

# FOREVER YOUNG: CHINA'S MIGRATION REGIME AND AGE PROFILES



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Unlike many other countries in the world, China has a hukou system that functions as an internal citizenship classification system. Basically, it differentiates the “locals” from the “outsiders”, providing urban social welfare to local hukou holders only. Since the economic reform in the 1980s, massive rural population has flooded into the cities to work. Without urban hukou, they are rendered second-class citizens in cities. In 2019 the size of the rural migrant population stock reached about 250 million. This study examines the fundamental governing principle of China’s internal migration via the lens of age profiles. Since the hukou system severely limits migrants’ access to local public service and education for their children in the destination, children and elderly parents of the migrants are often left behind in villages. As a result, the migrant population stock consists of overwhelmingly young working-age adults, reflecting the enormous difficulties of settling in the destinations, even after more after 30 years of massive migration. Such an approach has helped China achieve industrialization and urbanization at much lower costs to cities and industrialists, while shifting the burden of social production of labor to the countryside and migrant families. This lies at the core of the model of development of China, which is the premise of China’s becoming the low-cost producer of world’s manufacturing. Through comparing the age structures of migrant flows and migrant stocks of China derived from census data and three other countries, this study develops methods to pinpoint the rather unique age profile of Chinese internal migrant stock, linking migrants’ demography to the country’s special economic development strategy.

FEBRUARY  
23, 2021

3:30 – 4:30 PM  
PACIFIC TIME

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