

Life Changes and Adaptation of Herdsmen Entering the City: A Case of Ethnic Customs Street in Xilinhot, Inner Mongolia, China

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Abstract

With China's rapid urbanisation, ethnic minority groups, including Mongolian herdsmen, are increasingly transitioning to urban life. This study investigates the integration of Mongolian herdsmen into urban society, focusing on Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street in Xilinhot, Inner Mongolia, China. The challenges, adaptation process, and factors hindering integration are explored through in-depth interviews and direct observation. Findings reveal economic benefits juxtaposed with the rising cost of living, highlighting the importance of financial management. Training programs and entrepreneurial endeavours are pivotal for integration, yet language barriers and cultural conflicts pose challenges. Cultural identity preservation is a concern, emphasising language fluency and cultural maintenance. Socially, informants grapple with loneliness and difficulty forming meaningful connections. This research underscores the multifaceted nature of pastoral-to-urban transitions, advocating for holistic approaches to address economic, cultural, and social challenges and prioritising migrating herdsmen's well-being and cultural identity.

Keywords: Mongolian, Herdsmen, Urbanisation, Adaptation, Government.

Introduction

Since the reform and opening up (1980), with the continuous development of industrialisation and modernisation, China has become one of the most urbanised countries in the world (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, as of the end of 2023, China's urbanisation rate has reached 66.16%, an increase of 0.94 percentage points from 2022. (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In this process, it has gradually become common for ethnic minority groups to enter cities and become new citizens (Li, 2013). With urbanisation's continuous development, more and more farmers or herdsmen groups, including many fellow Mongolian herdsmen, have entered urban life and become new citizens. Because they face an entirely new living environment

after entering the city, the new changes make it difficult for many Mongolian herdsmen to adapt and integrate into modern urban social life and even develop urban autism (Li, 2013). This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of herdsmen integrating into urban life in Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street, Xilinhot, the challenges herdsmen face in integrating into urban life, and the factors causing difficulties for herdsmen. Xilinhot in Inner Mongolia is a border minority city where Mongolians are the main body, and Han people are the majority (Upcoming Baike, 2021). The seventh national census in 2020 shows that the urban population of Xilinhot is about 320,000, an increase of nearly 90,000 compared to the sixth census (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street is located south of Beizimiao Street in Xilinhot, only 300 meters from Beizimiao; East-West Street mainly sells Mongolian clothing and ethnic crafts merchants, while North-South Road mainly sells catering merchants (Xilingol News, 2013). Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street mainly provides entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for registered residents in pastoral areas who move to the city to work. It also helps herders who are willing to work there by providing rent-free stores for two years. The premise is that they must sell products with ethnic characteristics (Xilinhot Tourism Bureau, 2015). For example, operating Mongolian meals and handicrafts with ethnic characteristics, sewing Mongolian robes, manufacturing and selling dairy products, etc.

Mongolian herdsmen are more unique than those groups who mainly engage in farming or business. They have unique religious beliefs, traditional culture, language and customs (National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Therefore, when Mongolian herdsmen enter urban life, they face many problems, such as career change, children's schooling, limited public space, etc. (Ye, 2015). They will also encounter the test of cross-ethnic interactions, the collision between traditional pastoral and urban cultures, and other personality issues (Luo, 2023). In this process, some Mongolian herdsmen gradually adapted to mainstream society through self-adjustment and successfully integrated into urban life. However, a few Mongolian herdsmen still struggle with their living habits and cultural adaptability. They are still far away from mainstream urban society, and it is challenging to smoothly integrate into urban life.

This study explores the cultural and lifestyle changes pastoralists face as they transition from grassland pastoral areas to cities, which have significant implications for various aspects. Economically, it offers insights into the adaptations and challenges encountered by herdsmen in urban settings, providing valuable data for economic planning and resource allocation. Psychologically, the study delves into the psychological adjustments required amidst this significant life transition, shedding light on mental health considerations and support needs. Community dynamics are also examined, revealing changes in social structures and community connections of migrating herdsmen, which informs strategies for fostering social cohesion and support networks. Notably, the research identifies policy adaptations necessary to support the integration of herdsmen into urban life, informing the development of inclusive policies that address their unique needs and preserve cultural heritage. Overall, this study contributes to holistic understanding and informed policymaking, facilitating smoother transitions and enhancing migrating herdsmen and urban communities' well-being.

Research questions:

1. What is the phenomenon of herders integrating into urban life?
2. What challenges did the herders face in integrating into urban life?
3. What factors make it difficult for herders to adapt to urban life?

This research employs a combination of interview and observation techniques. Detailed interviews were conducted with resettled pastoralists to gather qualitative information regarding their experiences and viewpoints. Additionally, direct observation will be utilised to study the Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street within the research locale of Xilinhot. This observation will focus on understanding local living standards, social interactions, and governmental initiatives to facilitate ecological migration. These methodological approaches are anticipated to offer extensive insights into the ecological migration process and its ramifications for pastoral communities in northern China.

Literature Review**Research on the Concept of Social Integration**

Research on social integration in Western countries typically begins with a focus on social exclusion. The "vulnerable group theory," proposed by Professor Robert E. Gooden (1985), highlights the special responsibilities owed to vulnerable groups, leading to increased awareness of their social exclusion and advocacy for their protection. Bogardus (1925) introduced the social distance theory, contributing to the social exclusion theory's development and the emergence of social integration issues. With the rise of industrialisation, globalisation, and large-scale immigration post-World War II, research shifted towards immigrant groups, exploring assimilation and multicultural theories. Assimilation theory, originating in the 1930s with Park's (2012) work, suggests immigrants gradually assimilate into mainstream society, but criticism arose post-1950s regarding its applicability and potential discriminatory implications. Multiculturalism, in contrast, asserts the retention of immigrants' cultural uniqueness during adaptation, emphasising tolerance and understanding among different racial and national groups. This evolution from social exclusion to social integration theory provides valuable insights into China's discourse and offers a robust foundation for future research.

Western scholars have traditionally viewed social inclusion in contrast to social exclusion, with initiatives such as the ESFP (European Structural Funds Program) aiming to balance the relationship between marginalised groups and mainstream society, facilitating their access to social support and opportunities for participation across various levels of society (Liu, 2010). Overtime, scholars have expanded and enriched the concept of social integration (Guo, 2019; Park RE., 1921; Liang & Wang, 2010; Yao, 2014; Chen & Sun, 2012; Yao & Zhang, 2018). Martens describes the social integration of immigrants as involving mainstream society's acceptance of immigrants and the gradual internalisation of a new social value system by immigrant groups, fostering mutual attraction and combination (Guo, 2019). Influenced by the Chicago School, Robert Park and others observed how immigrant groups, through shared daily experiences, promote cultural integration, a process they termed social integration (Park RE., 1921). Similarly, Redfield Linton and Herskovits viewed social integration as a cultural adaptation process wherein individuals or groups with differing cultural backgrounds interact within a new environment, leading to cultural and psychological adaptation (Liang & Wang, 2010).

China initially began to address social integration issues after 1990, with limited research available, where scholars often equated "social integration" with itself. However, with the onset of the reform and opening-up policy, population migration surged, prompting a gradual enrichment of research on social integration in China from various perspectives. Yao (2014) introduced social integration as a process involving mutual adaptation and cooperation among individuals and groups. Chen et al. (2012) defined it as a proactive social action where disadvantaged subjects continuously engage with a specific community. Yao et al. (2018) studied international immigrants in Shanghai, proposing social integration as a process of mutual interaction, penetration, and adaptation between immigrants and residents. The varied perspectives offered by scholars offer valuable insights for comprehending social integration.

Research on the Dimensions and Index System of Social Integration

Western researchers have developed various models to measure the social integration of immigrants, such as Gordon's "two-dimensional" model, J. Junger-Tas et al.'s "three-dimensional" model, and H. Entzinger et al.'s "four-dimensional" model. Gordon's model emphasizes structural and cultural integration, focusing on immigrants' increased social participation and organizational involvement in their country of origin, while cultural integration concerns change in immigrants' social identity and value recognition (Piché, Renaud, Gingras, & Shapiro, 2002). Junger-Tas and others expanded Gordon's model by adding political legitimacy integration, stressing equality before the law. Entzinger et al.'s four-dimensional model refines these concepts by including socioeconomic, political, cultural, and mainstream society's acceptance of immigrants (Liang & Wang, 2010). This model acknowledges the changing attitudes of immigrants and their host countries towards each other, representing progress compared to earlier models.

Some scholars in China have adapted dimensional divisions to suit national conditions, such as Tian Kai's three-dimensional division into economic, social, and cultural dimensions (Wang, 2021) and Yang et al.'s five-dimensional division for migrant children, including cultural rule integration, social interaction integration, educational integration, family support, and psychological integration (Yang, Zhao & Deng, 2021). While Western classifications provide operational guidance for Chinese scholars, they generally offer more scientific standards than those developed in China.

Research on influencing factors of social integration

As research progresses on social integration dimensions, attention has turned to specific measurements and analyses of influencing factors. Granovetter (1973) proposed that social capital promotes individual social integration by constructing social relationship networks. Personal factors such as language fluency significantly impact integration, affecting residence scope and intermarriage probabilities (South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005; Van De Rijt, 2014). Additionally, gender, age, and marital status influence immigrants' integration status (Yao & Zhang, 2018). Organizational factors, like social relationship networks, play a pivotal role in integration (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004), while religion, political attitudes, and racial concepts also affect integration (Liu, 2016). Institutional factors such as employment opportunities and residential distribution shape integration (Alba & Nee, 1997), with integration often reflecting the transformation of integration policy goals (Yuan, 2021).

Both foreign and Chinese researchers emphasize the importance of personal, organizational, and institutional factors in social integration. The household registration system in China is a key institutional factor restricting population mobility and development (Li, 2021). Personal factors, including gender, age, education, and health, significantly influence integration, with men often exhibiting higher integration levels than women (Yu, Gao & Guo, 2012). Chinese scholars also highlight social capital's importance in facilitating integration, including social participation, trust, and interpersonal communication (Hou & Xu, 2021). These discussions by scholars provide a solid theoretical foundation for further research on social integration.

Research on the social integration of ethnic minority groups

Regarding the study of ethnic minority immigrant groups in Western countries, Hu (2013) examined the challenges faced by Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands due to the cultural assimilation policy, suggesting a need for enhanced cooperation between Muslims and mainstream society. Barbara et al. (2003) studied the integration of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Germany, noting their retention of Russian-speaking social networks. Chen et al. (2021) highlighted the insufficient social capital accumulation among ethnic minority migrants in China, emphasising the need for policy attention. Li (2020) addressed the employment struggles of ethnic minority migrants, advocating for both regulatory measures in enterprises and enhancing migrants' human capital. Liang (2021) emphasised institutional integration as crucial for protecting the rights of ethnic minority migrants. Yuan (2021) explored the identity dynamics of urban ethnic minority migrants in Guangzhou, proposing policy adjustments across various domains. Chen et al. (2020) focused on community asset-based approaches to promote the social integration of ethnic minority groups in urban areas. Yuan (2020) underscored the importance of enhancing interactions among ethnic minority migrants, residents, and government agencies to foster social cohesion. Li (2021) noted the diminishing impact of cultural factors on the social integration of ethnic minority migrant workers, highlighting the importance of enhancing governance capabilities and expanding employment opportunities. Wang (2021) discussed the unique challenges faced by ethnic minority college students in integrating into mainstream society, suggesting improvements in community service levels and social environments. Hou (2020) found low levels of social integration among relocated ethnic minority immigrants in China, recommending ideological support and vocational training for sustainable development.

The literature reveals a limited focus on the social integration of ethnic minorities. Western studies emphasise immigrant groups like Muslims, while Chinese research predominantly centres on ethnic minority floating populations. Some attention is given to ethnic minority migrant workers and specific minority ethnic groups, but overall, studies on minority ethnic immigrants and other groups remain relatively sparse and narrow in scope.

Methodology

This study utilises qualitative research methodology, an effective approach for gaining deeper insights into complex phenomena. The research focuses on integrating Mongolian herdsmen into urban society, aiming to understand their challenges, adaptation process, and factors hindering their integration.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to select 8 Mongolian herdsmen who faced typical challenges in integrating into urban life. Recommendations from relatives, friends, and personal connections were utilised to identify key research subjects.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the selected Mongolian herdsmen, using life narratives and dialogues to vividly portray their social integration experiences. The interviews explored urban society's economic, cultural, psychological, and daily life aspects, revealing integration challenges and dilemmas.

Direct Observation

Direct observation of Ronghuayuan Ethnic Street in Xilinhot supplemented data obtained from interviews and documentation analysis. This method focused on understanding living conditions, social dynamics, and governmental initiatives supporting ecological immigrants, providing firsthand insights into the ecological migration context.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews and direct observation were analysed to identify integration challenges, dilemmas, and facilitating factors at the economic, cultural, psychological, and daily life levels.

This study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the ecological migration process and its implications for northern China herders. The study establishes a robust methodological framework by employing purposive sampling, face-to-face in-depth interviews, and direct observation. The insights can inform policy, practice, and future research in ecological migration and sustainable development.

Discussion

The discussion for the paper encompasses a diverse range of experiences and perspectives among individuals who have relocated to the city from pastoral communities. Informant 1 highlighted the juxtaposition of increased monthly income and rising living costs, emphasising the importance of prudent money management in urban settings. Informant 2 expressed interest in exploring new avenues for income generation, such as live streaming, to supplement their earnings. Informant 3 shared a success story of entrepreneurship facilitated by training programs but also encountered conflicts between traditional customs and urban regulations. Informant 4 discussed challenges with language barriers and maintaining cultural traditions in a predominantly Han Chinese environment. Informant 5 lamented the decline in the preservation of Mongolian culture among younger generations in the city and stressed the importance of bilingualism for cultural preservation. Informant 6 reflected on feelings of loneliness and isolation in the city compared to the communal support system in their pastoral community. Informant 7 expressed difficulties forming meaningful relationships in the city due to language barriers and lifestyle disparities. Informant 8 described a lack of integration and a persistent sense of loneliness despite residing in the city for an extended period. Overall, the discussion highlights the multifaceted challenges and adjustments individuals face transitioning from pastoral to urban environments, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions.

Conclusion

Based on the insights gathered from the interviews with individuals who have relocated from pastoral communities to urban areas, several key themes emerge, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities associated with this transition.

Firstly, the increase in monthly income among some informants highlights the economic benefits of urban migration. However, this financial advantage is often offset by the rising cost of living in cities, necessitating careful budgeting and financial management. Secondly, informants' experiences regarding training programs and entrepreneurial endeavours underscore the importance of access to resources and support networks in facilitating successful integration into urban life. While some have benefited from training initiatives and secured entrepreneurial funds, others face barriers such as language difficulties and conflicting cultural practices with urban regulations. Thirdly, the preservation of cultural identity emerges as a significant concern among many informants. Despite the allure of urban life, some individuals express a sense of loss associated with the decline in traditional customs and the erosion of Mongolian cultural heritage. Language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation contribute to this perceived disconnect from their cultural roots. Lastly, the social implications of urban migration are evident in informants' experiences who grapple with loneliness, isolation, and difficulties in forging meaningful connections in their new urban environments. Despite expectations of vibrant social lives and new friendships, many encounter challenges in integrating into city communities and feel a sense of psychological distance and alienation.

In conclusion, the transition from pastoral to urban life presents a complex interplay of economic, cultural, and social factors. While urban migration offers economic opportunities and access to resources, it also poses challenges related to cultural preservation, social integration, and feelings of displacement. Addressing these challenges requires holistic approaches that recognise the multifaceted nature of migration experiences and prioritise the well-being and cultural identity of individuals and communities undergoing this transition.

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