

CITY NEWCOMERS' ADAPTATION TO URBAN LIFE, PERSONAL WELL-BEING, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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We evaluated the level of adaptation of city newcomers (CNs) to urban life in China, and their personal well-being, and explored the mediating effect of social support on the relationship between these variables. We used a 2-stage sampling method to recruit 314 participants who completed the Adaptation to Urban Life Scale, Social Support Scale, and Personal Well-Being Scale. Structural equation modeling was used to test full and partial mediation effects. Findings showed that there was a significant correlation between the extent of CNs' positive adaptation to urban life and their personal well-being. In addition, social support was beneficial for CNs' personal well-being, and partially mediated the relationship between CNs' adaptation to urban life and personal well-being. In addition, the adaptation to urban life dimensions of employment prospects, living conditions, and urban environment predicted CNs' personal well-being. Implications of the findings are discussed, along with directions for future research.

Keywords: city newcomers, adaptation to urban life, personal well-being, social support, social adaptation.

Since the 1979 reform in China, and especially in the 21st century with the ongoing development of Chinese industrialization and urbanization, many rural dwellers have become *city newcomers* (CNs), that is, people who transfer from the countryside to an urban household. CNs are characterized by either *active migration*, whereby people from the countryside become town citizens and join an urban household system through the purchase of private housing,

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or *passive migration*, through which country dwellers have been reassigned by the government to live in the city because of the expropriation of their lands. The latter category comprises the majority of CNs, who are known as *land-lost farmers* (Hua, 2008; Sun, 2008). CNs are qualitatively different from *farmer workers*, who have land—and, therefore, possess the means of basic production and living security—and are registered within a given rural area that is their permanent residence. Their stay in an urban environment is temporary, leading to high mobility and instability, whereas CNs are granted permanent urban residence certificates that enable them to live in the city as citizens.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China (2011), the Chinese urban population increased exponentially from 459,060,000 (36.2% of the total population) in 2000 to 771,160,000 (56.1% of the total population) in 2015. CNs' social adaptation and quality of life are related not only to social harmony and stability, but also to smooth social transition and sustainable financial security (Hua, 2008; Lin, Zhao, An, Li, & Shen, 2009). In this study we examined the processes of adaptation undertaken by CNs to find a meaningful and livable space in urban life, in a context of social and economic pressures.

CNs' adaptation process to new living conditions, referred to as *social adaptation* (Shen, 2010), *city adaptation*, or *city social adaptation* (Sun, 2008), entails social identity reconstruction and gradual adjustment to urban life in terms of living environment, interpersonal relationships, and work environment practices and prospects. However, most Chinese researchers (see, e.g., Bao & Ye, 2011; Fan, 2008; Nue, Lin, Zheng, Ding, & Peng, 2008) have focused on social adaptation among students, children with special needs, prisoners, migrant workers, and soldiers, rather than CNs. Individuals' adaptation to special circumstances has been found to have situational specificity and to be closely related to their living environment (X. D. Zhang, 2011; Zhou, Zhang, Tan, & Huang, 2008). Scholars focusing on student groups have shown that social adaptation has different connotations at different education stages, such as at primary and secondary school levels, compared to at university (Bao & Ye, 2011; Fan, 2008; Nue et al., 2008). Liu (2005) examined a group of young offenders undertaking obligatory work programs in their community and found that social adaptation embodies five steps: preparation for reinsertion and adapting to the notion of community, work adaptation, compliance with the law and social norms, interpersonal satisfaction, and interpersonal trust. Similarly, Wong and Earl (2009) studied retirees' adaptation and found that individual and organizational factors effectively predict retirement adaptation, whereas social psychological factors have no significant influence on retirees' adjustment and subsequent patterns of behavior.

These studies of immigrant or emigrant experiences may inform researchers' examination of Chinese CNs. For example, J. Zhang and Goodson (2011) examined international students' adaptation to social life in America and found that predictive factors include psychological characteristics, emergency situations, acculturation stress, physiological characteristics, life satisfaction, and sociocultural adaptation. However, J. Zhang and Goodson did not include all factors that impact on the social adaptation of economic migrants.

The above researchers in China have been concerned mainly with land-lost farmers from a social adaptation perspective. Their results have shown that CNs face many psychological and social barriers in the process of adaptation to urban life, which lead to a lack of confidence, identity deviation from the struggle to become accustomed to the CN lifestyle, and failing to identify as a CN (Ye, 2008). Further, prior researchers have highlighted how the long-standing duality of Chinese administrative structures—which separate the land, household registration, and social security systems between urban and rural areas—impede CNs' integration into urban life (Chen, 2008; Sun, 2008; Tan, 2003). Thus, cultural conflict between urban and rural areas is the main social factor that leads to land-lost farmers experiencing disorder in their adaptation process. CNs' weak social support network, comprising support from family, friends, and significant others (Tian, 2010), also contributes to social adaptation difficulties, which are reinforced by frequent discrimination and prejudice in the host community's attitudes and practices. That such attitudes create emotional and psychological problems explains why most new residents do not identify with their new social identity (Tan, 2003; H. B. Zhang & Tong, 2006). Consequently, more than half of land-lost farmers throughout China believe that their quality of life has declined after moving from the countryside to the city, and are generally not satisfied with their present living conditions (Cheng, Guo, Hugo, & Yuan, 2013; Lin et al., 2009).

In terms of the psychological parameters used to measure individual life quality, personal well-being has recently become a core concept of positive psychology (Wang, Wang, & Ma, 1999). Personal well-being is linked to general and objective factors, such as personality, culture, interpersonal relationships, environmental factors, health, work, education, leisure, and entertainment (Carr, 2004; Yan, Zheng, & Qiu, 2003). Hua (2008) revealed that the personal well-being of Chinese CNs is closely linked to the unique background and life circumstances of their situation. Factors that influence CNs' personal well-being are income, employment and leisure, education, physical and mental health, and social security, and the top sources of CNs' dissatisfaction are insufficient level of income, type of work, and urban environment (Ye, 2007). X. D. Zhang (2011) found that social interaction and the social security system also play an important role in improving CNs' personal well-being.

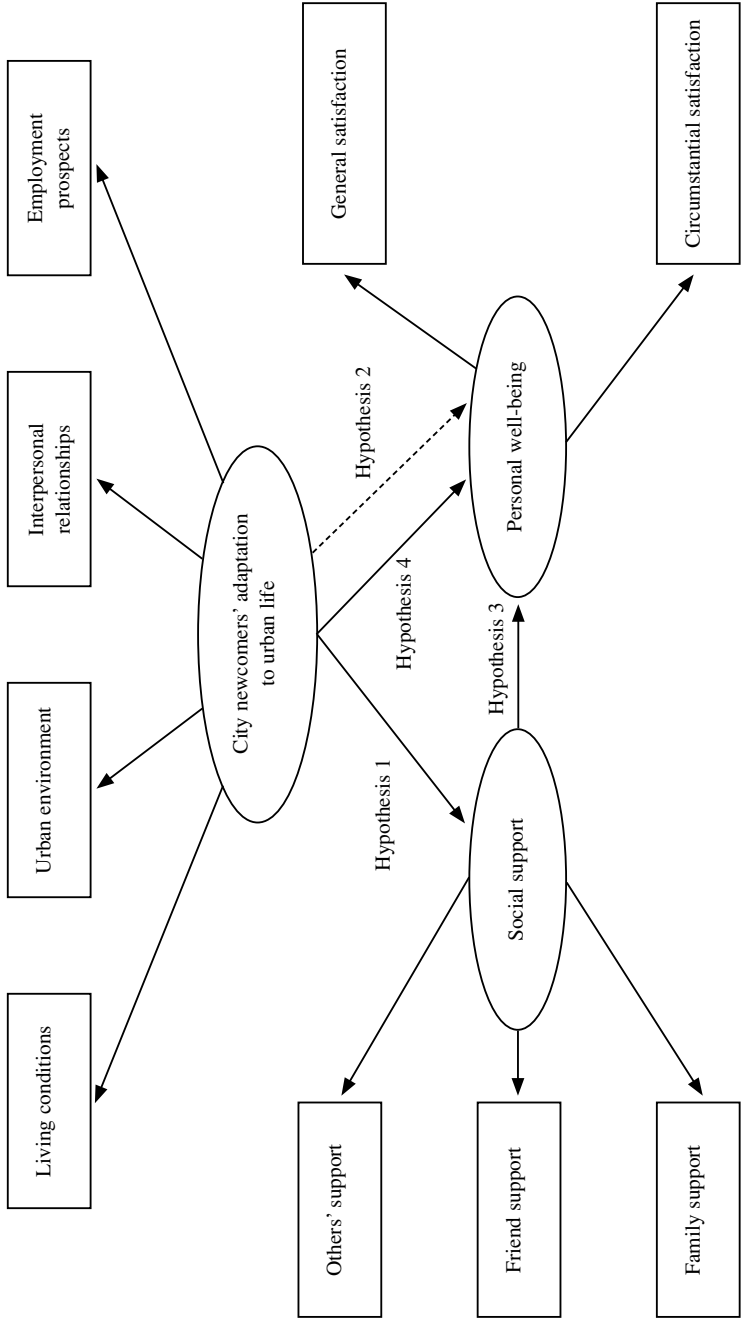


Figure 1. Proposed model of city newcomers' adaptation to urban life, social support, and personal well-being.

We examined the underlying mechanism through which social support influences CNs' adaptation to urban life and personal well-being (see Figure 1). To our knowledge, no previous empirical researchers have examined CNs from the point of view of personal well-being. Thus, we proposed the following research questions and hypotheses:

Research Question 1: What is the situation of China's city newcomers in terms of their social adaptation?

Research Question 2: To what extent do the stages of social adaptation influence city newcomers' achievement of a meaningful quality of life, and how does their ongoing social adaptation underpin their personal well-being?

Research Question 3: To what extent does city newcomers' social support play an intermediary role between social adaptation and personal well-being?

Hypothesis 1: City newcomers' adaptation to urban life will have a positive impact on social support.

Hypothesis 2: City newcomers' adaptation to urban life will have a positive impact on personal well-being.

Hypothesis 3: City newcomers' social support will be positively correlated with personal well-being.

Hypothesis 4: City newcomers' social support will mediate the relationship between personal well-being and adaptation to urban life.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted a two-stage cross-sectional survey from November, 2014 to January, 2015 in three settlement communities constructed by the government, to exclusively recruit CNs from the cities of Huai'an, Nantong, and Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, China. Respondents had transferred to their city of residence between 1999 and 2011, established resettlement households, and received basic urban medical insurance and government compensation for the appropriation of their lands. Respondents averaged around 20 minutes to complete the survey and were given a food coupon worth ¥15 (approximately US\$2.30) as a reward. We had planned to survey 330 participants; however, we received 318 responses, four of which were incomplete and discarded, resulting in a final sample of 314 (176 women; return rate = 95%).

Statistical analysis was conducted with PASW 18.0. We first calculated descriptive statistics for all measures to test the hypotheses. Next, we examined correlations among all variables. To examine the mediating effect of social support, we conducted linear regression and path analyses. Standardized path coefficient values of .10, .30, and .50 indicate small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Cohen, 1988).

Measures

Urban life adaptation. We used the 12-item Adaptation to Urban Life Scale (H. B. Zhang & Tong, 2006) to measure the four dimensions of CNs' adaptation to urban life: living conditions (three items, e.g., "My home is in a secure and safe area"), urban environment (two items, e.g., "I feel tired and uncomfortable because the streets are too noisy"), interpersonal relationships (four items, e.g., "Children and parents care about each other and have harmonious relationships"), and employment prospects (three items, e.g., "I have professional skills that help me to look for a job"). Items are rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A higher score indicates a higher level of urban life adaptation.

The results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with Amos 18.0 showed that the fit index of the scale was satisfactory at each wave: chi square (χ^2) = 134.556, $\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom (df)}$ = 2.803, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .075, normed fit index (NFI) = .98, incremental fit index (IFI) = .94, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .95, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, parsimonious normed fit index (PNFI) = .51, parsimonious comparative fit index (PCFI) = .54. This scale has good reliability and validity in the Chinese context (α = .89).

Social support. We developed a measure of social support from the Perceived Social Support Scale (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Our scale consists of 12 items loading on three factors that account for 68% of the variance in social support (α = .80): support from family, friends, and significant others. Sample items are "When necessary, I can get help and support from my family" (support from family), "My friends can help me when I am in need" (support from friends), and "I can share my happy and sad moments with people like my employer or colleagues" (support from significant others). Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

CFA results indicated that the scale fit was satisfactory at each wave: χ^2 = 110.985, χ^2/df = 2.312, RMSEA = .065, relative fit index (RFI) = .86, NFI = .93, IFI = .93, TLI = .93, CFI = .93, PNFI = .65, PCFI = .68. Cronbach's α was .80 in this study.

Personal well-being. We developed a Personal Well-Being Scale from the International Wellbeing Group's (2006) Personal Wellbeing Index–Adult scale. Our scale consists of nine items loading on two dimensions: general satisfaction and circumstantial satisfaction, which account for 68% of the variance in personal well-being (α = .80). The dimension of *circumstantial satisfaction* measures CNs' satisfaction according to the six indicators of occupation, income, social position, interpersonal relationships, work environment, and living environment.

Sample items are “I am satisfied with my current job” and “I am satisfied with my social status.” The dimension of *general satisfaction* comprises three items to measure CNs’ personal well-being in general. Sample items are “I think my life is getting better every day” and “Generally speaking, I am satisfied with my present living conditions.” Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher personal well-being.

CFA results showed that the scale fit was satisfactory at each wave: $\chi^2 = 1.019$, $\chi^2/df = 2.841$, RMSEA = .070, NFI = .92, IFI = .92, TLI = .92, CFI = .92, PNFI = .65, PCFI = .66. Cronbach’s α was .85 in this study.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables of social support, urban life adaptation, and personal well-being (circumstantial and general satisfaction). According to the data, CNs reported average perceived social support ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 6.61$) and low personal well-being ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 5.49$).

Urban life adaptation was positively correlated with personal well-being and social support. In addition, the correlation between personal well-being and social support was positive. Further, the urban life adaptation dimensions of living conditions, urban environment, and employment prospects were significantly correlated with personal well-being and social support. However, the interpersonal relationship dimension and personal well-being were not significantly related (see Table 2).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social support	3.53	0.55	Living conditions	3.49	0.74
Urban adaptation	3.21	5.25	Urban environment	3.04	0.93
Personal well-being	3.16	5.50	Interpersonal relationships	3.25	0.54
Family support	3.53	0.66	Employment prospects	3.25	0.54
Friend support	3.54	0.63	Circumstantial satisfaction	3.10	0.64
Others’ support	3.53	0.65	General satisfaction	3.30	0.77

Note. $N = 314$.

Table 2. *Correlations Between City Newcomers' Adaptation to Urban Life, Personal Well-Being, and Social Support*

	Personal well-being	Social support
Urban life adaptation	.42**	.41**
Living conditions	.36**	
Urban environment	.14*	
Interpersonal relationships	.04	
Employment prospects	.41**	
Personal well-being		.42**

Note. $N = 314$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The Mediating Role of Social Support on the Relationship Between City Newcomers' Urban Life Adaptation and Personal Well-Being

We set up a regression equation ($r > .05$), following Wen, Zhang, Hou, and Liu (2004). The model coefficient indicated that the independent variable of urban life adaptation positively predicted the dependent variables of personal well-being and social support (see Table 2). The initial model was tested using the maximum likelihood method and the initial model fit well: $\chi^2/df = 20.32$, NFI = .96, RFI = .79, IFI = .94, CFI = .93, goodness-of-fit index = .96, standardized root mean square residual = .047, RMSEA = .038. The path coefficients of the proposed model are delineated in Figure 2. The paths from urban adaptation to both social support and personal well-being were significant (see Figure 1), so Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. The proportion of the impact of social support on adaptation to urban life was .48 ($.79 \times .46 / .79 \times .46 + .39$). Thus, 48% of the impact of urban life adaptation on personal well-being was explained by the indirect effect of social support. In addition, the percentage of the direct effect of urban life adaptation on personal well-being was 51.77%. The path from social support to personal well-being was significant, supporting Hypothesis 3, and the mediating role of social support on this relationship was validated, supporting Hypothesis 4.

To further examine Hypothesis 4, we tested the mediating role of social support in the hypothesized model for significance, using the bootstrapping approach (1,000 replications). This procedure enhances the statistical power of mediation analysis, especially for a small- or moderate-sized sample (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As shown in Table 3, the direct effect of social support on urban life adaptation and personal well-being was significant, as was the indirect effect of urban life adaptation on personal well-being via social support. Therefore, all hypotheses were supported.

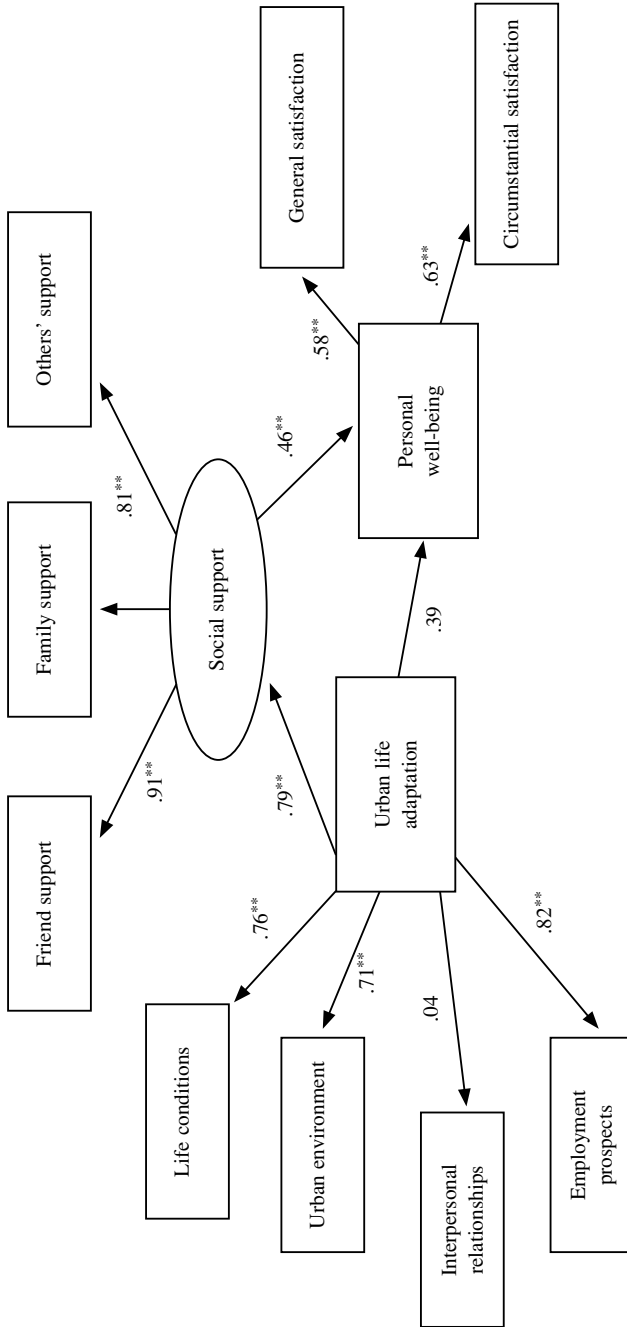


Figure 2. Path diagram of the mediating effect of social support on city newcomers' urban life adaptation. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. *Direct and Indirect Effects of Social Support on City Newcomers' Urban Life Adaptation and Personal Well-Being*

	Estimated effects (SE)	95% CI
Direct effect		
Urban life adaptation → Social support	.79** (0.04)	[0.36, 0.67]
Social support → Personal well-being	.46** (0.05)	[0.23, 0.44]
Urban life adaptation → Personal well-being	.39 (0.08)	[-0.01, 0.27]
Living conditions → Personal well-being	.43** (0.04)	[0.26, 0.45]
Urban environment → Personal well-being	.36** (0.05)	[0.14, 0.28]
Interpersonal relationships → Personal well-being	.04 (0.02)	[0.19, 0.57]
Employment prospects → Personal well-being	.41** (0.04)	[0.24, 0.47]
Indirect effect		
Urban life adaptation → Social support → Personal well-being	.36** (0.04)	[0.16, 0.27]

Note. $N = 318$. 1,000 bootstrapping resamples. SE = standard error, CI = confidence interval.

** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of our examination of the mediating effect of social support on CNs' urban life adaptation and personal well-being shed light on this relationship. As expected, correlation analysis demonstrated that CNs with high social support adapt to urban life better and have higher personal well-being than do those with low social support. Our finding that social support is positively related to adaptation to urban life and personal well-being is consistent with previous results (Cislo, Spence, & Gayman, 2010; Fan, 2008).

Among the four indicators of adaptation to urban life, living conditions, urban environment, and employment prospects were significantly correlated with personal well-being, but interpersonal relationships was not, marking a key discrepancy from previous findings (see, e.g., Carr, 2004; X. D. Zhang, 2011). This discrepancy can be understood as a result of differences in how the indicators of personal well-being are defined. As researchers use different index measurements and construct indices, correlation coefficient significance varies. Interpersonal relationships are only one index of the measurement, so it is inevitable that its correlation with the overall indices did not reach a statistically significant level. The discrepancy may also relate to the current social status of CNs. Lin et al. (2009) found that both migrant workers (farmer workers who work temporarily in the city) and CNs establish a preliminary interpersonal relationship network that is mainly based on geopolitics and consanguinity. That is, as newcomers to a city, CNs socialize only with their relatives and a limited number of acquaintances. This partially determines the comparatively smaller impact of interpersonal relationships on CNs' quality of life, whereas living

conditions, urban environment, and employment prospects play a more important role, according to standard regression indices.

Furthermore, path analysis showed that social support partially mediated the relationship between CNs' adaptation to urban life and personal well-being. Thus, CNs with high social support possess a high level of personal well-being, which contributes to their adaptation to urban life and improves their life quality.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

We have contributed to the literature in several ways. First, our findings extend understanding of urban life adaptation in the Chinese CN context. Although prior researchers have investigated the dimensions of spatial/physical adaptation of immigrants (Akay, Bargain, & Zimmermann, 2012; Cislo et al., 2010; Huq-Hussain, 1996), the personal well-being of CNs is relatively underexplored. CNs have some shared characteristics with foreign immigrant groups in terms of social adaptation, for example, both groups have to adapt to new cultural norms and lifestyles. However, there are also key differences between CNs and foreign immigrants in terms of urban life adaptation. Unlike foreign immigrants, who might be mainly considered active migrants because they have moved by choice, the majority of CNs are passive migrants, owing to the requisitioning of their land and subsequent enforced resettlement. Therefore, rather than unfamiliarity or discomfort arising from major cultural differences in the host region or nation, they have to confront and overcome challenges that involve compulsory separation from their familiar life environment, and to adapt to new living conditions, an urban environment, interpersonal relationships, and employment prospects.

Second, we elaborated on the mechanism underlying the mediating role of social support on the relationship between CNs' urban life adaptation and personal well-being. Although previous scholars have investigated Chinese land-lost farmers' adaptation to urban life (Shen, 2010; Tan, 2003), the role of social support in this relationship remained relatively unexplored until now. Thus, our study enriches the literature because we have demonstrated that social support plays a significant mediating role on this relationship.

Our results also have practical implications through providing guidance on how to help CNs integrate into urban life by improving their personal well-being. Of the determinant factors of well-being, the issue of employment prospects ranks first, living conditions second, and urban environment third (Ye, 2007). Therefore, in the urbanization process in China, the provision of more job opportunities and the improvement of CNs' living conditions are vital for their personal well-being and quality of life to improve. This will benefit CNs' resettlement and thereby contribute to China's economic development.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations in this study. First, we collected data through self-report measures, which might pose a threat to our internal validity because self-report bias (e.g., social desirability bias) is unavoidable. Thus, future researchers should use multiple and different methods of assessment to reduce subjectivity. Second, we adopted the convenience sampling strategy to collect data from participants in one Chinese province, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers could replicate this study in other provinces to improve the generalizability of our results.

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