

**WEDNESDAY
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5:00PM-6:00PM**

**ROOM LG01, CENTRAL HOUSE
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Growth of rural migrant enclaves in Guangzhou, China: Agency, informality, and social mobility

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Abstract:

Previous scholarship on migrant enclaves in Chinese cities has portrayed rural migrants as no more than passive and powerless sojourners. In these narratives, rural migrants are exploited by global capitalist production, constrained by the household registration (hukou) system and trapped in the lowest tier of urban labour and housing market. What is missing in this body of literature is the investigation of the 'bottom-up' agency of rural migrants during the growth of migrant enclaves. This research aims to provide a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamism of migrant enclaves and the implications for migrants' well-being in Chinese cities. Through an in-depth study on Xiaohubei, a migrant enclave with a high concentration of Hubei migrants and small-scale garment producers, in Guangzhou, China, this research examines how migrants negotiate institutional, social, and cultural constraints through urban informality, how they mobilize their resources and power to improve their wellbeing, and how they achieve upward mobility through participating in the enclave-based informal economy. Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom that rural migrants are no more than a homogeneous social group passively responding to economic opportunities and obediently succumbing to constraints. On the contrary, some rural migrants, especially migrant entrepreneurs, play an active and leading role in the growth and prosperity of migrant enclaves. Our findings also show that migrant enclaves are neither hopeless 'slums' nor temporary 'footholds'; they serve as efficient pathways of upward mobility and an entry point for rural migrants to integrate into host cities. In this sense, migrant enclaves smooth the process of Chinese urbanization. The findings of our research suggest the necessity to reflect on the massive eradication of urban villages in Chinese cities.