THE HUKOU SYSTEM AND RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

P. R. China's Hukou (household) registration system, set up in 1958, divides the population into two categories: rural and non-rural households. Individual interests and rights, such as education, healthcare, housing and employment, are determined by this household registration. Under this system, citizens born in rural areas do not have access to social welfare in the cities in which they live and work. Before the reform in China, the Hukou system had its intended effect: to severely restrict rural-to-urban migration. After the economic reform, the urbanization rate of China rose from 17.4% in 1978 to 46.59% in 2009.The time for a fundamental reform of the Hukou system seems to have arrived. China's government should gradually change the current system to a unified Hukou system, thus eliminating the rural and city division.

提要

中华人民共和国于1958年开始实行户籍登记管理制度，将人口划分为农村户口和城镇户口两种类型。于是，每一个人的教育、医疗卫生、住房和就业等方面的待遇，都与其户口类型密切相关。因此，持农村户口的人是无法享受城镇户口的各种社会福利待遇的，即便他们在城市里生活和工作也无法享有城镇居民的待遇。

在中国的改革开放之前，户籍制度已达到了其严格限制人口从农村到城市迁移的效果。自改革开放以来，中国的城市化率已经从1978年的17.4%上升为2009年的46.59%。对户口制度进行根本性变革的时机似乎已经到来。中国政府将逐步地改进现有的户籍制度，以期根除农村与城市之间的隔离状况。

关键词：户籍制度、从农村到城市的移民、中国

BACKGROUND

In most developing nations, economic development has promoted massive and uncontrolled migration from the countryside into urban areas (Kasarda and Crenshaw 1991). Rural-urban migration is a pervasive feature in developing countries. In general, urban areas are centres of development where incomes tend to be higher and economic opportunities greater. Peasants flock to the cities in search of better lives, driven by real or perceived differentials in economic opportunities (Lee 1966; Todero 1976), by the families' need to diversify risk in the absence of formal insurance mechanisms (Portes and Böröcz 1989), and by social network connections with others who have preceded them (Massey et al. 1993). Rural-urban migration is thus an important channel of social mobility.

China's Hukou[1] (household) registration system, set up in 1958 (Regulations, 1958), divides the population into rural households and non-rural households. Individual interests and rights, such as education, healthcare, housing and employment, are determined by this household registration. Under this system, citizens who were born in rural areas do not have access to social welfare in the cities in which they live and work.

I. WHAT IS THE HUKOU SYSTEM?

Hukou or huji refers to the system of residency permits which dates back to ancient China, where household registration was required by law in mainland China and Taiwan. In many contexts, Hukou can also refer to a family register: a household registration record is issued to each family, and usually includes the personal information of each family member. In China, family registers were in existence as early as the Xia Dynasty (2100 – 1600 B.C.). In the centuries which followed, the family register developed into an organization of families and clans used for taxation, conscription and social control.

Similar household registration systems exist within the public administration structures of Japan (Koseki), Vietnam, and North Korea (Hoju). In South Korea, the Hoju system was abolished on 1 January 2008.

The first page of a householder's booklet is used to record all the members of the household, following which every family member has a page to record their personal information. A household registration record officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes the following identifying information: name, relation with the householder, former name, gender, ethnic group, birth date, birth place, native place, blood type, ID Number, marital status, education, occupation, workplace, religion, stature, military service, and when & where they moved from and moved to. The booklet also contains pages for recording changes and corrections. Family members can use a second page to change and correct the records.

The 'birth place' and 'permanent residence' items in the household booklet may seem fairly innocuous, but in fact they were the cornerstones of rural-urban migration control. Every single person was assigned a registration status — either "agricultural" or "urban". Newborn babies were registered at their mothers' permanent residence, even if they were actually born at a different location. This meant that the 'agricultural' or 'urban' status of individuals was inherited through the mother. The rationale for passing the rural/urban status along maternal lines was that men generally tend to be more mobile than women; inheritance of status from the father would therefore add more children to the urban population.

II. HUKOU SYSTEM REFORM SINCE THE 1990S

The Hukou system has had its intended effect: to severely restrict rural-to-urban migration (Johnson 1994; Yang 1993). The central mechanism regulating population flows was the Hukou system, which, until the onset of the reforms in the 1990s, effectively tied Chinese citizens to their place of residence. The time for a fundamental reform of the registration system seems to have arrived.

There are a number of practical circumstances which have made the emergence of this temporary migrant population possible. With improved supplies and free markets, rationing has lost much of its former importance and most products can now be bought with money. Following good harvests and dietary changes, many provinces did away completely with grain coupons in the early 1990s. In order to boost employment, collective and private enterprises are not only allowed but are actively encouraged. Peasants can go to cities to sell their surplus products, and after decades of socialist neglect, the service sector is expected to grow, both reducing unemployment and improving the quality of life. The reforms have led to an enormous construction boom, both in cities and in the countryside, and most of the physical labour is done by peasant workers. A number of branches of industry find it increasingly difficult to recruit urbanites for heavy or dirty work and have resorted to hiring peasants.

The system has undergone further relaxation since the mid 1990s. On the one hand, the first relaxation allowed rural residents to buy temporary urban residency permits, meaning they could work legally; fees for these decreased gradually to a fairly affordable level. On the other hand, people from rural areas can buy urban residents' registration in many township levels around China.

The discrimination against rural women has been alleviated since 1998, when Hukou became inheritable through either the father's or the mother's line (Au Loong-yu et al 2007).

III. HUKOU SYSTEM REFORM SINCE ENTERING THE WTO, 2001

Although the Hukou system was widely regarded within the PRC as unfair and inhumane, reforming the residency system has been a very controversial topic within the PRC.

There has been recognition for some time that Hukou is an impediment to economic development (Calum Macleod 2001). China's accession to the World Trade Organization has forced it to embrace this reform to liberalize the movement of labour, speeding up its economic reform (Yao Shunli 2000).

From 2001 onwards, Hukou controls were weakened. In 2003, after the uproar surrounding the death of Sun Zhigang alarmed the authorities, the laws on Custody and Repatriation were repealed (Au Loong-yu et al 2007). By 2004 the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture estimated that over 100 million people registered as "rural" were working in cities.

In 2006, six groups with members from 14 central departments, including the Ministries of Education, Health, Labour and Social Security, were dispatched to 12 provinces to research how best to implement such a significant reform process. In the meantime, 12 provinces, including the Hebei, Liaoning, Shandong, Guangdong provinces, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and the Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing Municipalities, had launched pilot programs to experiment with a system that narrowed differentiation between rural and urban residents.

In some provinces, such as the economically well-developed Jiangsu Province, governments allow migrants with stable jobs and fixed residences to register where they live and work rather than where they were born, so that they can enjoy the urban welfare system. Gansu Province in western China (an underdeveloped area) also allows migrant rural workers who have lived in a stable city residence for three years to register as non-rural citizens. However, the central government has not set a time frame for national reform.

It has been reported that Beijing is to remove the limitation stating that only people with a Beijing Hukou (residence permit) can buy cars. In the future, non-locals will also be able to purchase automobiles in Beijing. Good news for non-locals who want to buy cars: they will no longer have to buy them using the name of some other Beijing local or company.

Examples of lifting Hukou limitations for the sake of market development were not all that rare in the recent past. For instance, the restrictions on home buying were lifted when the housing market was depressed. It seems non-locals do not have access to all the usual resources and services until they are abundant in the market. For example, migrant workers used to be required to use "employees cards" until the floating population was brought under greater control. Migrant workers construct and contribute to our city. The taxes they have paid go into the government's public finances. Therefore, the migrant workers should be treated fairly and equally by the locals.

The household registration system, though it played a positive role in the past, now stands to some extent in the way of the country's urbanization, which is essential to China's modernization. The evidence of China's economic success in the last 30 years is clear for anybody to see: a forest of construction cranes permeates almost every major city. This, however, has only exacerbated the problem of urbanization, by drawing more and more rural dwellers off their farms and into the city in search of a better life. The subsequent expansion of the service industry in the cities, in line with the expanding middle class, has created a vacuum in the secondary sectors that rural labourers hope to fill.

In our 2007-2008 survey, the total valid samples were 573 urban migrants. In general, 52.6% of them stayed in the four cities over 3 years (Qingdao (81.2%), Shenzhen (79.4%), Huhhot (34.9%), and Kunming (31.9%)). Generally speaking, 26.5% of them gained urban Hukou in one of the four cities. Of which, Shenzhen (66.7%), Qingdao (15.2%), Kunming (12.8%), and Huhhot (6.8%). 58.6% of them only had temporary registration Hukou (Kunming (77.8%), Qingdao (70.7%), Huhhot (65.0%), and Shenzhen (21.0%)). Over 65% bring the whole family in one of the four cities.[2] Our research shows that more and more migrants who relocate to find better jobs in cities tend to stay longer or even resettle with their entire families.

A survey showed that 92% of the 11,168 respondents said that the system was in need of reform. More than 53% said restrictive policies attached to the system, such as limits on access to education, healthcare, employment and social insurance should be eliminated. More than 38 per cent called for the system to be scrapped entirely.[3]

Since the adoption of the policy of reform and opening up, China has witnessed a bursting migration of rural labour to urban areas in search of work opportunities. More than 220 million migrant rural workers have moved to cities in search of work.

CONCLUSION

As China is struggling with the social effects of a widening rural-urban divide, there have been growing calls to reform the Hukou system, owing to the fact that millions of farmers have illegally started moving to towns and cities in order to find work. Hukou has played an important role providing basic data and identifying registration in certain historical periods, but it has become neither scientific nor rational given the irresistible trend of migration. China needs to propose a way to deal with the inequalities across Chinese society and bridge the divide. Many scholars have suggested eliminating the two-tiered household registration system and allowing freer migration between the cities and the countryside.

In 2009, the urbanization rate of China rose from 17.4% in 1978 to 46.59%. The government will adjust its policies on the settlement of rural residents in cities based on legal and permanent residence, stable occupation or

income. China's government should gradually change the current system to a unified household registration system, which eliminates the rural and non-rural division.

Reform of the Hukou system began in 1992, and to this day has not reached a satisfactory conclusion, largely because of the complicated policies attached to it — any missteps in the reform could result in some social problems.

The Hukou system may have served its time as an effective policy instrument, but it is far from dead. Reform of the Hukou system will be continued. Future research on both spacial and social mobility in China would do well to attend to the Hukou system as a central stratifying agent in contemporary Chinese society.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] *"Hukou"* has been adopted by English-language audiences to refer to both the *huji* system and an individual's *hukou.*

[2] The 2007-2008 survey in four selected cities (Shenzhen (South), Huhhot (North), Qingdao (East), and Kunming (West) of China, which was directed by Prof. Dr. Zhang Jijiao, Academy of Social Sciences, China.

[3] Source: A week-long poll conducted in March 2007 by website Sina.com and Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily.