

A Study on the Urban Integration of Migrant Workers from the Perspective of Activity Space

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Abstract: Migrant workers form the core of the urban industrial labor force and serve as a major driver of modernization, having made significant contributions to economic and social development. Facilitating the integration of migrant workers into cities has become a key indicator for assessing urbanization progress. It is also crucial for promoting high-quality urban development, ensuring the equitable sharing of development outcomes, and maintaining social harmony and stability. From the perspective of activity space, this paper analyzes the characteristics of migrant workers' daily activity spaces — including commuting, shopping, and leisure — to explore the underlying mechanisms affecting their urban integration. It also proposes strategies for promoting integration through spatial planning optimization, institutional safeguards, and innovative community governance. The study aims to provide insights into bridging the urban spatial divide for migrant workers, fostering inclusive urban development, and advancing new urbanization.

Keywords: Migrant Workers; Urban Integration; Influencing Mechanisms; Strategic Pathways; Activity Space

1. Introduction

Currently, China is undergoing the largest urbanization process in the world. By the end of 2024, China's urbanization rate had reached 67%, with migrant workers constituting a growing proportion of the urban population. In cities like Shenzhen and Dongguan, the migrant population accounts for up to 76%, while in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and others, it exceeds 50% [1]. Although a gap remains compared with developed countries, the sheer scale of China's population means the resulting social phenomena require serious attention. The large-scale migration of workers to cities has made them a vital contributor to urban development. However, due to factors such as household registration (hukou) policies, migrant workers still face significant challenges in integrating into urban life, which manifest in economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. As society develops, the needs of migrant workers are gradually shifting from "survival-based" to "development-based," with growing aspirations to integrate into urban society, contribute to urban development, and pursue a better quality of life in the city.

Previous research on migrant worker integration has primarily focused on structural factors such as the household registration system, social security, and labor market employment, yielding relatively concentrated findings. However, urban integration is reflected not only in institutional acceptance but also in the interaction between migrant workers' daily behaviors and their activity spaces. Activity space, as a key domain and spatiotemporal carrier of daily life, plays a crucial role in shaping urban perception, establishing social connections, and fostering identity. From the perspective of activity space, this paper employs literature review and qualitative research methods to explore strategies for the urban integration of migrant workers, offering both theoretical and practical insights.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Study

2.1 Concept and Dimensions of Activity Space

The concept of activity space originates from geography. Simply put, it refers to the spatial range individuals occupy and use in their daily lives, encompassing not only physical movement but also the construction of social space. Analyzing the urban integration of migrant workers from an activity space perspective involves three main dimensions: commuting, shopping, and leisure activity spaces. The

commuting activity space reflects their employment status and job stability; the shopping activity space reflects their consumption patterns and degree of economic integration; and the leisure activity space reflects their level of social interaction and cultural participation. These three dimensions effectively indicate the extent of urban integration.

2.2 Theory of Spatial Justice

The theory of spatial justice originates from Western studies on democratic politics and theories of justice. David Harvey pointed out in *The Condition of Postmodernity* that the root of contradictions in capitalist societies lies in the unequal distribution of urban space, and that urban planning and spatial governance should address this as a primary concern. Henri Lefebvre noted that beyond the material characteristics of space, what is more important is how it maintains social power and relationships. The production and allocation of urban space should reflect principles of social equity and ensure the spatial rights of all individuals [2]. Spatial justice theory emphasizes that resource allocation should balance the interests of different groups, respect and protect basic rights, and ensure equal access to public services and opportunities for development. Its core lies in balancing efficiency and fairness while reinforcing the overall social interest. Spatial justice theory focuses on rights issues in the production and allocation of urban space and has been widely applied in studies of residential space and urban governance. From the perspective of spatial justice, inequalities in activity space systematically marginalize migrant groups, hindering their collective urban integration. This inequality is manifested in restrictions on physical space, imbalanced resource access, socio-cultural segregation, and unequal employment and development opportunities, as observed through commuting, shopping, and leisure behaviors. This paper innovatively introduces spatial justice theory and seeks to enhance the protection of migrant workers' rights through optimized spatial planning and improved institutional safeguards, thereby promoting their better integration into urban life.

3. Activity Space Characteristics of Migrant Workers and Urban Integration

To further examine the activity space characteristics of migrant workers, this paper draws on existing literature, synthesizing findings from studies such as Mao Qi et al.'s *Research on the Spatial Distribution and Travel Characteristics of the "New Hangzhou Residents"*, Zhao Chunyu et al.'s *Research on Urban Integration of Migrant Workers in Hefei from the Perspective of Activity Space*, and Wang Xiao's *Exploration of Public Service Facility Provision and Usage by Migrant Workers in Large Cities*.

3.1 Commuting Activity Space

The commuting activity space is a key dimension reflecting migrant workers' urban integration. It is primarily characterized by its singularity and limited scope. The commuting radius of migrant workers is generally smaller than that of local residents, and they rely more heavily on public transportation or shared mobility options. In terms of time and space, migrant workers are highly income-sensitive, often enduring heavy workloads and long hours, and generally prefer to live near their workplaces. This commuting pattern is shaped by the labor market: many migrant workers are concentrated in sectors like construction, manufacturing, and services, which are often located in specific urban areas or industrial parks, thereby constraining their commuting range. The limitations of the commuting activity space restrict migrant workers' opportunities to pursue further development, experience urban life, and strengthen social interactions, fostering a sense of unfamiliarity and detachment from the city.

3.2 Shopping Activity Space

The shopping activity space is an important dimension for assessing migrant workers' consumption capacity, preferences, and habits, reflecting their degree of economic integration. Overall, their shopping behavior shows a clear preference for low-cost, cost-effective options. In terms of venues, they primarily frequent stable-priced chain supermarkets and small roadside stores, rarely visiting shopping malls, high-end boutiques, or specialty stores. Geographically, their shopping is mostly confined to areas near their residences or workplaces, with little cross-regional consumption. In terms of consumption structure, their purchases are predominantly daily necessities, with a relatively small proportion devoted to developmental or recreational items. These characteristics are influenced by economic constraints, consumption habits, and limited social networks. The restricted nature of their

shopping activity space not only reflects their economic marginalization but also indicates gaps in cultural integration and psychological identification with the city [3].

3.3 Leisure Activity Space

The leisure activity space is an important indicator for evaluating migrant workers' social interaction and cultural participation. It exhibits distinct characteristics of closure and introversion. In terms of time, migrant workers have significantly less leisure time than urban residents due to demanding work schedules. In terms of venues, their leisure activities are mainly concentrated around their residences and workplaces, in places such as roadside parks, internet cafés, and pool halls, with limited use of public cultural spaces like cultural centers, libraries, museums, or squares. In terms of activities, they primarily engage in mobile phone use at home or socializing with peers and colleagues, showing little integration with urban residents and maintaining relatively narrow social networks. The formation of these leisure activity patterns is influenced by both individual factors and the implicit exclusion within urban space, such as spatial layouts that limit leisure options and unequal resource distribution. The closed and introverted nature of their leisure activities restricts the expansion of social networks and inhibits sustained interaction with local residents, making it difficult to achieve deeper urban integration.

4. Influencing Factors of Urban Integration of Migrant Workers from the Perspective of Activity Space

4.1 Personal Attributes

Personal attributes are fundamental factors affecting the integration of migrant workers' activity spaces. These include age, education level, occupation, income, and other characteristics, all of which are closely related to their activity spaces and urban integration. Generally, younger, better-educated, and higher-income migrant workers have broader and more diverse activity spaces and achieve higher levels of urban integration. Youth is often associated with a greater willingness to embrace new experiences and adapt to new environments; education level affects the ability to understand and utilize urban space, with higher education generally enhancing spatial competency; income directly determines mobility and consumption capacity, enabling greater commuting flexibility, spending power, and leisure options. It is important to note that these factors interact, collectively influencing activity space integration. For example, education level often affects occupation and income, while income constraints influence residential choices and transport modes, creating a chain effect.

4.2 Institutional Policies

Institutional policies are key factors influencing the integration of migrant workers' activity spaces. Policies related to the household registration system, social security, and public services are closely tied to migrant workers' basic needs, their children's education, and access to healthcare and pensions. Such institutional exclusion is directly reflected in their activity spaces. For instance, the coverage of public rental housing systems directly affects the commuting, shopping, and leisure options available to migrant workers. Urban planning and spatial policies also play a role. For example, the development of industrial parks with comprehensive living services can create industrial communities that integrate work and living spaces. While this approach provides convenience, it may also confine workers' activities to a limited area, restricting their spatial range and hindering the formation of a broader urban identity and deeper integration.

4.3 Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the psychological basis for the integration of migrant workers' activity spaces. A sense of urban belonging and cultural identification is a deep-seated force that significantly influences activity space choices. For migrant workers, a lack of urban belonging may lead to self-isolation and restricted activity spaces; conversely, a strong sense of identity can encourage active exploration of the city and engagement with urban life. It is important to recognize the bidirectional relationship between cultural identity and activity space. Positive cultural identity motivates individuals to expand their activity spaces, while positive experiences within urban spaces can, in turn, shape and strengthen cultural identity. This interaction makes the urban integration of migrant workers a dynamic process

[4].

4.4 Spatial Environment

The spatial environment is the physical context that influences the integration of migrant workers' activity spaces. Overall urban planning, infrastructure, cultural and recreational facilities, urban greening, and environmental sanitation all impact the spatial behavior of migrant workers. Many migrant workers live in urban villages, peri-urban areas, or industrial park dormitories where public facilities are often inadequate, transportation accessibility is poor, and environmental quality is low. These "urban fragments" negatively affect their urban integration. Currently, many Chinese cities are actively pursuing urban renewal initiatives, continuously improving the urban spatial environment. Optimizing the spatial environment for migrant workers is an effective way to promote their integration into cities.

5. Pathways and Strategies to Promote the Integration of Migrant Workers' Activity Space

5.1 Optimizing Commuting Activity Space: Enhancing Transportation Accessibility and Job Quality

To improve the integration of migrant workers' commuting activity spaces, efforts should first focus on enhancing transportation accessibility, increasing commuting efficiency, and reducing costs. Government departments need to improve urban planning and strengthen road network construction, particularly branch roads and minor arteries, to improve connectivity between industrial parks, urban villages, and peri-urban areas. Public transportation systems, including buses, subways, and light rail, should be vigorously developed to enhance connectivity and reduce the commuting burden on migrant workers. Appropriately expanding the coverage of shared bicycle and motorcycle services can address the "last-mile" travel challenges faced by migrant workers.

Secondly, mechanisms for vocational skills training and talent introduction should be improved, encouraging and guiding migrant workers to move into core local industries and sectors with high labor demand. This can enhance their job stability and income levels, facilitating better urban integration [5].

5.2 Restructuring Shopping Activity Space: Building an Inclusive Commercial Environment

Restructuring the shopping activity space of migrant workers requires building a multi-level, inclusive urban commercial environment. First, urban planning and commercial development should adhere to principles of inclusivity and order. In areas with concentrated migrant populations, aging commercial facilities can be renovated and upgraded—without disrupting traffic or the urban landscape—to improve their image while meeting the demand for affordable goods and ensuring access to basic services. Second, large commercial facilities should be encouraged to cater to migrant workers through initiatives like off-season promotions and affordable product fairs to attract their participation. Migrant workers should also be supported in utilizing commercial spaces for entrepreneurship and innovation, thereby improving employment quality. Finally, logistics and delivery facilities in areas with concentrated migrant populations should be strengthened to overcome physical spatial barriers and diversify consumer choices for migrant workers.

5.3 Expanding Leisure Activity Space: Innovating Public Spaces and Social Interaction

Expanding the leisure activity space of migrant workers is an important measure for improving their quality of life and sense of urban belonging. First, the design of urban public spaces should be optimized to enrich leisure activities, taking into account diverse cultural backgrounds and income levels to enhance inclusivity. For example, enterprises, social organizations, and communities can jointly organize diverse community activities to promote interaction between migrant workers and local residents. Second, cultural exchange platforms should be established in areas with concentrated migrant populations, featuring interactive programs designed to break down social barriers between migrant workers and urban residents. For instance, Hangzhou has set up volunteer service stations for new residents, providing platforms for assistance, rights protection, skills development, and cultural and sports services. Organizing various cultural activities has effectively promoted the integration of the migrant population into the city.

5.4 Innovating Community Governance Models: Building a Multi-dimensional Collaborative Support System

Promoting the integration of migrant workers' activity spaces requires integrating resources from government, communities, enterprises, and social organizations to innovate community governance models and strengthen multi-dimensional support. For example, in the early 2000s, Hangzhou issued the Regulations on the Service and Management of Floating Population in Hangzhou and the Measures for Special Assistance to Migrant Workers in Difficulty, effectively protecting their legal rights. In 2018, Hangzhou unified occupational insurance, allowing rural migrant workers to participate on an equal basis with urban employees and access vocational training, skill certification, and entrepreneurship subsidies. It is essential to respect the agency of migrant workers by establishing community councils, tenant associations, and other organizations that encourage their participation in community governance, enhancing their initiative and proactivity in the integration process.

6. Conclusion

Migrant workers are a vital component of urban industrial development and a key force driving modernization, having contributed significantly to economic and social development. Facilitating the better integration of migrant workers into society is a vital mission in the new era and demonstrates the advantages of the socialist system. By creating inclusive urban spaces and continuously improving the daily activity experiences of migrant workers, it is possible to promote their transition from mere "residence" to genuine "integration," enabling them to share in the benefits of urban development and enhancing overall urban well-being.

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