

# Realistic Dilemmas and Optimization Paths of Citizenization of Agricultural Transfer Population

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**Abstract:** *Promoting the citizenization of agricultural transfer population in a scientific and orderly manner is a necessary measure to advance high-quality urban-rural development and an inherent requirement for taking the path of Chinese-style modernization. In the process of promoting the citizenization of agricultural transfer population, there are three main dilemmas: insufficient pulling force and shifting pushing force, the urban household registration as a means failing to achieve the expected goals, and problems in the integration of agricultural transfer population into communities. Therefore, efforts should be made to solve the problems in the citizenization process of agricultural transfer population by gradually unifying the urban-rural household registration management system, formulating and improving employment policies, enhancing the citizenization capacity of agricultural transfer population, and improving the "people-land-money" linkage policy.*

**Keywords:** Agricultural transfer population; Citizenization; Practical dilemmas; Optimization paths.

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## 1. Introduction of the Research Question

Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel laureate in Economics, once emphasized: "One of the two events that will have the greatest impact on the world in the early 21st century is China's urbanization." "The people build the city, and the city is for the people." China's urban development has always followed the people-centered ideology, gone through a period of scale expansion and quality improvement, and gradually formed a development pattern centered on the people, with high-quality development as the primary task, and balanced development of scale and quality. Some scholars believe that urbanization is equivalent to citizenization to a certain extent. Although this idea is consistent with the people-centered development concept, in essence, urbanization is not equivalent to citizenization; rather, urbanization includes citizenization, which is a part of urbanization and an important indicator for measuring urbanization.

The flow of population from rural to urban areas is a basic trend of social development. In the short ten years from 2013 to 2023, China's urban population increased by more than 180 million, and the proportion of urban population rose from 54.5% in 2013 to 64.2% in 2023. In 2023 alone, more than 10 million agricultural transfer population settled in cities and towns. Although the number of agricultural transfer population is increasing, the quality of citizenization is not high. Insufficient support from relevant policies and high living pressure of agricultural transfer population have significantly

restricted the improvement of the quality of their citizenization. In the new era, it is urgent to solve the problems in the citizenization process of agricultural transfer population, improve quality, and meet the needs of people's life and development. Even though some agricultural transfer population have worked in cities and towns for many years and agricultural income is no longer their main source of income, land still has functions such as emotional sustenance and bottom-line security for some of them, and they cannot cut off their natural connection with rural areas. Therefore, continuously promoting the citizenization of agricultural transfer population with high quality at present is not only an inherent requirement of rural revitalization but also a necessary measure to promote high-quality urban development.

## **2. Three Dilemmas in the Citizenization of Agricultural Transfer Population**

1) Insufficient Pull and Shift in Push. Cities naturally have an attraction compared to rural areas. According to the Seventh National Population Census report, China's urban population is 901.99 million, and the rural population is 509.79 million. Compared with the Sixth National Population Census, while the national total population shows an increasing trend, the rural population has decreased, whereas the urban population has grown significantly. This reflects the vitality of urban development and the attractiveness of cities. However, a series of institutional barriers represented by the household registration system have always been a major obstacle to the urbanization of agricultural transfer population. Although major cities in China have been actively promoting household registration system reforms since the 1990s, they have not fundamentally resolved the barriers arising from the household registration system, and the urban-rural dual structure still exists. Although many large cities have introduced policies to attract talents to settle down, these talent policies exclude the main body of the agricultural transfer population—farmers. At the same time, due to policy orientation, in the long run, the rural household registration dividend has increased. Some agricultural transfer population are unwilling to give up their rights and interests such as land and homestead, leading to the phenomenon of reverse urbanization. Some wealthy farmers even have a 排斥心理 towards urban household registration, which is more common in some suburban areas. Insufficient pull for urbanization and shift in rural push have led to agricultural transfer population being more willing to retain agricultural household registration. The urbanization of agricultural transfer population faces the dilemma of "cannot" and "do not want". Objective conditions are limited, subjective conditions are not positive, and various obstacles make it difficult for agricultural transfer population to integrate into cities, significantly reducing the push effect of rural areas and making it difficult to promote the urbanization of agricultural transfer population.

2) The urban household registration as a means has failed to achieve the expected goals. Essentially, the urban household registered population is a crucial criterion for measuring the urbanization level of a city, and it should also be a goal pursued by ordinary people. However, in terms of current policies and situations, the purpose of agricultural transfer population is not to obtain urban household registration, but to access medical resources, public services, social status, employment opportunities, etc., that match urban household registration. Most agricultural transfer population, with yearning for the city, desire to obtain jobs in the city that can sufficiently support themselves and their family expenses, but there is a gap between "ideal" and reality. Even if a large number of agricultural transfer population obtain "urban household registration" through various efforts, their original purpose has not been achieved. Most agricultural transfer population engage in dirty, tiring, and dangerous jobs that urban residents are mostly unwilling to do, usually with unstable income, un 体面 work, and high labor intensity, resulting in low subjective well-being among agricultural transfer population. Although their income is higher than that in rural areas, the cost of living is also higher. Compared with urban original residents, agricultural transfer population face the dilemma of lower income and higher consumption,

which seriously affects the acquisition of well-being.

3) There are problems with the integration of agricultural transfer population into communities. The decisive factor for agricultural transfer population to choose to transfer their household registration to the city and develop is still income, and the level of income also directly determines the degree of integration of agricultural transfer population into communities. Only by integrating at the economic level can agricultural transfer population be guaranteed long-term and stable development opportunities in the city. At present, the income level of agricultural transfer population has increased, and their ability to integrate into the urban economy has also improved, but compared with urban original residents, they face greater housing and living pressure. Although migrant workers have physically entered the city and live in it, they have not integrated well into the city mentally or in other aspects. Rural areas form circles mainly based on kinship, while cities mainly emphasize work-related relationships. Building circles based on work-related relationships requires changing original habits and overcoming the drawbacks brought by path dependence. If economic income level is the primary factor for agricultural transfer population to choose to settle in the city, then the social psychology of agricultural transfer population is the ultimate factor affecting the integration of agricultural population into the city. Only when agricultural transfer population develop a sense of identity and belonging to the settled city and living community, and form an identity consistent with urban residents psychologically, can they be considered to have truly integrated into the city.

### **3. Optimization Paths for the Citizenization of Agricultural Transfer Population**

1) Gradually unifying the urban-rural household registration system. The ultimate goal of household registration system reform is to eliminate the distinction between "agricultural household registration" and "non-agricultural household registration", that is, to remove differences in household registration and abolish various social disparities attached to it. However, the establishment of a unified urban-rural household registration system cannot be achieved overnight; it is a gradual process. An open household registration system plays an important positive role in promoting citizenization. "Being able to live a decent life and settle down" is the inherent requirement for promoting the citizenization of agricultural transfer population. Only when agricultural transfer population develop an emotional attachment to the city can there be a deeper motivation for citizenization. Developing only cities or only rural areas does not conform to China's actual development situation. Currently and in the future, it is necessary to integrate urban development with rural revitalization and make joint efforts. In promoting urbanization, rural areas also have broad development space. Establishing a unified household registration management system can coordinate urban-rural development, embody the people-oriented principle, and fully stimulate the endogenous motivation of agricultural transfer population to "enter cities", thereby promoting the 良性运转 of urbanization. The ultimate direction should be that cities attract agricultural transfer population, who choose to settle in cities not merely because cities have infrastructure and public services that rural areas lack, which are attached to the household registration system.

2) Formulate sound employment policies. To a certain extent, employment is the primary driver for attracting and retaining agricultural transfer population. The formulation and gradual adjustment of policies should focus on the practical needs of the agricultural transfer population, and fully sound employment policies should be formulated. Employment is the most important aspect of people's livelihood. High-quality employment and increased income levels can help the agricultural transfer population overcome their own class limitations and achieve long-term development. The government should, based on objective reality and development conditions, establish and improve a series of employment policies not based on household registration, break rigid labor market employment

policies, and continuously improve the employment quality of the agricultural transfer population. At the same time, efforts should be intensified to remove a series of institutional barriers affecting the equal employment of the agricultural transfer population, smooth and broaden the channels for expressing the interests of the agricultural transfer population, and effectively ensure that their own interest demands are taken seriously, thereby further alleviating the pressure of the agricultural transfer population to settle in cities. With the government's attention and strong promotion, a situation where the agricultural transfer population "has good employment, high income, can stay, and has a high sense of happiness" will be formed. Only then can the citizenization of the agricultural transfer population be continuously promoted, and the continuous inflow of the agricultural transfer population is bound to add impetus to improving the urbanization level.

- 3) Improve the quality of citizenization of agricultural transfer population. The full integration of the agricultural transfer population into cities is not a simple process. To promote their integration into cities, it is necessary to improve their vocational skills, strengthen vocational skills training, enhance their own development capabilities, and strengthen the accumulation of human capital of the agricultural transfer population. When the quality and employment competitiveness of the agricultural transfer population are improved, they will be better able to find stable and high-paying jobs, thereby integrating into cities more quickly. The improvement of the citizenization ability of the agricultural transfer population cannot be achieved overnight. It is necessary to strengthen incentives and guidance, promote the agricultural transfer population to participate in community construction and social development, enhance their sense of ownership, and at the same time enhance the interaction between the agricultural transfer population and urban residents. This not only helps the agricultural transfer population expand their social networks but also promotes the generation of a sense of belonging, prompting them to integrate into cities more quickly psychologically and emotionally.
- 4) Improve the "people-land-money" linkage policy. The scale of agricultural transfer population continues to rise, with a large number of transferred people flocking into cities. Urban construction land indicators are relatively fixed, making it difficult to meet the housing needs of transferred population. The separation of people and land, as well as people and households, leads to supply-demand mismatch and may easily trigger potential social problems. First, continue to promote the cross-regional circulation and transaction of tangible rural resources such as homesteads and land in the form of coupons, which can revitalize rural land while reducing the housing burden of agricultural transfer population, forming a win-win situation between rural and urban areas. Second, improve the housing policy oriented by residence, improve the policy system for indemnificatory housing, promote the matching of the scale of permanent population with the scale of residential construction land, and accurately calculate the relevant construction land scale. Third, strengthen financial support to reduce the cost of citizenization for relevant groups while attracting talents. Improve talent attraction policies, use real financial incentives to attract talents, expand the scope of target groups of attraction policies. Urban grassroots builders also contribute to urban development and should not be restricted by academic qualifications. Finally, the excessively high living cost of transferred population affects the sustainable development of cities. The government should increase financial expenditure in education, medical care, elderly care and other fields, improve the mechanism linking the cost of citizenization of transferred population with finance, allocate special funds by relevant provincial and municipal governments, and at the same time apply for support from the central finance, and improve the finance linkage mechanism based on the permanent population standard. The cost of citizenization of agricultural transfer population should not be borne solely by individuals. The government should introduce policies to form a linkage mechanism with relevant enterprises and individuals to reduce the cost of citizenization.

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