population of more than 5 million, 2015

	Population size of migrants (10 thousand persons)	Distance of migration		
		Inter-town/township within a county	Inter-county within a province	Inter-provincial
Shanghai	1354.3	12.3	15.8	71.9
Beijing	1138.5	14.7	19.9	65.5
Shenzhen	1073.4	2.3	31.2	66.5
Dongguan	808.6	2.4	17.9	79.6
Guangzhou	686.4	8.8	46.0	45.2
Chongqing	669.1	40.0	41.6	18.4
Wuhan	604.1	17.4	64.3	18.3
Suzhou	599.8	6.1	26.2	67.7
Chengdu	597.5	10.6	74.0	15.4
Tianjin	555.1	14.7	19.8	65.5

Figure 2 Distribution of migrants by prefecture, 2015



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**(5) Population migration is mainly driven by economic considerations, with an increase in reasons associated with social (moving with family members), development (learning and training opportunities), and living livelihood (improving living conditions) dimensions**

Population migration in China has been mainly driven by the quests for employment and business opportunities, which represent more than half of the migrant population (see Table 10). However, due to increasingly diversified considerations for migration, the proportion of migrants driven by the desire to find

employment and engage in businesses decreased by 3.2 percentage points between 2000 and 2015. In contrast, the proportion of migration associated with social reasons (represented by moving with family members) has been rising, with an increase of 2.5 percentage points between 2000 and 2015. Similarly, the proportion of migration associated with development reasons (represented by pursuing learning and training opportunities) presented a more rapid increase from 6.9% in 2000 to 14.8% in 2015. The mini-census in 2015 included a new category of “improving living conditions” under the causes for migration, which accounted for 4.5% of migrants, similar to the figure for the reason of marriage, and

**Table 13 Reasons for population migration, 2000-2015**

Reasons for migration	2000	2005	2010	2015		
				Total	Male	Female
Finding employment or engaging in business	55.1	53.1	51.1	51.9	59.9	42.6
Work transfer	3.2	2.6	3.5	—	—	—
Work allocation and recruitment	1.2	0.6	—	—	—	—
Learning and training	6.9	3.7	11.2	14.8	13.6	16.1
Demolition and relocation	4.0	3.3	4.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
Marriage	5.4	7.8	5.2	4.6	1.3	8.4
Moving with family members	13.1	14.3	15.4	15.6	12.4	19.3
Seeking support from relatives and friends	6.3	8.3	4.6	—	—	—
For children's schooling	—	—	—	1.9	1.5	2.3
Improving living conditions	—	—	—	4.5	4.7	4.2
Quasi residence registration	—	1.4	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3
Others	5.0	4.9	4.1	6.0	5.7	6.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: “—” in the table indicates that the survey back then did not include such an option.

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more than the reasons for children's schooling and relocation due to building demolition. This implies that migration driven by the pursuit of a livable environment is becoming more and more important.

Among the reasons for migration, male migrants were more driven by economic considerations, with finding

employment or engaging in business accounting for 59.5%, compared to 42.6% for female migrants. Female migrants were more driven by family factors (such as moving with family members, marriage, and children's schooling) with a proportion of 30.3%, while this for male migrants was only 15.2%.

## II. Problems and challenges faced by migrant population

Changes in the key characteristics of migrants imply that the problems and challenges faced by migrants are also changing during this transitional period. These may include:

### 1. The discrepancy between improved human capital of migrants and their capacity to avoid risks

Historical data from censuses and mini-censuses have indicated that educational attainment of migrants has continued to improve. On the other hand, compared with those with local *Hukou*, migrants tend to be highly mobile and experience low job stability. Moreover, compared with the previous generation of migrants, the new generation of migrants have not greatly improved their skills in the industries and occupations where they are employed and continue to face significant risks of unemployment. Losing a job for a migrant implies the loss of his/her main source of living, and coupled with the lack of unemployment insurance, unemployment not only affects the well-being of migrants and their families, but also exerts adverse effects on the city and social stability.

### 2. Two-way demands and dual obstacles in urban settlement

Long-term settlement in urban areas is not only the key goal of migrants, but also an important target pursued by city governments. On one hand, dynamic

monitoring surveys conducted by the National Health Commission on the desire of migrants to stay in cities found that with their accumulated time and experience and the increase in the number of the new generation of migrants, long-term settlement in their migration destination cities has become the main aim of more than half of the migrants and their families. On the other hand, against the background of decelerated growth of migrants, the increasingly severe shortage of migrant workers has triggered city governments and employers to retain migrants through policies and provision of benefits. Therefore, long-term settlement in urban areas has become a two-way demand for both the migrants and their host cities. However, contrary to the demands, migrants still face dual barriers from the social system and their families when considering long-term settlement in their cities of employment. While helping to improve financial conditions, migration to cities will also create problems for migrants' families, such as education and care of left-behind and migrant children, care and psychological support of left-behind senior family members. The solutions to these problems face various institutional obstacles.

### 3. Migrant children face the dual challenge of school education and adaptation to urban settings

Children have gotten increasingly involved in migration with the massive migration of labor force across China. The number of migrant children reached a peak in 2010, with a significant proportion of them

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born and growing up in cities, and therefore living the life of “urban children”. However, compared with urban children, migrant children face the dual challenges of school education and adaptation to urban settings. On one hand, the enrollment of migrant children at schools is below that of urban children, and on the other hand, upon their arrival in cities from rural areas, migrant children have to adapt themselves to the brand new urban settings and face changes in living environment, life style, way of thinking and culture.

## 4. Rural children left-behind face the dual deprivation of school education and family comfort

There were 68.77 million of children left-behind nationwide in 2015, an increase of 1.3 times from the figure in 2010. Children left-behind mostly live in rural areas, but there is a trend of an increasing number in children left-behind in urban areas, with 28.26 million of children left-behind in urban areas in 2015. The root causes of the problems facing children left-behind are the separation of family members and the lack of family comfort. According to the mini-census in 2015, half of the children left-behind in rural areas could only live with one of their parents, the other half could only live with their grandparents or other caretakers, and about 10% of them lived alone or with other children. Leaving their young children where their *Hukou* is registered is often the last resort for migrant parents. The biggest challenge facing children left-behind is that they cannot maintain daily contact and communication with their parents. Although the majority of children left-behind maintain relatively stable communication with their migrating parents through telephone or other means, there are still problems in communication frequency and content. In terms of communication content, migrant parents tend to instruct their children to be obedient and study hard, and less attention is given to actively listening to the troubles and difficulties faced by their children.

## 5. Contradiction remains between the preferences of migrants for large cities and the orientation of urban settlement policies

Governments at all levels are committed to support the settlement of the transferred agricultural population in cities through obtaining city *Hukou* and increasing the urbanization rate among the *Hukou* population. However, policies which encourage migrants to return home, promote local urbanization, and set up thresholds for obtaining city *Hukou* are not in line with the preferences of migrants who generally are in favour of settling in larger cities. According to the 2010 census, about 40% of China’s migrants lived in mega-cities (with a population of more than 5 million). These cities still hold strict absolute thresholds in terms of granting *Hukou*, although policies have relaxed in recent years. About 17% of the migrants lived in larger cities (population size of 3 to 5 million), 35% in large cities (population size of 1 million to 3 million) and medium-size cities, and only about 10% lived in small towns with no restrictions on obtaining local *Hukou*. Though the National Development and Reform Commission has recently released new policies requesting all cities to lower the threshold of obtaining local *Hukou*, it still holds true that the larger the cities, the higher the thresholds for obtaining *Hukou*. In cases where the threshold has been lowered, it is only for selective groups. The decision to grant local *Hukou* is still left to the local governments, and questions remain about the extent to which local practices fully align with the policies of the central government. It can be inferred that the discrepancies between the policy and practices will greatly reduce the possibility of migrants settling down in their cities of employment through obtaining local *Hukou*.

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## 6. The dilemma of joining the migration or staying behind among rural elderly populations

The decision to join the migration among rural elderly populations is mainly driven by the factors of seeking employment and following family members. Therefore, older migrants mainly consist of two groups: older migrant workers and those moving with their families. Both groups are largely ignored by the current public policies. Due to their low level of educational attainment and poor ability to master new skills, most of the current older migrant workers have difficulties to engage in emerging industries and can only work

in traditional industries such as construction and manufacturing. Older migrant workers are one of the most vulnerable groups in the current urban labor market, and yet there is no corresponding policy in place to protect their rights and benefits. On the other hand, older persons migrating with family members also face dilemma of family ties and homesickness. Influenced by traditional thinking, behaviors and values in rural areas, older migrants who move from a rural society focused on blood relations to unfamiliar cities dominated by professional relations not only face challenges in adapting to the urban life styles, they also have difficulties with cultural integration, identity recognition and access to social security.

## III. Recommendations

In the four decades since the opening up and reform drive in 1978, population and development in China have experienced a milestone shift from the primary focus on fertility and mortality to the current focus on migration. Facing the emerging trends and challenge of migration in a new era, efforts are deemed important in the following aspects:

### 1. Break the systematic and institutional barriers preventing social mobility of the labor force and skilled workers

Massive migration of the labor force from rural to urban areas and from the agricultural sector to non-agricultural sectors not only achieve effective transfer and optimal deployment of surplus in the labor force, but it also greatly facilitates economic development. At the same time, migrants with improved education continue to enter the labor market and obtain employment, and this not only ensures rapid improvement in human capital of the current labor force, but also reaps the dividend of improved human capital. However, China's economic growth rate has

continued to decline since 2007 and has entered a 'new normal' of economic development. Due to institutional obstacles, population migration and its cumulative effects are considered one of the important reasons for the slowdown in economic growth. The mismatch of labor in industries caused by a surplus of labor force in the agriculture industry was estimated to have significant direct losses that negatively affected economic growth. Therefore, it is necessary to break the systematic and institutional barriers preventing social mobility of labor force and skilled workers to revitalize human capital, which will not only contribute to sustainable economic development but also resolve problems associated with population migration.

### 2. Deepen reforms of the *Hukou* system to ensure an orderly flow of population migration

To deepen the reform of the *Hukou* system, efforts will have to be made to fully understand, respect and adapt to the needs of urban development and population migration. The goal would be to carefully manage the relationship between the freedom of movement

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and an orderly flow of population migration, between adjusting the threshold of granting local *Hukou* and reforming the *Hukou*-based public policies, and between overall urban development and personal development of the migrant population. Efforts will also be required to accelerate the development of medium- and small-size towns to reduce regional disparities and guide an orderly movement of the transferred agricultural population.

### 3. Newly registered urban residents and migrants should both be integrated into the service and administration system for migrants

According to the vision outlined in the national new urbanization strategy, about 100 million transferred agricultural population and other types of permanent long-term residents already living in cities are expected to obtain urban *Hukou* and settle down. Considering the fact that migrants will get their *Hukou* mainly in medium- and small-sized cities, but employment opportunities remain concentrated in large cities and city agglomerations, and the fact that obtaining *Hukou* can be a short-term behavior whereas full urban integration is a continuous process, relevant Government departments should not continue to focus their attention only on those migrants without *Hukou* but instead extend their efforts to include the newly registered urban residents. Equal consideration and treatment should be granted to these two groups in regard to service provision and administration as well as promoting full urban integration.

### 4. Public services targeting migrants should transform from serving individual migrant workers to supporting migrant families

In the new era where families are increasingly migrating together and a large number of migrants will be granted *Hukou* and settle down in urban areas, public service policy targeting migrants must

support migrant families to formulate strategies for the development of migrant families and take into account the needs of diversified groups such as migrant workers, migrant children, accompanying spouses and older family members. In particular, education guarantee for migrant children should be placed at the core of the public service system, which is considered as a fundamental way to address the concerns of migrant workers, improve the quality of human capital and the labor force, and promote full urban integration of migrants.

### 5. Multiple stakeholders including migrants, employers and government departments should be fully mobilized to jointly promote the full integration of migrants and the newly registered urban residents

Full urban integration of migrants is of great benefit to the continuous supply and quality improvement of the urban labor, the harmony and stability of urban communities, and the healthy development of urban societies. Therefore, the responsibilities and costs associated with the integration of migrants should not be borne entirely by the city governments and the migrant families. Rather, multiple stakeholders, including migrants, employers and government departments should be fully mobilized to jointly advance the full integration of migrants. Employers should take more responsibility in social insurance and vocational training of migrant workers; urban communities should do more in social integration and community services for migrant families; migrant families should also be proactive in participating in social insurance, community public benefits activities and social services; and relevant government departments at all levels should undertake the dual responsibilities of expanding the supply of public services such as public housing, education and medical care, and developing a policy system that can more effectively mobilize and coordinate with various stakeholders.

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## 6. Pay more attention to older migrants and provide quality services to older migrants in migration destinations

The emergence and rapid expansion of the older migrant population deserve high attention, which also warrants higher requirements on services and management capacity for migrants. In particular, the construction of a service system for older migrants requires systematic thinking. Given that more families migrate together and the policy threshold to obtain local urban *Hukou* has been lowered, the children of older migrant workers tend to work in cities and a high proportion of their grandchildren also attend education institutions in cities. Hence, there is a loose connection between families of these migrant workers and their migration origins. Similar characteristics can also be observed with older migrants migrating

with their families. Therefore, older migrants generally have high demands for and possibility of long-term settlement in cities. On one hand, efforts should be focused on integrating urban and rural pension and medical insurance schemes, and integrating them into the urban and community old-age support system as a necessary component of the services for migrant families. This will allow continuous support for older migrants, even with the challenges associated with securing local urban *Hukou*. On the other hand, taking advantage of their relatively strong willingness to obtain local urban *Hukou*, active efforts should also be made to guide older migrants and their families to obtain *Hukou* and settle down in urban areas. This could be one of the breakthroughs in promoting the transferred agricultural population to settle down in urban areas, and increasing the urbanization rate among the *Hukou* population.

## About the NBS/UNFPA/UNICEF Joint Data Project

Data is the foundation for good policy making. In China, UNFPA and UNICEF have been working with the National Bureau of Statistics and other partners to increase availability, analysis and use of data disaggregated by sex, age and region, from both regular population census/surveys and administrative reporting systems. The aim is to enhance monitoring

and reporting by the national statistical systems on national development plans such as the National Programmes of Action for Women and Children, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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