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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 labor 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 Labor Group in Longhua District. For the Talent Group, the hukou system acts as a "Green Channel" for state-sponsored stability, whereas for the Labor Group, it remains an invisible ceiling. Additionally, market forces such as gentrification force low-skilled workers into horizontal displacement, preventing the formation of localized social capital. The study further identifies that the gig economy creates a trap of "occupational involution," offering horizontal movement between jobs 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