



The Impact of Population Mobility on Social Stratification: A Qualitative Study in Shenzhen

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Abstract

Shenzhen's transformation from a rural border town to a global technology hub was historically powered by massive labour migration, often viewed as a pathway to the urban middle class. However, as the city matures, opportunities for vertical social mobility are increasingly stratifying based on rights and belonging. This qualitative study explores the subjective experiences of 35 migrants to examine contemporary mechanisms of social closure. Employing a phenomenological approach and Constructivist Grounded Theory, the research compares the high-skilled Talent Group in Nanshan District with the low-skilled Labour Group in Longhua District. For the Talent Group, the hukou system acts as a "Green Channel" for state-sponsored stability, whereas for the Labour Group, it remains an invisible ceiling. Additionally, market forces such as gentrification force low-skilled workers into horizontal displacement, preventing the formation of localised social capital. The study further identifies that the gig economy creates a trap of "occupational involution," offering horizontal movement between apps but no vertical professional progression. Ultimately, the findings suggest that Shenzhen has shifted from an open competitive environment to a rigid hierarchy, where the intersection of hukou policy and the real estate market actively channels low-skilled migrants into a model of segmented assimilation.

Keywords: Hukou System, Segmented Assimilation, Occupational Involution

1. Introduction

Shenzhen is often heralded as the epitome of China's rapid urbanisation, transforming from a rural border town to a global technology hub in less than four decades (Du, 2020). This transformation was powered by the massive inflow of labour, creating a society fundamentally defined by population mobility (Kaiming, 2007). Historically, migration to Shenzhen was viewed as a great equaliser, offering rural individuals an escape from agricultural poverty and a pathway to the urban middle class. However, as the city matures, the channels for vertical social mobility appear to be narrowing. The rising cost of living, coupled with the continued enforcement of the household registration (hukou) system, has created new barriers that stratify the population not just by income but also by rights and belonging (Liu et al., 2018). This paper aims to deconstruct the lived experiences of these migrants to understand the contemporary mechanisms of social closure. It explores how institutional and market forces interact to stratify a population that is almost entirely mobile.

The study of social stratification in China has traditionally focused on the rural-urban dichotomy, with the hukou system identified as the primary institutional barrier to social integration (Li & Gu, 2011). The hukou system functions as an internal passport system, denying rural migrants access to the same social welfare benefits as urban natives, such as education, healthcare, and pensions, resulting in a caste-like division (Chan, 2013; Fang, 2018). Solinger (1999) further conceptualizes migrants as second-class citizens who are economically incorporated but socially marginalized. However, recent scholarship suggests that stratification is evolving beyond simple administrative categories into more complex forms. Studies on digital labor governance argue that algorithmic management, data surveillance, and flexible employment contracts reproduce structural inequalities by weakening collective bargaining power and institutional protections for migrant workers (Huang, 2026; Lei, 2021; Sun, 2019; Yaolin & Mimi, 2025). Simultaneously, the National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) push to relax urban residency restrictions in 2022 (Notice on Issuing the Key Tasks for New Urbanization and Urban-Rural Integration Development in 2022 (NDRC Planning [2022] No. 371)), has theoretically dismantled barriers in smaller municipalities, megacities like Shenzhen have concurrently adopted stringent, points-based entry systems (Li & Chen, 2024).

In the specific context of the “world factory” era, Pun (2005) highlights the dormitory labour regime in Shenzhen, where the spatial management of labour serves to extract maximum value while preventing social rooting. As Shenzhen shifts toward a post-industrial knowledge economy, the criteria for social mobility have shifted. Urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) provide a low-cost living solution for migrants (Tao, 2011; Zhu et al., 2018), but the recent spate of gentrification and urban renewal is systematically demolishing these areas and displacing low-income migrant residents (Hao et al., 2011; Li et al., 2026; Sheng et al., 2025; Xiang et al., 2025; Zhong & Feng, 2017). In addition, Bian (2002) argues that the importance of social capital, or *guanxi*, in Chinese stratification should not be underestimated; for migrants, the absence of a local, unique network can easily impede their pathway to a higher status than the established urban population (Ryan, 2022). While recent policies aimed to decouple employment from social services, strict population caps in megacities like Shenzhen continue to exclude low-skilled migrants (Luo, 2016), concentrating urban benefits primarily among advantaged groups. Concurrently, the rapid expansion of the digital platform economy has absorbed this migrant workforce into a new precariat class (Standing, 2011). Migrant gig workers exhibit a high tolerance for degraded working conditions not by choice, but as an imposed position stemming from their structural vulnerabilities and algorithmic control within China's tech-driven economic restructuring (Zhou, 2024). This paper integrates these views to investigate how the intertwining relationships among the hukou system, real estate, and social relationships create a stratification system with multiple layers.

2. Method

To deeply explore the subjective experiences of social stratification amidst high population mobility, this study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in a phenomenological approach. The field research was conducted in Shenzhen, chosen as the paradigmatic case of a migrant metropolis, where 64.9% of residents are non-hukou (data from the Shenzhen Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development in 2024). To capture the city's dualistic social structure, two distinct districts were selected for fieldwork: Nanshan District and Longhua District. Nanshan District, home to the High-Tech Park and numerous listed corporations, represents the concentration of high-skilled talent migrants and elite housing. In contrast, Longhua District, characterized by its dense urban villages and manufacturing clusters (including the Foxconn complex), serves as a primary settlement for

low-skilled labor migrants. This comparative site selection allows for a juxtaposition of divergent mobility trajectories within the same administrative boundary.

The study used a purposive sampling method, combined with snowball sampling, to collect data from 35 participants. To improve transparency in the recruitment process, the study documented participant flow and recruitment outcomes throughout fieldwork. Initial recruitment began with 18 seed participants identified through professional WeChat groups in Nanshan District and community outreach in Longhua District. These participants subsequently referred additional respondents through snowball chains. To avoid over-reliance on homogeneous social networks, the researcher intentionally diversified referral chains by limiting the number of participants recruited from any single referral source to a maximum of three individuals. Additional outreach was also conducted through community service centers, rental compounds, and public labor markets to incorporate participants outside the original networks.

In total, 47 individuals were approached during the recruitment process. Of these, 39 initially agreed to participate, while 8 declined due to scheduling conflicts, concerns regarding privacy, or reluctance to discuss income and housing insecurity. Four interviews were subsequently excluded because participants did not meet the minimum residency requirement of three years in Shenzhen. The final sample therefore consisted of 35 valid participants.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was assessed through ongoing memo-writing and comparative coding during the interview process. By the thirty-second interview, no substantially new themes related to hukou exclusion, housing displacement, or occupational immobility emerged. Three additional interviews were nevertheless conducted to confirm thematic stability across both migrant groups. The final interviews largely reiterated previously established categories, indicating that sufficient analytical depth had been achieved.

The sampling frame was designed to incorporate maximum variation across important socio-economic factors, including education level, hukou status, occupation, gender, and homeownership status. The population was stratified into two main categories to facilitate comparison between groups: the Talent Group with 15 participants and the Labor Group with 20 participants. The Talent Group included participants holding a bachelor's degree or above and employed in the finance, technology, and professional service sectors with Shenzhen hukou. The Labor Group comprised individuals with high school education or below, employed in manufacturing, logistics, construction, or the platform economy (e.g., food delivery and ride-hailing), most of whom held rural hukou from inland provinces.

Table 1. Brief Demographic Table of Participants

	Talent Group (N=15)	Labor Group (N=20)
Age		
22-29	10	8
30-39	3	6
39-45	2	6
Education		
High school or below (including Associate Degree)	0	14
Undergraduate	5	6
Postgraduate	10	0
Income (RMB, per month)		
< 10,000	0	18
10,000-20,000	6	2
>20,000	9	0
Household Registration		

Shenzhen City	15	1
Guangdong Province (excluding Shenzhen)	0	5
Outside Guangdong Province	0	14

The collection of information was carried out through a process of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The nature of these interviews was such that flexibility, combined with a structure composed of three poles, was achieved. This consisted of (the details shown in the Appendix A): (1) motivations for migrants and occupational transitions; (2) experiences of hukou, public education, and health care; and finally, (3) space, community, and social integration. The conversation was carried out in Mandarin Chinese and was done in a conversational way to build rapport and to collect information in a narrative way. Owing to the irregular work schedules of persons from the Labor Group, interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, from coffee shops and fast-food restaurants to community parks, and also through WeChat voice calls for follow-up interviews. These interviews lasted for anywhere between 60 and 120 minutes, averaging 90 minutes. To ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence, all interview transcripts and key quotes were first translated into English by the researcher. A bilingual academic peer then conducted a back-translation procedure to verify that the original nuances were accurately preserved, particularly regarding culturally specific terms like “neijuan” (involution) and “laoxiang” (hometown fellows).

All interviews were tape-recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed word-for-word. Data analysis employed Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), allowing theories to emerge naturally from the data rather than being forced by preconceptions. The analytical process involved three stages of coding, assisted by NVivo 12. First, open coding was performed to label discrete units of meaning (e.g., rent anxiety, hukou rejection, school admission stress). Secondly, axial coding was employed to identify associations among the categories to form more overarching themes, such as Institutional Exclusion, Spatial Displacement, and Network Segmentation. Finally, selective coding was employed to generate the core category “Bifurcated Mobility.” This helps interpret the distinct movements of the two migrant categories. To ensure coding reliability and analytical rigor, a peer-debriefing process was implemented. Two researchers independently coded 10% of the interview transcripts using NVivo 12 to establish the preliminary codebook. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa coefficient. The initial coding comparison yielded a Cohen’s Kappa score of 0.84, indicating strong agreement between coders. Following discussion and refinement of ambiguous categories, the revised coding framework achieved a final Kappa value of 0.89. Discrepancies primarily involved distinctions between themes such as “spatial insecurity,” “occupational involution,” and “institutional exclusion.” These disagreements were resolved through iterative discussion and memo comparison until conceptual consensus was reached. The consensus-building process refined node definitions, clarified inclusion and exclusion criteria, and improved thematic consistency across the dataset. The finalized and standardized codebook was subsequently applied by the primary researcher to code the remaining 90% of the transcripts. Throughout the analysis, the findings from the Nanshan and Longhua District cohorts were cross-referenced to verify differences in stratified experiences.

Due to the sensitive nature of these themes, particularly regarding income, immigration status, and housing insecurity, a set of ethical principles was carefully adhered to. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and each was informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, to ensure privacy for all participants, all personal identifiers were stripped, and all participants were given pseudonyms in each transcript and at the end of all reporting. Additionally, reflexivity was taken into consideration throughout the field research, with the

individual being mindful of their own identity not just as a social researcher, but as an academic researcher in particular. This status, as an outsider, initially hindered establishing a level of trust with the Labor Group participants in particular. This was addressed by the researcher's early forays into the community areas of urban villages before conducting the in-depth interviews, allowing for early observations that could narrow the status differential between the interviewer and the interviewees.

3. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of interview narratives reveals a fundamental shift in how the state manages population mobility in Shenzhen: the hukou system has evolved from a barrier of physical movement to a mechanism of value filtering. In the Talent Group, participants described the hukou acquisition process as a "Green Channel". This perspective was strongly supported by 12 out of the 15 participants in this group. For instance, Mr. Zhang, a 28-year-old software engineer, noted that his master's degree facilitated an almost automatic transition to permanent residency, granting him immediate eligibility for talent housing and childcare subsidies. He said "Getting the hukou was just a matter of submitting my degree certificate; suddenly, I was eligible for the district's talent housing lottery". His mobility was rewarded with state-sponsored stability. Conversely, the Labor Group experienced the hukou system as an invisible but rigid glass ceiling. 17 out of the 20 Labor Group participants echoed this systemic frustration. Despite having lived in Shenzhen for over a decade, participants like Ms. Li, a factory line leader, remained temporary residents. She said, "I have contributed to the development of Shenzhen, but I am not a Shenzhen resident, and my child has difficulty attending school in Shenzhen, so I have to send him back to my hometown". The data indicate that while physical borders have dissolved, social borders have hardened. The points-based entry system, ostensibly meritocratic, systematically devalues manual labor experience while privileging academic credentials. It turns human capital into politics, from education into rights, so that low-skilled migrants are effectively stranded in a condition of second-class citizenship once and for all. Their labor is tapped, but their social support for reproduction is abandoned.

Purportedly, the Talent Group has a fixed, middle-class presence through housing accumulation, whereas the Labor Group is forced into intra-city mobility due to gentrification. Interviews with residents in Chengzhongcun neighbourhoods illustrate the dynamic of dispersal, unravelling the social ties. As the force of urban renewal rolls through and demolishes these low-cost neighbourhoods, the poor migrant populations are driven toward the edge of the city. Raising commute costs and distances, thereby reducing proximity to economic centres, this practice has been found to result in sociologically significant spatial marginalisation of these populations. Among the Labor Group, 16 of the 20 participants reported experiencing at least one forced relocation in the past three years due to urban renewal, which prevents the formation of localised social capital. It prevents the formation of localised social capital; as one courier stated, "I have no neighbours, only temporary roommates." Another participant, a construction worker, emphasized this instability: "The moment the character for 'demolish' (chai) is painted on the wall, we know it is time to pack our bags for an even farther suburb, starting over with strangers." Theoretically, this aligns with the concept of socio-spatial exclusion, where physical distance translates into social distance. The housing market thus functions as a wealth filter, accelerating social closure by ensuring that only those with pre-existing capital can access the high-quality public resources (such as top-tier schools) that are spatially bundled with expensive real estate.

The study uncovers a critical paradox regarding the gig economy, which absorbs a significant portion of Shenzhen's mobile population. While platform work (e.g., food delivery,

ride-hailing) is often framed as a flexible entrepreneurial opportunity, the findings suggest it functions as a trap of occupational involution (*neijuan*). Unlike the traditional manufacturing sector, which offered a distinct albeit limited ladder of mobility (e.g., from operator to line leader to production manager), the platform economy lacks an internal promotion structure. The interviewees in the Labor Group spoke of additional hard work resulting in mere physical fatigue rather than professional promotion. Mr. Wang has been a delivery rider for the last five years, but his career development has stagnated, with his salaries have stagnated even as he has put in longer hours. Expressing this exhaustion, he noted, “The system only rewards you if you run faster than yesterday, but eventually, your legs give out and you are exactly where you started.” This confirms the theory of segmented assimilation, which proposes that there is a trajectory of downward assimilation in the movement into the platform economy (Portes & Zhou, 1993). The algorithm commodifies the migrant’s time while stripping away the skill accumulation necessary for upward mobility, which is highly mobile horizontally (between apps) but immobile vertically (up the social ladder).

Beyond economic and spatial factors, the study identifies network segmentation as a subtle but powerful force reinforcing stratification. In a highly mobile stranger society like Shenzhen, one might expect a high degree of cross-class interaction. But the data also finds that there is a certain stratification within the social networks. All 15 participants in the Talent Group reported relying on weak ties, including profession, alma mater, and colleagues, that are highly informational and offer many opportunities that can easily lead to more improvement. In contrast, 19 of the 20 Labor Group respondents maintained strong ties that are based on kinship and geographically based ties (*laoxiang* relationships) (Granovetter, 1983). While these ties provide crucial emotional support for survival, they lack bridging capital that can easily enable the members beyond their socio-economic classes. As one factory worker articulated, “My phone contacts are all from my village; if the factory closes, we only know how to ask each other for jobs, but nobody knows anyone in an office.” It has been found that the classes in Shenzhen live in parallel areas, they coexist in the same space in the subway and shopping malls. This lack of social osmosis means that information about better jobs, investment opportunities, or educational resources does not filter down, causing class boundaries to sediment over time.

The findings also contribute to broader debates on social closure and durable inequality. In Parkin (1982)’s terms, Shenzhen’s contemporary governance structure reflects a process of exclusionary closure in which access to urban citizenship is monopolized through educational credentials, property ownership, and *hukou* status. The points-based *hukou* system effectively transforms social rights into competitive assets unequally distributed across migrant groups. Likewise, Tilly (1998)’s framework of durable inequality helps explain how categorical distinctions between “talent” and “labor” migrants become institutionalized through differential access to welfare, schooling, and housing. Importantly, the findings suggest that digital platform labor intensifies these mechanisms by creating forms of algorithmic segmentation that reproduce precarious mobility without long-term incorporation. Rather than dissolving social barriers, high mobility in Shenzhen increasingly reproduces stable patterns of inequality across generations and occupational sectors.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed that high-frequency population mobility, while historically the engine of the city’s economic rise, is no longer a guaranteed conduit for upward social mobility. The qualitative evidence gathered from 35 in-depth interviews underscores that Shenzhen has transitioned from a fluid society characterized by open competition to a rigid, stratified hierarchy. The central conclusion of this research is that social stratification in contemporary

Shenzhen is driven by a dual mechanism: the state-imposed hukou system and the market-driven real estate sector. For the talent class, geographical mobility acts as a multiplier of social capital, facilitating a seamless integration into the urban elite. Conversely, for the labouring class, mobility has devolved into a mechanism of horizontal displacement, where individuals circulate between precarious jobs and temporary housing without achieving vertical status attainment.

Theoretically, the findings support a model of segmented assimilation, where structural barriers such as the points-based entry system and the financialization of housing actively channel low-skilled migrants into a permanent underclass. The group, such as delivery riders, factory workers, and service staff, is integral to the city's production but is systematically excluded from its consumption of public goods and social rights. The hukou and the housing prices effectively trap this population in a state of perpetual transience, preventing the intergenerational accumulation of wealth and status.

Furthermore, the study highlights the changing nature of work as a stratifying force. The shift from manufacturing to the platform economy has altered the trajectory of the working class. Where the factory floor once offered a narrow but visible ladder for promotion, the gig economy doesn't. An intensification of labour without corresponding career progression. This finding suggests that the digital turn in urbanisation may be exacerbating inequality by stripping away traditional organisational support structures and atomising the workforce. Those with existing cultural capital (education) or economic capital are more likely to have development opportunities, while the vast majority of the migrant population remains stagnant.

To mitigate these stratifying effects, several actionable policy implications emerge. First, the points-based hukou system should be recalibrated to weight long-term local tenure and practical vocational skills more heavily, recognizing the essential nature of manual and service labor. Second, municipal authorities must expand affordable rental housing policies, specifically subsidizing public rentals that target non-Hukou, low-income gig workers, to shield them from gentrification-induced displacement actively. Finally, labor regulations must adapt to the platform economy by establishing mandatory baseline protections, such as algorithmic transparency and comprehensive occupational injury insurance, while constructing transparent skills-progression pathways within digital platform ecosystems.

However, this study still has limitations. As a qualitative study involving approximately 35 individuals across two districts, the results cannot be generalised to the broader migrant community in megacities in China. In addition, the use of snowball sampling may have introduced network-based selection bias, as participants recruited through referral chains may share similar social backgrounds or experiences. Although efforts were made to diversify recruitment pathways and include participants from multiple occupational and residential settings, the sample may still underrepresent highly marginalized migrants who lack stable community ties or who were reluctant to participate in formal interviews. The cross-sectional design of this qualitative study may also fail to capture how migrants' life paths can shift and evolve. Subsequent studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to examine migrants' life courses over a decade and how, for example, married life, children, and economic downturns shape these life paths. Comparative studies between Shenzhen and other megacities, such as Shanghai or Beijing, could also provide insight into the institutional frameworks that shape aspects of social inequality.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Part I: Personal Background and Career Path

1.1 Basic Information

- Age, Education Level, Hometown (Province and City), Current Occupation, Length of Residence in Shenzhen.
- Current Household Registration Type (Shenzhen Household Registration/Urban/Rural).

1.2 Motivation

- 1.2.1 In what year did you first come to Shenzhen? Why did you choose Shenzhen instead of other cities (such as Beijing, Shanghai, or returning to your hometown)?
- 1.2.2 What was your first job when you first arrived in Shenzhen? Where did you live?
- 1.2.3 How many times have you changed jobs over the years? What were the main reasons? (For example: for higher income, to learn skills, or was it a forced change?)

Part II: Career Development

2.1 Career Path

- 2.1.1 Compared to when you first came to Shenzhen, do you feel that your current position or income level has significantly improved?

2.1.2

- For the labor group: Do you feel that there is room for advancement in jobs such as food delivery/ride-hailing/factory work? Do you feel that the workload is very heavy but income growth has stagnated (involution)?
- For the talent group: Has your career development in Shenzhen met your expectations? Have you utilized specific industry resources or alumni networks to obtain better opportunities?

2.2 Skills Accumulation

- 2.2.1 What core skills have you accumulated during your time working in Shenzhen? Would these skills still be useful in another city?

Part III: System and Household Registration

3.1 Household Registration Desire and Obstacles

3.1.1 Do you currently have Shenzhen household registration?

- If yes: Was the process of obtaining household registration smooth? (Follow-up questions: Was it through the points-based system or the talent introduction program?) What practical benefits has household registration brought you (e.g., public rental housing, vehicle license plate, subsidies)?
- If not: Do you want to obtain Shenzhen household registration? What are the biggest obstacles at present (e.g., education level, social security contribution period, property ownership)? Do you consider yourself a temporary resident in this city?

3.2 Children's Education and Public Services

- 3.2.1 Do you have children? (If so) Where are your children currently attending school?
- 3.2.2 Have you encountered difficulties in your children's schooling, medical treatment, or other matters due to household registration issues?

3.2.3 What are your plans if your children cannot take the middle school or college entrance examinations in Shenzhen? (Let your children back to hometown or move the whole family back?)

Part IV: Residential Segregation and Housing Stratification

4.1 Current Housing Situation

4.1.1 What kind of community do you currently live in? (Urban village, ordinary residential area, high-end residential area/villa?)

4.1.2 Is your current residence rented or owned? What percentage of your income is allocated to housing expenses?

4.2 Spatial Mobility and Relocation

4.2.1 How many times have you moved in Shenzhen over the past few years?

4.2.2

- For those living in urban villages: Have you experienced urban village redevelopment or being evicted to a more remote area due to rent increases? How has this affected your commute and life?
- For homebuyers: Do you feel that buying a house has changed your mindset or social status? Do you feel that you truly belong in Shenzhen?

Part V: Social Networks and Sense of Belonging

5.1 Social Circles

5.1.1 In Shenzhen, who are your best friends or closest contacts? (Fellow townsmen, colleagues, or locals/people from various industries?)

5.1.2 When you encounter difficulties (such as urgently needing money or finding a job), who do you usually turn to for help?

5.2 Social Interaction

5.2.1 Do you feel integrated into mainstream Shenzhen society?

5.2.2 Do you usually feel a significant disconnect from other social classes (such as people wealthier than you, or migrant workers)?

5.3 Self-Positioning

5.3.1 If society is divided into upper, middle, and lower classes, where did you feel you were when you first arrived in Shenzhen? Where are you now?

5.3.2 Some people say, "Once you're here, you're a Shenzhener." Do you agree with this statement? Why?

Part VI: Future Expectations

6.1 Willingness to Stay in Shenzhen

6.1.1 In the next 3-5 years, do you plan to stay in Shenzhen, or return to your hometown/go to another city?

6.1.2 What do you think is the most crucial condition for settling down in Shenzhen? (Housing, household registration, income, or something else?)

Part VII: Others

7.1 Do you have any additional thoughts or feelings about living and working in Shenzhen that you would like to share?