

# Study of second generation floating population is vital

## POPULATION STUDIES

By YIN DETING et al.

According to the seventh national census, completed in 2021, China's floating population is approximately 376 million, an increase of 69.73% over the sixth national census in 2020. With the expansion of this migratory population, mobility has become a common experience for many members of society. This experience is also intergenerational. Scholars are now studying the influence of migration on the second generation floating population, attempting to understand the universal laws of growth and development of these children, and seeking solutions for new "post-migration" challenges faced by the second generation floating population. As this group makes up such a large portion of Chinese society, research on the floating population is the key to understanding society today, and for continuing China's high-quality socioeconomic development.

### Terminology

The "second generation floating population" referred to in this article, are the children of one or two parents who have migrated for work. The theoretical value of this new concept — the second generation floating population — is threefold.

First, as a fully-formed concept, the second generation floating population completely covers the heterogeneity and epokality of this group. Study of the children growing up in this environment accounts for the intergenerational transmission of the migratory group's subjective initiative, social interactions, and their responses to changing times, avoiding a common research fixation on the impact of migration on this young group.

Second, the second generation floating population alters existing research paradigms on intergenerational transmission of values. These include well-known studies on mobility trajectory and career acquisition, moving research models further away from the established mindset of intergenerational succession, wherein, "children inherit their father's business." This diversity enriches research topics on intergenerational influence, group comparisons, differentiation mechanisms, and the life course of this group. As a result, this group can be studied from multiple perspectives: family and society, intra-group, and external interactions.

Third, defining the second generation floating population helps to create a three-dimensional portrait of this group in terms of their survival, life, and development in today's era. It allows researchers to comprehensively consider the relationship between where and when the migration happens, personal struggles and structural constraints, physical mobility and a sense of belonging, and family and policy support.



College volunteers read to "left behind" children, who live a rural life with grandparents as their parents work in cities. Reading sessions took place at a library in Maojianshan Village, Yuexi County, Anhui Province, on July 9. Photo: CNSphoto

### Four research dimensions

On the whole, previous research addressed the specific problems of the second generation floating population by studying intergenerational relationships, physical and mental development, educational achievements, career development, social integration, social anomie, and so on. But studies mainly involved four dimensions: intergenerational relationships, subjectivity, development, and sociality.

When studying intergenerational relationships, relevant fieldwork has explored the generational characteristics and intergenerational interactions of this group. Studies found that the second generation floating population had both similarities and differences from their parents, showing a complex intergenerational relationship full of both dependence and conflict.

In terms of subjectivity, relevant studies focused on the physical and mental health of group members. Subjectivity is established through the process of interacting with the outside world, so the group's physical and mental health is not an individual or personal matter, but is closely related to mobility of family members and interactions or social perceptions during social events.

In research of this group's developmental progress, relevant studies have examined the challenges faced by the second generation floating population in personal development, especially in educational achievement and career growth. It is generally agreed upon that educational achievement is directly related to career development. However, existing studies disagree on assessments of the overall educational achievements of the second generation floating population, and there are different understandings of their career development as well.

In terms of socialization, studies focused on the social integration or social anomie of this group, two sides of one coin. Poor social integration in childhood may lead to social anomie in adult life, a matter that requires attention from scholars and policymakers.

### Theoretical construction

The diversity inherent in the second generation floating population

makes this group a particularly rich research topic. Due to the unclear definition of this group, theoretical construction faces the following three challenges.

First, differences between various subgroups within the second generation floating population requires both classification and comparative research. Classification of different subgroups is needed to map out the group's overall characteristics.

The second challenge is untangling the relationship between endogenous and exogenous interactions. Studies of the second generation floating population generally involve interactions between parents and their children, interactions between these children and society during their childhood and adolescence, and the interactions during major social events. In addition, each of these relationships has superimposed a relational dynamic which influences the group's whole life course.

The third challenge is understanding the relationship between homogeneity and variability. Previous studies generally concluded that the second generation floating population was full of strong homogeneity due to intergenerational transmission of values, but, once this group's boundaries are clarified, the broad differences and variability within the group will be revealed.

Taking into account these complications to theoretical models, the study of the second generation floating population needs to bridge knowledge gaps in the following four areas: group portrait, empirical discussion of controversial issues, the influence of major social events, and the study of life course.

### Further studies

When conducting an overall review of the research on the second generation floating population, it became clear that it was necessary to move beyond ideas of intergenerational transmission, and apply the "life course theory" to further explore the impact of familial migration experiences in childhood on this group's development in adulthood. To be specific, the following five aspects might be the key to research.

First, the health risks in the life course of the second generation

floating population cannot be overlooked. Parental migration can affect the health of their children. Health risks are not only intergenerational, but also intragenerational. Therefore, studies of health problems for this group should be carried out from a more macro and long-term historical perspective, which is conducive to tracing the source of, and expanding the research on, health problems.

Second, more studies should focus on this group's career development in the digital era. Employment is the fundamental driving force of the floating population, and it remains an important issue in the study of the group. In a time featuring constant change in new industries and new forms of business, it is crucial to study the new job market and labor requirements faced by the second generation floating population when they come of age, so as to understand this group's mobility characteristics and employment laws. We need to figure out what kind of new social field the second generation floating population faces in the digital age. Also, we need to map out this group's employment traits, brought by digital transformation.

Third, studies must focus on family-oriented problems that the second generation floating population faces against the background of structural population change. The seventh national census shows that the average household size in China has declined, with a significant increase in the proportion of first generation families while the proportion of second generation and third generation families declines. The huge floating population in China consists of tens of thousands of families with migration experience, but there are few studies on the size, structure, and function of the second generation floating population when they reach adulthood.

Therefore, we can combine the latest national census and relevant surveys to study the family-oriented problems of the current second generation floating population after adulthood, estimate their family size and structural characteristics, and compare this with families from the non-floating population, so as to reveal this group's family-oriented characteristics and structural challenges. In addition, we can further explore factors that influence the process as this population forms families.

Fourth, social integration of the second generation floating population is worth deeper analysis. Social integration is an important indicator of the floating population's transformation into urban citizens, which is tied to a sense of acquisition and belonging for this group. It is necessary to study the influence of their parents' migration experience and their childhood mobility or the experience of being left-behind on the social integration of this population in adulthood. Based on the specifics of parents' migration during group members' childhoods, including the

initial migration time, duration and distance of parents' mobility, the types of parents' mobility, and their own mobility or left-behind experience, a complex relationship can be unfolded in terms of the group's social integration.

At the same time, we can also study the subjective perception and objective state of social integration between the two generations of the floating population, evaluate the difference in social integration between the generations, and analyze the mechanism behind changes in socially inclusive attitudes.

Finally, policy guarantees for this population, in the context of new urbanization, should be a key field of academic inquiry. The report to the 20th CPC National Congress pointed out that efforts should be made to resolve the pressing difficulties and problems that concern the people most, improve the basic public service system to raise public service standards, and make public services more balanced and accessible, to make solid progress in achieving common prosperity.

Based on the above-mentioned problems faced by the second generation floating population, combined with changes to policies regarding the floating population, we should further summarize the successful experience and shortcomings of China's floating population policy, and build a policy system to support the development of the second generation. The development oriented policy system includes public policy and social policy, where the policy to support the urbanization of second generation floating population falls under the purview of the latter. The developmental social policy covers the entire lives of the second generation floating population, and is related to the core issues of health, employment, family integration, and social integration.

In the context of urbanization, the formulation of the development-oriented social policy system for the second generation floating population needs a stronger top-level system design at the national level. It is first necessary to further study the value concept, method, and path of this policy from a theoretical and practical perspective. However, the developmental social policy should also balance interests between the second generation floating population and the resident population.

As we design development-oriented social policies, we need to balance the interests of subjects, clarify the policy connotations, and analyze the effects brought by the implementation of these development-oriented social policies through social policy evaluation, further refining the social policy system supporting the development of the second generation floating population.

Yin Deting is from the Beijing Municipal Party Committee School (Beijing Administration Institute).