THE SURGE OF MIGRANT LABOR

Internal migration and the *hukou* system in the People’s Republic of China

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INTRODUCTION

For the last three decades, China has been considered the “factory of the world”. The sheer size of the Chinese population has made possible the continuous supply of cheap labor into the industries of the more economically developed zones, such as the Pearl River Delta. The main reason China is capable of providing so much low or medium-skilled labor who work for meager wages is that most of its workforce consists of migrant workers, who leave the small plots of land in their rural villages in search of job opportunities in more developed areas. Once they leave their hometowns, these workers lose most of their rights and lack access to basic services in their places of destination such as public healthcare or public education for their children. At the heart of this form of institutional discrimination is the household registration or hukou system.

Implemented during the Maoist era, the hukou system served not only as a mechanism to record population data but as a system to restrict population movement. In the heydays of collectivism, hukou regulations even made it impossible to procure food and other basic goods outside of one’s registration area. The system was designed to favor urban residents, who obtained from their local governments stable employment, free healthcare and education, and welfare and pensions schemes. Ruralites, on the contrary, had very little in the way of public services but were handed the right to use a plot of land for self-sufficiency.

Since the opening of China to foreign investment and the transition into a market economy, restrictions on population movement have been relaxed, but it is still difficult, and sometimes impossible, to transfer one’s hukou registration upon moving into a new locality, especially to one of China’s megacities. To move without a proper hukou transfer, as more than a hundred million Chinese people have done and continue to do, means going by with no social protection from local or state governments. The system is so discriminatory it has even been dubbed as “China’s apartheid” (Luard, 2005; Park & Xu, 2012; Golley, 2014). But what exactly is the household registration system and how has it created a dual society in China? What are the consequences of hukou regulations for the millions of migrant workers who constitute the workforce of the factories supplying everything from textiles to electronics to the whole world?

The main objective of this essay is to analyze the hukou system and to determine how the existence of such a system in the People’s Republic of China has given way to the legal exclusion of a large amount of population, up to a point where they resemble illegal migrants in their own country. This essay looks at how migrant workers live and work, and whether the
The hukou system is still as effective in restricting migration today as it was when the system was first implemented. In addition, this essay harbors further objectives, which are tackled in four distinct sections:

- The first section defines hukou registration, including what it records and how it is managed. The necessary steps to change hukou status or transfer it into a different locality are discussed together with the relevance of hukou transfer to migrant workers. Furthermore, the major reforms to the household registration system are explained in overview.

- The second section draws an historical outline of the household registration system, from its precedents as a population management and tax collection system in ancient Chinese dynasties and up to the Kuomintang rule, to its reinforcement during the Maoist period and its use as a means of social control and population movement restriction especially after the Great Leap Forward, and its subsequent reforms to adapt to the new market economy fueled by the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping.

- The third section examines more closely how the legal exclusion exerted by the hukou system affects the great mass of rural, low or medium-skilled temporary migrant workers. The life of rural migrant workers in big cities, the struggle for improvement of labor rights and the specificities concerning women migrants and children of migrants are tackled.

- The forth and last section offers a brief glimpse into the discussion that poses the present and future of the hukou system and the reactions following the last announcement of reforms, which took place in July of last year.

In order to achieve a clear perception of the current situation regarding hukou, I have focused on recent literature. I have used Delia Davin’s (1999) classic book on internal migration as a background source, as well as Fei-ling Wang’s (2008) recent, comprehensive study of hukou. These sources have been confronted with and complemented by specialized papers and census analyses as well as press articles and pieces of investigative journalism to offer an all-around view on internal migration and hukou regulations in China to date. To keep with the consulted literature and the nature of this essay, I have decided to use APA style for my citations and references.
THE HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION SYSTEM

The household registration or *hukou* system is “an administrative mechanism for collecting and managing information on citizen’s personal identification, kinship, and legal residence” (Wang, 2005, p.63) as a means of population management and social control. *Hukou* registration “is also the sole legal basis of Chinese citizenship, family or kinship identification, and all other individual or family legal rights” (Wang, 2005, p.69). A person or family’s *hukou* file records seven categories of information: birth, death, personal data, family relations, migration out, migration in, and changes or corrections (Wang, 2005, p.69). *Hukou* registration is needed for education, marriage, passports, travel, employment, business licenses, and even to open an account for a public utility, a fixed telephone line, or cellular telephone service. Couples need *hukou* documentation in order to acquire their birth quota so as not to violate the state policy of family planning and birth control (Wang, 2005, p. 67).

All citizens must be registered within one month of birth or adoption at the local police station (*paichusuo*) to establish a permanent record regarding *hukou* location and status, and family relations. The unit of registration is the household, which refers typically to a family (nuclear or extended) or a single person, but may also be a collective household such as a dormitory, a military unit, or a religious temple or shrine. During the collectivization period, the whole population of a commune was recorded in the same *hukou* book. In urban areas, the household ceased to be associated with the family and effectively became tied to the *danwei* or work unit.

However, with the economic reforms of the 1980s and the boom of the free market in China, the aim has shifted towards the individuality and portability of *hukou* documentation to facilitate control of the moving population. *Hukou* records are managed by specialized *hukou* police who work under the supervision of the public security bureaus. Each police station is in charge of a *hukou* zone and keeps the original *hukou* records of all residents, whether permanent or temporary. Beginning in the late 1990s, police stations, especially in cities and areas of heavy population movement, were connected to share their *hukou* records electronically in order to exert better control over migrants and reduce black market *hukou* sales and *hukou* counterfeiting.

One citizen can legally have only one permanent *hukou*, at only one *hukou* zone. *Hukou* status is classified according to two related parts: residential location and socio-economic eligibility (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.821). The *hukou suozaidi* is the place of *hukou* registration and is supposedly the place of regular residence. An individual can only be registered to one
place of residence at any given time. The \textit{hukou leibie}, the second part of this classification, is the type or status of \textit{hukou} and is divided between “agricultural” and “non-agricultural” \textit{hukou}. Non-agricultural \textit{hukou} is mainly referred to as “urban” \textit{hukou} in much of the literature but the term “urban” defines only \textit{hukou suozaidi} and can lead to misconceptions as one can be registered in the countryside and still possess non-agricultural status and thus receive the same benefits granted to those holding \textit{hukou} from big cities. However, \textit{hukou} reforms in the mid-1990s eliminated the \textit{hukou leibie} in some localities, dropping the distinction between “agricultural” and “non-agricultural” in an attempt to improve equality amongst local residents.

Originally, the difference between a household designated as “agricultural” or “non-agricultural” stemmed from whether the household was capable of producing its own grain for consumption or if it was supplied with grain and other basic foods through the state rationing system. With the abolishment of the rationing system and the end of collectivization, the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural has become shorthand for “those who are entitled to state benefits” and “those who are not”, independently of the actual occupation of the holder. This distinction has created a dual economy system, effectively raising a wall between cities—especially the so-called megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai—and the countryside, which still stands today despite a number of policies designed to ease labor allocation in the thriving market economy of China.

Changing one’s \textit{hukou} status is not easy. It does not change upon marriage and until 1998 \textit{hukou} status was inherited from the mother. The matrilineal character of \textit{hukou} stemmed from the fact that women are more likely to gain upward social mobility through marriage; thus, by registering children with the same \textit{hukou} as their mother, the population entitled to non-agricultural status remained tightly controlled. After a change in regulations in 1998, children could inherit their father’s or mother’s \textit{hukou} status, making rural-urban or cross-regional marriages a truly practical means of \textit{hukou} transfer for the following generation (Wang, 2005, p.52). Yet, if the father or stepfather is registered in a major city, children have to wait for availability in the state dictated quota (Wang, 2005, p.218). This change in the linearity of \textit{hukou} status is part of a number of reform policies aimed at relaxing the rigidity of the \textit{hukou} system since the economic reform of the early 80’s, which will be examined in depth in the following pages.

The importance of keeping a low level of non-agricultural \textit{hukou} holders resides in the fact that from the establishment of the PRC, the CPC was preoccupied with providing urban
residents with public healthcare and education, subsidized foods and housing and pension funds. While the central government is responsible for all of these benefits in urban areas, it is responsible for none of them in the countryside. The _hukou_ itself serves as a recordkeeping system collecting data from all Chinese citizens, but the difficulty—in most cases impossibility—of changing _hukou_ status is what limits rural-urban migration and helps create a spatial hierarchy that has become a de facto social hierarchy in which downward mobility is generally permitted without restrictions and even encouraged, whereas upward mobility was nearly impossible for decades and is still today a very difficult endeavor. In this way, the central government controls all regulated channels of migration inside China.

The following table serves to illustrate dual classification scheme of the _hukou_ status by dividing the seven locality categories according to the Chinese administrative divisions into those considered urban and rural. A sample of the population at every level in 1996 is provided to exemplify the share of agricultural and non-agricultural _hukou_ holders in each locality category. While presence of agricultural _hukou_ holders up to county-level cities and even prefecture-level cities is noteworthy—and can be explained by the opening of the market economy but also because peasants working the land surrounding these cities also fall under an urban _hukou_ category—, entering of agricultural _hukou_ holders into China’s biggest city is difficult and therefore scarce without a previous change in _hukou_ status. Even today, most rural migrants moving into the biggest Chinese cities hold either temporary _hukou_ or are unregistered and thus might face deportation if discovered.

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<th>Agricultural</th>
<th>Non-agricultural</th>
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<td>Cities under the State Council</td>
<td>3,491,577</td>
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<td>Cities under the province</td>
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<td>221,129,342</td>
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Converting one’s _hukou_ from rural to urban involves a change in both _suozaidi_ and _leibie_, that is, in both geographical residential place and entitlement status. The process of this
change is known as *nongzhuanfei*, which is subject simultaneously to both policy (*zhengce*) and quota (*zhibiao*) controls (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.823). While policy defines the qualifications needed for entitlement to non-agricultural *hukou*, the quota regulates the number of qualified people who will get non-agricultural *hukou*. In order to be eligible for *nongzhuanfei*, one needs to satisfy the policy conditions and at the same time obtain a space under the quota control. Quota controls are set by the central state and vary annually and geographically.

*Nongzhuanfei* can be obtained through regular or “special” channels. The regular channel manages change of *hukou* status for reasons such as “recruitment by a state-owned enterprise (*zhaogong*), enrolment in an institution of higher education (*zhaosheng*), promotion to a senior administrative job (*zhaogan*) and migration for personal reasons” (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.827). The special channel is used when temporary policies concerning *nongzhuanfei* affect certain groups of people under special circumstances, giving the state certain flexibility to deal with unanticipated situations.

Only those who apply for *nongzhuanfei* are considered as legal permanent migrants (*qianyi*). *Qianyi* involves moving from one *hukou* zone to another and completing the relocation registrations in order to obtain a new legal address and *hukou status*. This process of registration consists of two parts *qianchu* (outmigrant) and *qianru* (inmigrant) registration. Outmigrant registration must be done before moving out of one’s *hukou* zone through local *hukou* police, in order to obtain a Migrant *Hukou* Certificate and cancel original permanent *hukou*. A Migrant *Hukou Certificate* must contain the reasons for migration as well as the destination point and is effective for a maximum of 30 days. Within those 30 days and upon arrival to the new *hukou* zone it is necessary to obtain *qianru* registration by providing the Migrant *hukou* Certificate and other specified documents at the local police station. When moving from a rural to an urban area, a preissued *Hukou Relocation Permit* from the destination *hukou* zone officials is also necessary (Wang, 2005, ps. 63-68).

**Main reforms to hukou regulations**

The economic and social reform of the 1980’s affected also *hukou* regulations, bringing changes in conditions for *nongzhuanfei* as well as new variations in *hukou* categorization and other residential policies. An overall modification of the hukou system was the decentralization of *hukou* transfer criteria to local governments. By means of this mechanism, criteria for *nongzhuanfei* as dictated by central state disappeared, and local authorities were
gradually more free to set their own entry conditions into their localities. A good example of the evolution of the hukou system is the introduction in 1984, of the now extinct hukou for “self-supplied food grain” (zili kouliang) households in towns. This new category of hukou allowed peasants to get a different type of urban hukou in market towns, provided they were either running businesses or employed by TVE’s (townships and village enterprises) and were able to find their own accommodation and make their own food arrangements. While people holding the “self-supplied food grain” hukou were considered as non-agricultural population by the State Council, they still differed from permanent non-agricultural hukou holders in several aspects giving this new type of categorization did not equal nongzhuanfei.

“Self-supplied food grain” hukou holders were not entitled to state-subsidized welfare nor were they able to move freely to an urban area from a higher rank than the town in which they had registered. Migrating to a bigger city or converting their status to an official non-agricultural hukou still meant having to go through the whole process of nongzhuanfei, which could take years. Furthermore, peasants applying for “self-supplied food grain” hukou were forced to give up their right to land in their villages of origin, thus renouncing to the possibility of returning to an agricultural livelihood. The popularity of this type of hukou peaked in 1988 with over 4 million peasants registered under the “self-supplied food grain” category but as new policies for moving into urban areas arose and the process for nongzhuanfei loosened, this category of hukou fell into disuse and was finally terminated in the 1990s.

“Self-supplied food grain” hukou serves to illustrate the attitude of the CPC regarding the hukou system: the aim of the central state is to relax migration policies to accommodate for the increasing demand of labor since the economic reform brought steady industrial growth and the proliferation of private enterprises in China, while keeping intact the foundation of the hukou system as a basis for entitlement discrimination. Further policies have been developed to facilitate population movement — while maintaining population control —, such as the creation of temporary residence certificates, the so-called “blue seal hukou” or a scheme to redirect migration flows to towns and small cities.

Temporary residence certificates (zanzhuzheng) were introduced in 1985 and are aimed at those aged 16 and over who intend to stay in urban areas other than their place of hukou registration for more than three months. Migrants must obtain temporary residence certificates in order to legally rent housing, work, open a bank account, or receive registered mail. Such certificates are valid for six months up to two years at a time and are renewable. Renovation of these permits requires the application of the hosting household, landlord or employer.
Therefore, stable accommodation and work are mandatory to remain in urban areas under temporary residence certificates. Temporary urban residents are not entitled to any of the benefits provided by the state to regular non-agricultural hukou holders, such as welfare, public education or subsidized housing, and cannot change their temporary hukou into permanent, non-agricultural hukou no matter how long they have lived or worked in the place they hold temporary hukou from. Actual enforcement of this regulation is hard, especially in metropolises and urban areas with high migration “pull” factors, given the fact that many migrants only apply for temporary residence permits when they need them for job applications which can be long after arrival in the new hukou zone.

The “locally-valid” hukou program, commonly known as blue seal or blue stamp hukou because of the blue color of its official seal, different from the red non-agricultural seal, was introduced by the central state in the 1990s. The blue seal hukou may be regarded as a compromise between a temporary and permanent hukou. The specificities of the blue seal hukou are left for local governments to decide and implement. The central government’s standpoint on the blue seal hukou is based on the principle of “local need, local benefit, local responsibility, local validity” (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.838), meaning local governments are free to develop this program as they deem convenient but are also responsible for providing blue-stamp hukou holders with any services or benefits. Blue seal hukou requires an urban entry fee, the so call “urban infrastructural construction fee” (chengshi zengrongfei), in addition to meeting other required conditions which vary from city to city. Urban entry fees, which can be as high as 50.00 yuan (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.838) are a way to ensure that newcomers are either wealthy enough to pay the fee themselves or possess valued education and skills and have been able to find a sponsor, normally a prospective employer. Thus, blue seal hukou holders constitute a new category of “first-class migrants” who do not need to apply for Migrant Hukou Certificates and can be granted permanent hukou status in the city they live and work in after a period of five years, provided they pass an annual verification. Blue seal hukou holders enjoy the same rights and social status as local non-agricultural hukou holders.

The blue seal hukou program can be regarded (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Davin, 1999) as a means of regularizing the sale of non-agricultural hukou that started in the 1980’s in various urban areas as a means of raising capital for local governments. This practice was oftentimes shut down by the local government, as happened in the Pearl River Delta and Sunan (Wang, 2005, p.71) were the cadres responsible for implementing hukou sale were severely penalized. Nonetheless, given the proliferation of hukou sales escaping the control of the central state,
the implementation of the blue seal *hukou* appeared as a measure to “legalize” such *hukou* transfers.

While non-agricultural *hukou* for big cities and metropolises is still strictly controlled and quotas for *nongzhuanfei* amount to only 0.15 to 0.2 per cent of the population depending on the city, the process for change in *hukou* status for smaller cities and towns has been loosened up in an effort to redirect migration towards cities under 200,000 inhabitants. This scheme which started in 1997 with 450 pilot towns and small cities (Chan & Zhang, 1999, p.840) aims to grant non-agricultural *hukou* to those coming from rural areas who can achieve stable work and accommodation and have stayed in the small city or town for over two years. This change in *hukou* status can be also extended to close family members. This scheme has widely replace the “self-supplied food grain” *hukou* program, and provides its holders with the same rights as regular residents, namely public education for them and their children, social security and welfare benefits.
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION SYSTEM

Precedents

A system of household registration has existed in China in different forms and with different levels of efficiency at least since the Xia Dynasty (21-16 century BC) which initiated a population census and household registration system. Since then, mostly every ruling dynasty in China has intended to monitor its population, mainly for taxation purposes, even though restriction of population mobility was also enforced at times. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), “people were politically prohibited and socially discouraged from migrating or going into exile at will. Anyone with a legitimate reason for traveling or moving must carry an official fu (identification) permit to avoid arrest and imprisonment. Illegal migrant were designated fugitives, and checkpoint officials who did not inspect fu diligently were to be criminally prosecuted” (Wang, 2005, p.36).

The various systems of household registration developed by Chinese dynasties were enforced at times alongside the baojia system. The baojia was a system of neighborhood control that organized households in three layers: bao —consisting of 5 to 10 households—, dabao —25 to 50 households— and dubao —250 to 500 households—. All families in the same bao shared a collective responsibility, lianzhuo, and all were to be punished alike if anyone was found violating the law. As migration became illegal during specific periods, the baojia system became an effective tool of population mobility control.

It was not until the Qing dynasty, though, that an attempt was made to regulate an imperial hukou system through modern legislation. The first hukou law was promulgated in 1911, the final year of the dynasty. The Qing hukou law did not prohibit internal migration but set the principles of mandatory registration and centralized administration which lasted up until the hukou system as it is known today. The Republic of China under Kuomintang rule inherited the Qing hukou law and used it for both population control and taxation purposes. Although internal migration was not restricted, in those regions undertaking anticommunist campaigns population movement was especially restrained through baojia. Thus, much of the hukou system created by the CPC was taken from earlier forms of population control methods. The CPC began implementing their own hukou system even before 1949, among the areas under its control. Early hukou implementation, though, stemmed less from concerns with population movement than from the need of monitoring counterrevolutionary activities.
and so, the *lianbao* system, differing from *baojia* in nothing but name, was introduced as a means of social control.

**The 1950's in China**

In September 1949, just days before its final victory over the Kuomintang rule, the CPC celebrated the first “Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference”, reuniting the CPC with eight aligned parties. This meeting resulted in a Common Program, used as a constitution until the issuing of the first official PRC Constitution in 1954. Both the Common Program and the 1954 Constitution granted people “freedom of residence and freedom to change their residence” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.646) but from as soon as 1949, the differences in approach taken by the CPC regarding urban and rural population would turn internal migration into a pressing problem.

Firstly, the newly founded Chinese government committed themselves to offer subsidized food and housing for its urban population including those unemployed, a commitment that was never taken in the countryside, where peasants were expected to grow their own food. This commitment posed a problem in both resources and government funding. Therefore, the state prompted the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees and unemployed urban residents from large cities to the countryside (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.647). These relocations were voluntary —except for criminals and class enemies— and assisted by the state; financial support for transportation was offered along with the promise of land and grain allowances. Moreover, migration back to the cities after relocation was not prohibited.

Still, the flux of rural-urban migration, which came to be known as “blind” influxes of migration, continued growing and the State Council addressed in 1952 registration control as a means of short-term management of population movement. It was believed that the path of rapid industrialization and construction would eventually absorb the surplus rural labor. A State Council “Directive on Dissuading Peasants from Blind Influx into Cities” followed in 1953, urging “the hundreds of thousands of peasants who had entered the cities in search of work to return to their villages, exempting those who had already obtained employment and had government or factory papers to prove it” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.653).

Less than a year later, the Ministries of Interior and Labor promulgated a “Joint Directive to Control Blind Influx of Peasants into Cities”. This directive limited the labor flows from the countryside to the cities by charging the district and township government with the task of recruiting the amounts of demanded labor through a regulated process. By
recruiting rural labor through official channels, it was easier to return the recruits to the countryside once their employment had concluded. The directive was executed in threefold manner, namely by:

- Prohibiting urban units from making private arrangements to recruit rural workers.
- Directing local governments to halt uncoordinated recruitment in the villages.
- Ordering manager and union leaders to instruct workers not to invite people from their villages to come to the cities in search of work.

In the following years, a “Regulations for Public Security Substations” was passed, which called for the creation of security bureau substations in both rural and urban areas in order to deal with population registration. Once the institutions covering population movement control had been established, the 1955 “Directive Concerning Establishment of a Permanent System of Household Registration” was issued by the State Council, implementing a full scale hukou system. Following the thorough implementation of a household registration system came the implementation of a rationing system. Through the “Provisional Measures Governing Grain-Rationing in Cities and Towns” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.657), which applied at first only to grain but was soon extended to most other foods as well as cotton and cloth, food rationing became inextricably bound to hukou. In order to obtain grain-supply cards, one had to present their hukou card, available only through hukou registration. Thus, with the progressive collectivization and disappearance of the free market, avoiding hukou registration meant being unable to procure food or clothing.

The rationing system widened the gap between the rural and urban spheres. While those with non-agricultural hukou were entitled to a state supply of grain and other products, rural peasants were expected to feed themselves. Rural households were required to sell most of their harvest to the state who, as the only monopolistic buyer, could fix very low sell prices. The amount allowed to keep for personal consumption in rural areas, about 143-186 kg of rice flour, was significantly less than what the rationing system provided non-agricultural hukou holders, about 184-212 kg of flour, leaving rural residents to be not only poorer but also underfed.

**The Great Leap Forward: demise and reinstatement of hukou**

More comprehensive and definitive hukou regulations came in on January of 1958, when the Standing Committee of the NPC promulgated “Regulations on Household Registration in the People's Republic of China”. These regulations, considered by most of the literature as the actual starting point of a full-blown hukou system, coincided with the collectivization scheme
which was part of the Great Leap Forward. Hence, *hukou*, food rationing and collectivization became intertwined, especially in rural areas. While in cities, public security organs were to keep a separate record of each household, in the countryside it was the collective which kept a single register with the names of all households and individuals. Article 4 of the “Regulations on Household Registration in the People's Republic of China” stated that “in the countryside, a household (registration) book shall be issued to each collective”, and it was registration which would provide proof of “the identity of citizens” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.663).

Refusing to join a collective meant being unable to register and thus placing oneself out of the state system; by November 1958, 99.1 per cent of rural households had already been enrolled in 26,500 communes (Bailey, 2001, p.171). Registration also spread to the People’s Liberation Army, subjecting virtually every inhabitant of China to *hukou* regulations.

As the CPC attempted to further tighten population mobility through collectivization and *hukou*, the massive campaigns to push for the country’s rapid industrialization mobilized more workers than ever before in the history of China. Consequently, the first years of the Great Leap Forward were a period of chaotic, unregulated migration which resulted in a surge in urban population at both big city and rural town levels. When the failure of the Great Leap became apparent and those suffering from famine could be counted by the millions, the central state embarked on a nation-wide implementation of the *hukou* system with the aim of regaining control over economy and society. Millions of workers were laid-off and returned to the countryside in an effort to reduce the supply of grain and other commodities to the cities. Population mobility, especially rural-urban migration, was severely restricted and those deemed “illegal migrants” were persecuted and sent back to their hometowns. As a result of these measures, the gap between urban and rural population widened and urban growth virtually came to a halt for almost two decades until the economic reforms championed by Deng Xiaoping.

Mao planned the Great Leap not only as a strategy for rapid industrialization but also as a means of closing the gap existing between the urban and rural spheres in China “by promoting development of small-scale industry such as crop processing and tool manufacture in the rural areas” (Bailey 168). Thus, he advocated for a process of decentralization that put both the commune system and state-controlled enterprises in the hands of local and provincial governments. “Mao further argued that in the process of industrializing the countryside the masses themselves would master technology and thereby reduce their dependence on a technocratic elite” (Bailey, 2001, p.169). The unfolding of this process meant that “by June
1959 80 per cent of centrally controlled state enterprises were under provincial jurisdiction while, at the same time, the number of central government ministries was reduced from 41 to 30 in 1959” (Bailey, 2001, p.170).

The decentralization created a “general breakdown of administrative control” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.665) which favored unorganized migration even as the CPC worked to implement *hukou* regulations, at least during the first year of the Great Leap. In 1958, “China's leaders called on provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions to issue construction bonds and to recruit whatever labor they required to promote industry in the service of accelerated growth” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.665). By the fall of that year, “38 million people were reportedly mobilized to leave their villages, taking with them tools and draught animals to join the campaign for indigenous iron and steel production” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.665), even those traveling without a migration certificate were welcome and could easily find work if they were minimally literate and in good health condition. As a result of these massive mobilization campaigns, urban population rose from 99 million to 130 million in three years (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.665).

The pressure to improve productivity in both state industries and rural communes was the main reason for the ultimate failure of the Great Leap Forward. In an effort to comply with the overly optimistic growth figures flaunted by the central state, provincial cadres substantially revised figures upwards. For example, in the Guangdong province, “the planned increase in industrial production for 1958 had been set at 5.8 per cent in October 1957. By early February 1958, the planned increase was revised upward to 33.2 per cent” (Fairbank, 1992, 325) Grain production figures were also inflated, up to double the actual production, although the harvest declined in 1959. Because of the decentralization championed by Mao, centrally managed production statistics were impossible to collect and the central state had no alternative but to trust provincial government reports. The official grain figures, although deceiving, were used to calculate the state quotas for grain, which meant a higher percentage of grain was taken from the peasantry, leaving very little in the countryside to supply the communes. Moreover, in many areas where rural residents were mobilized en masse to join construction projects or steel factories, and many crops were left to rot as there were not enough farmers left to harvest them. Grain and other food supplies were also left to rot during transportation process, as precedence was given to transporting steel and iron to the factories and construction sites. As a result, an acute famine extended specially through the countryside, during which as many as 30 million people are estimated to have died of starvation.
The first signs of famine and economic collapse, though, were already perceived in 1959, bringing the state to consider reducing the number of urban residents and state employees in an attempt to ease its economic burden. The State Planning Commission estimated in 1959 that “if the urban population could be reduced by 10 million, the supply of grain to the cities and towns could be cut by 1.5 to million tons, and the supply of coal and vegetables could be cut by 2-3 million tons and 0.75 million tons respectively” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p.666). Moreover, the CPC would save around 2 million yuan in state wages. By the end of the year, five million state employees had already been dismissed. Over the course of the following 3 years, around 20 more million workers would be dismissed. By 1965, the industrial labor force had declined from 16.6 per cent in 1958 to just 6 per cent of the total population. A total of around 28 million people who had obtained hukou registration in urban areas were sent back to their former villages (Wang, 2005, p.47), and hukou regulations became strictly enforced to ensure population mobility was completely restricted.

The story of the inhabitants of Da Fo, a small village of the province of Henan, almost bordering Hebei, illustrate the hardships of life in the communes and of population restriction during the last years of the Great Leap as well as of the return of most of the villagers who had left to become state employees or to enroll in one of the state promoted factories and construction projects. After the closure of the market, the state pressured villages to move toward the production of grain, even those villages that had comparative advantage in other crops. This prompted many villagers from Da Fo to migrate in 1958, “when hukou controls on migration were still loose” (Thaxton, 2008, p.165). In the summer of 1959, however, as the central state was already planning the relocation of millions of urban dwellers to the countryside, “Da Fo’s harvest company leaders passed the word that migration was prohibited. From this point forward, if people left the village without permission for more than a few days, they were reported to brigade and commune leaders” (Thaxton 2008, p.163), arrested and brought back to the village where they were publicly scolded in front of their neighbors.

The situation in Da Fo, as in most other villages, became even more difficult for those attempting to migrate in 1960 and after, with the full-blown implementation of hukou and strict control over population movement. In Da Fo, the party secretary declared that anyone who left the village for an extended period without an official hukou certificate would not be able to get food outside the village and would risk losing his share of the village grain ration if he were to return. Furthermore, at the provincial level, the Communist Party authorities to which the Da Fo was assigned, threatened that food would not be given to any household with
a member missing from harvest company work for more than a few days. The Da Fo harvest company leaders were assigned with the task of discouraging migration, but also apprehending those who left the village and punishing disobedience with violence (Thaxton, 2008, p.166). 1960 also marked the beginning of the return of many of the villagers who had either been dismissed from their factory jobs or found it nearly impossible to subsist with their meager state employee wages. An account of Da Fo’s returnees include:

Zheng Tianbao, along with a host of Liangmen People’s Commune staff appointees, came back to Da fo to stay in 1960, because the salary from his commune position was too small to support him and his family. Ruan Tianhan, who had been sent to work in the Anyang Cotton Station in the first year of the Great Leap, returned to Da Fo’s collective fields in the fall of 1961. The floodgates opened in 1962: Pang Guihua, a worker in the Shangcun Cotton Station, had to return to Da Fo that year after the staff of the station was downsized from 180 people to 30. Pang Canshen, a state cadre who sold pesticides, fertilizers, and farm implements for the Dongle County Commercial Bureau, “volunteered” to give up his employment in 1962 because, he says, “my salary could not support my five young children.” Bao Jingan, who had found work in the Angyan Steel Company, was sent back to Da Fo to become a farmer in 1962. In 1963 Ruan Yindao, the deputy-director of the Liangmen Commune Irrigation Department, gave up his government position, with its 27.5 yuan per month, to come back to the village and serve as the accountant of the fifth production team. And on it went. (Thaxton, 2008, p.168)

This picture repeated itself all over the country.

The Cultural Revolution

Before the death of Mao and the eventual takeover of the central government by Deng Xiaoping, one more period of chaos shook China. The Cultural Revolution was Mao’s last intent to regain center stage in China by seemingly leading an uprising against the same party structures he had built. His efforts turned into a decade of disorder, factional conflict and violence; although the Cultural Revolution’s most violent phase lasted for about three years, its effects were felt well until Mao's death. After the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, Mao withdrew from day-to-day affairs, leaving economic planning in the hands of his second Liu Shaoqi and Secretary Deng Xiaoping. With a more pragmatic approach in government, communes were reduced and decollectivization began in some areas as early as 1962, allowing peasants to work on private plots and sell the remnants of their production in some newly re-established rural markets, or take sideline occupations such as raising poultry (Hunter & Sexton, 1999, p.32).

Mao, however, revolted against his belittlement in the decision making process and the economic policies he regarded as an incitement to capitalism. At the Eleventh Plenum of the
Central Committee, celebrated in the summer of 1966, Mao demoted Liu Shaoqi as his number 2 and replaced him with General Lin Biao, leader of the PLA and at the time dubbed Mao’s “close comrade in arms”. The Central Plenum also served to announce a Sixteen Point Decision on the Cultural Revolution, which envisioned a mass movement that would “overthrow those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road” (Cambridge History of China vol. XV, p.140). This mass movement was to “repudiate” bourgeois ideology and to “transform education, literature and art”. Mao’s vision took shape in the organization of the Red Guards, a radical grassroots movement comprised mainly of teenage high school students who were both inexperienced and highly destructive. A Central Cultural Revolution Group was formed to guide all Cultural Revolution activities and report to the Politburo Standing Committee.

The campaign against the Four Olds —old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits— saw the Red Guards attacking intellectuals, closing down universities and destroying ancient artifacts and buildings for the sake of ridding the country of any traditional or reactionary elements. Supported by Mao and the PLA, the Red Guards grew more and more violent and branding the slogan “Bombard the Headquarters”, endorsed by Mao himself, began to direct their attacks against the revisionist group inside the CPC, eventually forcing the purge of Liu and Deng, who were deemed “capitalist roaders”. In 1967, the party structure itself was under fire as Mao incited the masses to “seize power from below” (Fairbank & Reischauer, 1989, p.521). The general atmosphere of chaos and authority breakdown made it easier to bypass hukou restrictions and many young people who had been sent down to the countryside in the early 1960’s, now took advantage of the disorder to return to cities. The possibility of free transportation across the country for Red Guards to exchange revolutionary experiences and attend mass rallies in Beijing also greatly allowed for uncontrolled population movement.

Mao’s next step was to call for the setting of revolutionary committees at all levels of government. Under the supervision of the Central Cultural Revolution Group these committees were enlisted to introduce new local governments with members of the revolutionary masses, which deepened the tension inside the CPC. Meanwhile, the Red Guards had broken into factions which soon started fighting amongst themselves. Violence escalated until civil war virtually broke in some regions and the PLA had to be brought in to restore order. Acknowledging the failure of the Red Guards, Mao disbanded them in mid-1968. Disbanded Red Guards, along with intellectuals and disgraced officials amounting to 20 million people, were sent to the countryside to settle and work on agriculture. At the same
time, the flow of migrant peasants to the cities continued, even though under temporary contracts from state owned enterprises, they were forced to go back to their villages once their work was over. Millions of cadres, teachers and students headed on the opposite direction as they were required to spend months or years in rural areas for re-education, but still kept their non-agricultural *hukou* and could restore their status after their periods of rustication.

In 1973 Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated and appointed Vice Premier, just until Premier Zhou Enlai’s death in early 1976, after which he was again dismissed from office. Zhou, who had navigated the waters of the Cultural Revolution avoiding purges while still trying to counter Mao’s worst excesses, announced his plan for the “Four Modernizations” in 1975 at the 4th National People’s Congress, marking a change in direction towards a more pragmatic economic policy which would take precedence over politics. Zhou, however, was already ill and died just eight months before Mao himself, who passed away in September of 1976. A power struggle began amongst factions in the high ranks of the CPC, to which Deng came out victorious, being reappointed as Vice Premier and head of the military, thus effectively taking control of the country in 1978. Deng, continuing with the direction brought forth by Zhou Enlai, announced the official launch of the Four Modernizations in December of that year, giving way to an era of reform that would transform the economy of China.

**Economic reforms**

The 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee marked the beginning of an era of economic reform, industrial development and progressive capitalization that has made China one of the fastest developing powers, sustaining annual growths of between 8 and 10 percent. In the Plenum, Deng impulsed Zhou’s Four Modernizations, a fourfold plan that included improvements in the fields of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. Of these four courses of modernization, two had a serious impact on population movement: agriculture and industry.

In regards to agriculture, the decollectivization process began in 1978 and, by 1982, the People’s Communes had officially been abolished and replaced by township governments. By 1983, decollectivization was effective although land remained property of the state. A Household Responsibility System was set in motion, in which the land, agricultural buildings, machinery, and draught animals that had been managed by the People’s Communes were now contracted to individual households. Unlike under the collective system, in which the bulk of the production was handled by the Commune and redistributed among the peasants, these contracts asked for a fixed amount of production to be returned to the state for procurement
agencies, but the remainder of production could be sold by the peasants themselves in the free market. The prospect of earnings boosted productivity in agriculture. Although at first the contracts were signed for a duration of a few months to a year, in some parts of China land was soon being leased for up to fifteen or thirty years.

The boost in agricultural productivity, however, worsened the already delicate situation of surplus labor in rural China. While being home to more than 20 percent of the world’s population, China amounts only to 7 percent of its arable land, and the rapid population growth meant that the arable land per capita continuously shrunk, so an alternative occupation for rural laborers became paramount. The alternatives were either migration into cities and newly developing industrial areas, or the creation of non agricultural jobs on the countryside. The latter appeared in the form of Township and Village Enterprises or TVEs.

TVEs were partly fuelled by agricultural prosperity and owned by local communities and government bodies though outside of state control, and concentrated in light industry, such as the production and repair of agricultural tools and processing of agricultural goods. They allowed rural workers to “leave the land without leaving the village” (litu bu lixiang) and constituted a safer way out of agriculture at a time where hukou regulations still greatly hindered population movement. Faced with the prospect of a rural migration flow into the cities, the central government set a nongzhuanfei annual quota of rural to urban hukou of 0.15 percent of the total population, which by mid-1980s had increased to a 0.2 percent but remained constant and largely enforced in most big cities until the early 2000s.

Furthermore, the lack of information about migration prospects and the inexistence of migrant networks also constituted deterrents to population movement. Thus, TVEs absorbed much of the surplus rural labor in the 1980s, growing from about 1.65 million TVEs to over 12 million in just one year from 1984 to 1985. This impressive surge in TVEs coincided not by chance with the introduction of the “self-supplied food grain” hukou which allowed for many peasants from remote rural areas to obtain non-agricultural hukou in more prosperous villages and small towns. The growth of TVEs continued sustainedly until 1993, where they reached their peak at 24 and a half million.
After 1993 the number of TVEs decreased dramatically (Lu, 2014, p.73), due partly to the competition posed by state owned enterprises and the proliferation of joint ventures, partly to the low levels of productivity some TVEs recorded. By 1998 the number of TVEs had been reduced to round 20 million and would not recuperate for almost a decade. As more TVEs closed down, rural workers opted for migrating onward to cities and the more developed industrial coastal zones. Figure 2 shows how as the number of households working in TVEs decreased, those households involved in migrant labor increased rapidly, surpassing TVE workers in 1993 and rapidly escalating as the pace of industrial development in China accelerated. According to the China One Percent Population Surveys from 1987 and 1995, 41 percent of migrants originating from rural areas were living in towns in 1987. However, in 1995 the number had dropped to just 9 percent. On the contrary, in 1987 the proportion of migrants from rural areas living in cities was of 33 percent but that number had climbed to 51 percent in 1995 (Liang, 2001). These findings are consistent with migration originating from the decline in the number of TVEs. Although its number has been growing steadily in the XXI century, TVEs continuing posing a problem due to their economic and ecological unsustainability, and the lack of regulations concerning safety conditions for their workers.

Modernization in industry was marked by a progressive opening to foreign trade and investment, the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that laid the path of industrial development, and a price reform that eventually led to a market economy. Thanks to the implementation of the Household Responsibility System in agriculture, a dual economy system had been created in which the quota of grain and other agriculture produce returned to
the state were sold at controlled prices, much lower and more stable than the prices set for the free market. During the 1980’s, a similar system was extended to all sectors of the economy. The plan was to reduce or maintain fixed the quota of production that had to be returned to the state. In this way, as the economy grew, the proportion to be sold at market prices would increase in respect to those sold at state prices. By the mid-1990s, only a small percentage of all goods were still sold at state prices and China had virtually transformed into what at the 14th CPC Congress in 1992 had been dubbed a Socialist Market Economy.

The marketization of the economy brought harsh consequences for state workers. Enterprise managers were given leeway to hire and fire employees, and to implement strategies to maximize benefits and reduce production costs. At the same time, the Central State was letting go of some of the longtime benefits provided for urban residents and state employees, such as state-subsidized food rations which by the early 1990s had been eliminated. Samely, the provision of welfare housing for non-agricultural hukou holders ended in 1999. All this contributed to what has been called the “breaking the iron rice bowl”, namely the end of the lifelong benefit package ensured to all non-agricultural households.

To attain rapid economic growth, the PRC came out of decades of self-reliance and started an “open-door” policy in order to attract foreign investment. On the one side, China joined the World Bank in 1980 and has since been one of its largest borrowers. Loans from the World Bank have been used to develop infrastructures and improve welfare programs in the poorest areas of the country (Hunter & Sexton, 1999, p.88). On the other hand, pilot areas for private foreign investment designated as Special Economic Zones (SEZs), were created in the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Xinjiang and the island of Hainan. Inside SEZs, foreign investors were given facilities to establish joint ventures with Chinese partners while enjoying a more open lifestyle than in the rest of China. Furthermore, fourteen maritime ports were opened to provide especially for foreign trade.

Industries in SEZs focused in the production of consumer goods such as clothing, shoes, toys, and small electronics; in short, industries which are labor-intensive and require workers with a minimum skill set. As these industries are privately controlled, wages paid could be far below the ones in state-owned enterprises, and hours longer. Working conditions made employment in SEZ industries undesirable for urban workers, accustomed to the benefits of state jobs, thus creating an enormous pool of job opportunities for rural migrants. Guangdong, home to three SEZs, was the receiver of the two largest interprovincial migration streams between 1985 and 1990, and by 1995 accounted for around 7 million migrants, 13 percent of the total temporary population of China (Liang, 2001, p.503-504). Workers at SEZ factories
have typically been young women, between 16 and 25 years old. In some areas such as Shenzhen, older workers were actively discriminated against and not permitted to work (Davin, 1999, p.117). These workers lack any welfare or benefits but because working hours usually amounted to 10 or 12 a day, women factory workers could earn in a month what their male counterparts earned in a year working the land.

Most workers live in shared rooms in dormitories provided by the factory owners and tend to migrate to zones where workers from their own province are already present. Davin (1999) provides an account of an interview with a Sichuanese worker in the Shenzhen SEZ who stated she could tolerate working conditions better because all of her colleagues were from Sichuan so she could speak in the provincial dialect and even get Sichuanese food from the canteen. This account is consistent with a rather usual recruitment method of hiring workers through introductions from other workers. Workers in SEZs, of course, hold only temporary contracts and thus are not eligible for hukou transfers. They are expected to return home when their contract comes to an end and, unless they can find a new job, cannot stay in these zones.
MIGRANT WORKERS: LIFE AND HARDSHIPS

Migrant life in cities

Migration into China’s biggest cities is diverse and the fate of migrants depends greatly on their hukou status. Migrants coming from urban areas with non-agricultural hukou may even be able to obtain better job opportunities than locals holding agricultural hukou, as some jobs in cities are still reserved for those with non-agricultural hukou only. Furthermore, non-agricultural hukou holders tend to be better educated and thus to have better employment prospects. On the contrary, migrant peasants with limited labor skills can aspire only to menial jobs in factories or in the service sector, the so-called 3D jobs—dirty, dangerous and demeaning—, and to temporary and oftentimes abusive contracts (if they are lucky enough to have contracts at all).

Illustrating this dichotomy, data from the 1997 Beijing Migrant Census reflects that those migrants with non-agricultural hukou were more likely to be unemployed than their agricultural counterparts (Guo, 2007, p.219). Even though it might seem contradictory, this finding indicates that those with non-agricultural hukou are able to remain in the city without employment, either because they get unemployment benefits from their former jobs, or because they enjoy a more stable network of family and friends who can support them until they find a new job opportunity. Rural migrants working under temporary contracts or involved in the informal sector do not enjoy such benefits and cannot support themselves in the city for long without a job, so they tend to return home when employment opportunities are scarce (hence they were more unlikely to be captured by the survey) (Guo, 2007, p.225).

Temporary migration continued to grow in the decades following the economic reforms. In 1987, the main reasons for migration were still family reunification or permanent job transfers through the tightly controlled official hukou channels, and migrations for reason of business or factory work,—hence the kind of migration that is temporary in nature—amounted only to 10 percent. But only three years later, migration accounting for business and factory work had climbed to 24 percent (Liang, 2001, P.516). As temporary migration has grown, so has its occupational concentration in the marginal sectors of the economy. In the 1997 Beijing Migrant Census, for example, 80 percent of migrants cited manual labor as their employment, 18 percent were engaged in small businesses such as street vending and only around one percent were employed in other jobs. Unemployment was low at less than one percent, supporting the proposition that rural migrants tend to return home when they lack job opportunities or simply take any job that comes along.
The reform era has also seen the revival of a special class of temporary worker, the *yigong yinong* (peasant worker), who might be hired by state employers to work in hard or heavy jobs such as underground excavation or hazardous cleaning (Wang, 2005, p.97). This system, first initiated by Liu Shaoqi in the 1960s, provides peasant workers with contracts of between three and ten years during which their *hukou* remains agricultural but they are offered job subsidies and bonuses, and could opt for grain rations and other subsidized supplies until the state phased them out for all workers. However, they are not provided with accommodation and other types of welfare, nor their children have access to public urban schools. Because of this rather advantageous system considering rural migrants general working conditions, peasant workers are eager to get these contracts and most state owned enterprises have hired a substantial amount of *yigong yinong* to carry out undesired jobs.

The rise in the number of temporary migrant workers, who are by their sheer size and nature very difficult to control, has created insecurity and rejection amongst urban residents and officials alike. Hence, discriminatory terms such as *liudong renkou* (floating population) or *mangliu* (blind floaters) have been used to refer to temporary migrants, especially those migrating without a proper *hukou* transfer, failing to register with the *hukou* police upon arrival or living in the city with an expired temporary residence certificate. The size of the so-called floating population has skyrocketed and was considered to be between 85 and 120 million people in the early 2000s.

Officially, without at least a temporary registration, migrants would not be able to obtain a job, but most of them can still find employment in the informal sector by, for example, becoming a maid in a local household or finding a job in the service sector, working for a fellow migrant running a small business. The development of the informal sector in China’s cities began with those returning from rustication after the death of Mao. The state sector could not grow fast enough to absorb all those who had been living in the countryside but still retained non-agricultural *hukou*. Faced with this problem, local authorities permitted all those considered “awaiting employment” to start their own small business and earn a living becoming street vendors or setting up small food stalls (Davin, 1999, p.101). Since then, the informal sector has been the only opportunity for most of the urban poor and rural migrants.

The informal economy in China’s big cities expands from the original street vending and small restaurants to garbage collection and prostitution. Migrants engaged in this activities are considered highly mobiles and thus difficult to control, uneducated and prone to crime. Local police oftentimes target specifically migrant floaters and they can be arrested.
and fined or returned to their hometowns at any moment. In Shanghai, police annually arrest and deport over ten thousand migrants who lack proper *hukou* (Wang, 2005, p.97).

Migrant networks are vital for many of these rural workers, as they are able to find work and accommodation mostly through relatives, friends or fellow villagers. For example, the waste collection and recycling business in the city of Beijing is managed mostly by families from Henan Province, who make up 66.6% of all collectors (Davin, 1999, p.103). Because there is a reasonable amount of money to be made from recycling, through migrant groups the right to collect from certain premises is guarded. Similar monopolies happen in other cities and for other occupations (such as the Beijing maids, who all hail from Anhui province). For those lacking a stable migrant network, most cities have “labor markets”, enclaves situated near busy intersection or close to train stations and long distance buses drop-off points. Labor markets can either be for general laborers waiting to get hired for whatever job is available, or more specialized such as for construction or domestic workers.

Construction is one of the sectors employing a great number of temporary migrants. Some are hired in labor markets; others are brought in large groups directly from their hometowns through employers or labor contractors who sign deals with local governments in the sending areas. Some get hired day by day and others have fixed contracts until the project is completed. Those contracted by project not only work but tend to live in the construction sites, in makeshift dormitories provided by employers. Construction workers sleep together in bunk beds and have little or no space for personal possessions and primitive systems of sanitation. Much as manual laborers living in factory dormitories, construction workers seldom visit the city they are working in as they fear getting lost or having their meager wages stolen, and they have no contact with local residents (Davin, 1999, p.111). To facilitate official control over migrant construction workers, police officers in cities like Shanghai have set up outposts on large construction sites in order to register migrants and to prevent unregistered individuals from living in the workers’ dormitories (Wang, 2005, p.77)

For rural migrants not staying in employer-provided accommodation, finding a place to live might pose a challenge. In big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, rent prices are generally impossible to afford for a temporary worker and buying a house or a flat is nothing but a distant dream. Moreover, renting or buy property requires a permanent *hukou* relocation or a specific type of temporary *hukou* (blue seal *hukou* allows holders to rent and buy property), which floating migrants do not possess. The difficulty of finding accommodation through regular channels coupled with the tendency of migrants to settle in urban areas where their fellow villagers are already established, had given way to the
formation of “urban villages” (Davin, 1999, ps.107-108). In Beijing, these makeshift villages spread through peripheral areas that were once agricultural land and are known by the hometowns of the majority of their inhabitants, i.e. “Zhejiang Village”, “Anhui Village”, “Xinjiang Village”, etc. Within them, the informal sector thrives and small business run by migrants attract newcomers looking for work. Some of the villages have grown enough that the population contains only a minority of migrants from the province after which they were named, housing both rural workers and the urban destitute alike.

Living conditions in urban villages are precarious at best, with unpaved roads and self built houses, many of which lack electricity or running water. Some of them even lack a proper sewage system. Moreover, people living in urban villages are exposed to harassment from local officials, they might be rounded up and deported or their houses demolished at any time. Zhejiang Village, one of the most developed migrant communities in Beijing, has been “cleaned-up” and its houses have been demolished several times. Upon the arrival of large numbers of migrants who failed to register with the authorities during the 1980’s, Beijing authorities decided to carry annual clean-up drives during which thousands of migrants were expelled from the city (Davin, 1999, p.109). Even if the existence of these urban villages has since been normalized, the situation of migrants leaving in these communities is far from stable.

It is the instability regarding employment and housing what causes rural migrants not to feel as they are urbanites even when they have lived in cities for long periods of time. Especially if they fail to keep their hukou documentation updated, they lack access to the formal economy and to any of the services or social protection that urban residents enjoy. Those living in urban villages, construction sites or factory dormitories, rarely venture into the city and they have little to no contact with urban residents. The lack of relations between urban residents with non-agricultural hukou, who enjoy the many privileges still attached to their status, and their rural migrants counterparts further deepens the economic and social divide in China, which trickles down to the following generation, even those children of migrants who are already born in the city but live so removed from the urban resident experience that they become neither urbanites nor ruralites and find themselves at a loss regarding their identity. Furthermore, some rural migrants never actually leave their land or homes behind, contributing to the experience of duality in which sojourns in the city, no matter how long, are always temporary. The land becomes a sort of safety net in which to fall back if opportunities in urban areas turn scarce.
Migrants’ labor rights

As we have seen in the section above, the economic reform brought about the marketization of the economy and the eventual “breaking of the iron rice bowl”, the end to a number of state-provided benefits for non-agricultural hukou holders, which included food rations and the state subsidized supply of other basic goods as well as housing and social insurance. China’s social insurance for urban workers comprised five key items: pension insurance, industrial injury insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance and unemployment insurance. In 1991, the State Council Decision on Pension System Reform for Workers and Staff of Urban Enterprises signaled the new approach in which the economic burden of social insurance would be shifted to employers in the form of payroll tax and to employees in the form of wage deductions (Davies, Nielsen, Smyth, 2008, p.69). Difficulty in ensuring the compliance of enterprises to this new approach led the central government to transfer the responsibility of managing social insurance from the enterprise managers to city officials (Davies et al., 2008, p.70). Municipal governments thus could introduce their own insurance schemes but also has to enforce their compliance. Decentralization of the social insurance scheme generated great policy differences between regions.

While since the introduction of the new social insurance schemes urban workers have been amply covered by their employers, migrant workers holding agricultural hukou have been virtually excluded from any of these benefits. “As of June 2006, 16 million migrants were participating in industrial injury insurance; 11 million migrants were participating in pension insurance and 10 million migrants were participating in medical insurance nationally” (Nielsen & Smyth, 2008, p.4). Taking into consideration the number of migrants in the PRC, both those properly documented and those pertaining to the so-called “floating population”, the number of migrant workers participating in these three types of insurance, the ones most commonly offered to migrant workers, is still way below 10 percent. Moreover, migrant workers often face even unfairer working conditions as they lack proper employment contracts stipulating their wages and working hours, so wage arrears, incomplete payments and other irregularities on the part of employers are frequent.

The low level of protection to migrant workers poses a great concern to the central government as the combination of low wages, harsh working and living conditions, discrimination, and lack of social protection and benefits may spark a movement of unrest amongst migrant workers who are per se a difficult mass of population to control. Hence, at a central state level the CPC is keen to improve protection of migrant workers to reduce the
existing inequality and avoid the possibility of social unrest, protests and increasing strikes (Boehler 2014). Moreover, the extension of insurance to a young and relatively healthy migrant population would help replenish local insurance funds and improve viability of various schemes, especially pensions (Wong & Gongcheng, 2008, ps.163-4). However, the difficulties of creating a nationwide social insurance scheme for migrant workers are numerous; for starters, the formulation of what responsibilities lay in central governments, local governments and enterprises already poses a problem (Wang, 2008, p.59). Thus, the predominant strategy has been to integrate migrant workers into existing local social security schemes, which creates large variations in participation and coverage.

Central state efforts nonetheless encounter resistance both from urban residents, who for the most part look upon rural migrant workers as inferior, and the municipal governments who should provide insurance to migrant workers in the first place. Any attempt to reform the existing system to reduce inequality between urban residents with non-agricultural hukou and rural migrant workers would undoubtedly imply the elimination of certain fees and taxes imposed on rural migrants by local authorities in exchange for a range of services, including the issuing of temporary residential permits or the entry of migrant children into public urban schools (Davies & Grant, 2008, p.33). Municipal governments would therefore not only lose the benefits obtained from these fees but also have to provide services to migrant workers, increasing their expenditure and financial burden. (Davies & Grant, 2008, p.38) Moreover, the high mobility of migrant workers creates further difficulties in management and higher costs. The concern of local governments is that by mandating the extension of social insurance to migrant workers, which is de facto equivalent to imposing a new tax, enterprises, will be discouraged from investing in the area and just move away in order to minimize their costs (Wang, 2008, p.59). On the contrary, pushing to improve the situation of rural migrant workers does not economically benefit local governments.

Withal, there has been an effort to improve policies directed towards the social protection of rural migrant workers, as exemplified by the Circular No. 1 issued by the State Council Office in 2003, subtitled “Circular on the Good management and Provision of Services for Rural Migrant Workers”. This document, which has provided a basis for different governmental agencies to further expand related policy directives, consists of six key points:

1) the abolition of restrictions (imposed by the former “administrative approval system”) on the employment of rural migrant workers in urban areas; 2) the abolition of all fees and levies previously imposed on migrant workers by various government agencies; 3) the introduction of penalties for enterprises that default on migrant worker wages and/or impose arbitrary wage
deductions, together with the introduction of compulsory labor contracts for all migrant workers that stipulate such items as the term of the contract, duties, salary and mode of payment; 4) the introduction of work safety measures (including work safety training for migrant workers, preventive measures for specific occupational hazards, and inspection of work premises) to be undertaken by local government at all levels, as well as adequate compensation for those injured or killed in the course of performing their duties; 5) information campaigns for migrant workers in preventive medicine and health education to be conducted by health departments at all levels, as the adoption of appropriate “concrete measures” to provide migrant workers with medical insurance if conditions permit, as well as the inspection of dormitories and sanitation facilities set up by enterprises for migrant workers to ensure that health standards are met; and 6) the implementation of compulsory education for children of migrant workers, responsibility for which is to local governments to enroll such children in public primary schools and junior middle schools. The circular also stipulates that local schools are prohibited from charging additional fees for the enrolment of migrant workers’ children. Moreover local governments are urged to specifically allocate funds to the education of these children. (Davies & Grant, 2008, p.35)

The circular is obviously ambitious and tackles the basic points of discrimination experienced by migrants regarding both working conditions and social insurance availability. However, actual implementation of any of these points by local governments is unlikely. And it is not only municipal authorities but enterprises and even migrants themselves who are wary of a change in the status quo. Regarding social insurance, a clear example can be found in the results of the “Survey on the Participation of Pension Schemes by rural-urban Migrant Workers” carried in 2005 in seven provinces and one large city, in which 80 percent of enterprises declared they did not wish to contribute to pension insurance. Migrant workers were not eager to participate either, with 83.2 percent of the surveyees not willing to contribute to pensions and more than 90 percent who did not contribute at all (Li, 2008, p.93).

The unwillingness to participate in social insurance schemes on the part of migrant workers can be due to sheer disinformation or due to the fact that migrant workers prefer to keep the integrity of their wage so they can save it and return to their hometowns or send remittances to their families, even if it means lacking any sort of social benefit.

A survey carried by Bingqin Li (2008) out of 70 in depth interviews with rural to urban migrants in the construction and service sector in Tianjin reflects that most interviewees did not know of the existences of social security schemes and when they did know, they did not fully understand them. Out of the 70 migrants interviewed, two participated in unemployment social insurance, four in health insurance and three had pension coverage. Just one participated in the three types of insurance and another in two out of the three. They all worked in the service sector and had a higher average monthly income than the general
average income of all interviewees. This proportion does not differ much from the general 10 percent of insurance scheme participation nationwide. Out of the migrant workers who did not participate in any schemes, Li categorizes their reasons for abstaining from insurance participation into six categories:

- Impossibility to afford social security schemes.
- Skepticism about the usefulness of the schemes.
- Lack of understanding of the schemes or confusion between different types of schemes.
- Negative influence (not knowing other migrants who had participated).
- Concern about wage arrears.
- Lack of organization amongst migrants in order to participate together.

The motives for abstaining from participation in social insurance schemes show it is not only cost but to a great extent disinformation what prevents migrants from joining existing schemes and even more from demanding their employers offer some sort of social protection to employees if they are not already doing so. There seems to be, though, reasons to think the situation is improving, as participation in social insurance is highest amongst migrant workers under 30 (Wang, 2008, p.55), signaling an increasing consciousness and eagerness to demand proper labor conditions amongst younger migrants.

An interesting example of the growing awareness in young migrant workers is the appearance and proliferation of the figure of the “citizens’ agent” (Ruwitch & Beck, 2008). Citizens’ agents are migrant workers who have turned themselves into legal advisors in order to help other migrant workers take legal action against their employers when labor conditions become abusive. Most do not have any formal qualifications and have not received any law education, but have learnt about labor law by themselves after suffering abusive working conditions of their own. While traditional lawyers demand retainers and charge high fees, citizens’ agents work in exchange of very low sums, encouraging workers to initiate legal proceedings.

Together with citizen’s agents, more traditional law firms in China have begun to engage with labor law cases. Even though they pay migrant workers can offer is very low, young lawyers perceive it as a contribution to social transformation and as a way of gaining experience in a field, labor law, that is just beginning to develop in China. Besides, litigation is becoming more and more common in China as a legitimate form of protest against labor mistreatment, as other forms of negotiation, such as the creation of independent unions, are
banned by the CPC. The existing All-China Federation of Trade Unions, sponsored by the state, is in fact inactive in the protection of workers’ rights.

Local governments, however, have kept a hostile attitude towards citizens’ agents, NGOs and law firms who supply legal advice to migrant workers. In Bao’an, a district of Shenzhen heavily populated by migrants, the local court decided to ban citizens’ agents because they were winning too many cases. Meanwhile, lawyers also complain of local authorities interfering with court decisions. Opposition from local governments is part of a bigger movement that regards with suspicion the development of a civil society in China, which may lead to undermining the authority on the CPC. On a more practical note, local governments fear that, if workers’ rights increase considerably, investors and factory owners might move away to other areas where production is cheaper.

Women migrants

The specificities of women migrants in China require a more comprehensive look. Women are more likely to migrate for reasons not related to employment, such as marriage and family reunification. Women who migrate from rural areas in search of employment usually earn lower wages, are less likely to participate in social insurance schemes and work in a distinct range of jobs. Furthermore, in recent years widespread migration has changed women’s marriage and fertility patterns.

Marriage migration has been and is still today one of the major causes for migration amongst women, especially between rural areas. Marriage is still regarded in the more traditional parts of China as a transaction from which both families benefit. Therefore, marriage between an urban groom and a rural bride is rarer, given that the groom’s family would have little to gain from that union in the form of social connections or a better status. Furthermore, because of hukou regulations, the newlyweds would probably have to live apart for some time until the bride could relocate her hukou registration. Still, it was because marriage migration was a common form of upward mobility amongst rural women that hukou status was matrilineal until 1998.

Relocation between rural areas of the same or similar category, on the contrary, is definitely easier. Marrying outside the village is common in China as it sustains a series of benefits to both families, especially increasing their network, which is important in cases of need or shortage (a poor harvest or a natural disaster, for example). Thus, there exist a sort of “marriage market”, in which family connections and middlemen play a part in putting
families in contact or sharing information about the availability of prospective brides and grooms in a concrete area. Since the 1990s, however, the marriage market has grown bigger in size (Davin, 1999, p.146) and women now travel long distances if it means an opportunity for advantageous marriage.

Long distance marriage migration, however, poses many threats for women who embark on journeys of thousands of kilometers without firsthand knowledge of his future husband or in-law family. They might be tricked into marrying men who are much older, sick or disabled. Migrant brides feel more isolated, as they might not have friends or acquaintances in their villages of destination. They might be badly treated or abused by their new husbands, but have very little possibilities of contacting their families or running away back home. In Xiao County, Anhui Province, the All-Women’s Federation of China found that wives who had migrated from other provinces complained they were not allowed to stay in contact with their families for fear they might run away. These wives suffered from low status as they had no useful connections that could benefit their husbands or in-law family and they struggled to learn the local dialect and how to plant local crops (Davin, 1999, p.148). Still, migrant brides may suffer even bleaker fates, as they might be tricked or abducted by traders who then sell them into forced marriage or prostitution.

Even though migration marriage is still a substantial part of women migration, the number of women migrating for employment reasons grows every day. A huge number of rural female migrants move into Guangdong Province to work at the factories that populate the Pearl River Delta. The profile of these migrants is often that of young — it is mandatory to be 18 to work but some factories recruit underage workers (Chang, 2008, p.6) — single females from poor rural areas with a low level of education and skills. They live in dormitories next to the factories and are unable to come and go at will. To ensure workers stay for at least six months, employers withhold the first two months’ wages, but even after six months it might not be possible to get the payment back in order to leave (Chang, 2008, p.9). Working hours are long and often stretch to 10 or 12 a day, with only two breaks for meals. Workers might even get fines for a range of things that include talking or taking bathrooms breaks without permission.

Despite the terrible conditions, young women regard migration as an opportunity to travel, experience new things, and break from the monotony of their villages. Some just want to save money to send to their family for a while until they return to the village to get married. Others regard their migration as an escape from rural life and try to move up the employment ladder — to “walk out of the factory”, meaning to pass from working with their hands to
working with their heads (Chang, 2008, p.16). Whichever way, employment migration plays an important role in the life plans of these women. Women who migrate young are more likely to get married later as they will spend more time working in the cities before getting married.

Marrying later also means they start having children later. Furthermore, for those who still migrate after marriage, or those who marry migrant workers, there can be long periods of time in which the spouses are separated, which also interferes with fertility rates. Although there is a widespread conception amongst the urban population that migrants have many kids—which they regard as a major reason not to afford them give any benefits, as they would make the system collapse—, the reality is actually the opposite: temporary migration contributes to a depression in fertility.

Having children as a migrant worker entails many risks. It was not until 1994 that the National People’s Congress passed a law stipulating that all Chinese citizens were entitled to maternal and infant health care. In 2001, the State Council issued regulations which further defined the content of maternal health care, which should include: “1) education on maternal health; 2) pre-marital physical examination; 3) pre-natal examinations for genetic diseases; 4) delivery; 5) contraceptive surgery; and 6) screening for neonatal diseases” (China Labour Bulletin 2009). Still, many of these services are not free and few female migrant workers are able to afford them. Because of the protection of migrant mothers and newborns is low, the maternal death rate of migrant workers is between three to seven times higher than for local women.

Aside from maternal health, female migrant workers also encounter difficulties to obtain medical care for their small children. In Shenzhen, a healthcare insurance scheme for small children was set up in 2007. In order to be eligible, workers had to have joined the city’s basic medical insurance and their children had to be enrolled in nursery, primary or secondary school. These two conditions are nonetheless huge obstacles for migrant parents and children. Firstly, employers are not required to include migrant workers into the basic medical insurance scheme. Secondly, most migrant children are not enrolled in public state schools but in private “migrant schools” some of which are not even recognized as such by the state. Thus, these children, together with the ones born outside state-family planning, are not eligible for public medical care.
The next generation: migrant and left-behind children

The hardships of migration do not affect just migrant workers themselves but their whole families, especially children. Children of rural migrants generally face one of two fates: if their parents hold only temporary jobs or tend to have a high mobility —such as seasonal workers—, children stay behind in their rural hometowns and are raised by either just one parent or by other relatives, seldom getting to see their parents. If migrants establish themselves in a city or a bigger town and are able to obtain stable employment and accommodation, they bring their children with them. In the city, children of migrants face the same discrimination their parents have to endure. They rarely have access to public healthcare or state schools. Migrant workers are either forced to pay an exorbitant sum of money —for migrant standards—as an “entry fee” to get their children into state schools or to turn to “migrant schools”, private schools dedicated specially to migrant children and generally founded by migrants themselves, who lack the preparation to become teachers. Migrant schools lack resources and are badly equipped, lagging way behind state schools. Because of their poorer education, the chances migrant children have of passing state exams and earning college access are very slim. As one of the ways of obtaining a change into non-agricultural hukou is by getting into a college or university, the poor education of migrant children helps perpetuate the divide between the urban and rural class in China. This section examines the prospects of children of migrant parents who are left behind in their villages and of those who are brought along to the cities by their parents.

The issue of children left behind in villages was not thoroughly examined in China until 2007, when a study based on the 2005 China One Percent Population Survey carried by the All-China Women’s Federation estimated that there were about 58 million children below 18 years of age left behind by their parents nationwide. This number accounts for 21 percent of all children in China. Out of the 58 million, 40 million were under the age of 15 and 30 million had between six and 15 years of age (China Labour Bulletin 2009). Around half of the children left behind live with one of two parents, usually their mothers. The other half are either cared for by grandparents or by other relatives, friends, or live on their own without adult supervision.

Children left to live with relatives or friends rarely get to have contact with their parents. Most of them see their parents once a year for the Lunar New Year, a big holiday for migrants to return home, and some get to see their parents twice a year. Others do not see their parents for years. Communication between parents and children is mostly through
telephone calls. A survey in Beijing found that most migrant parents called their children once every two weeks. Other children, though, talk to their parents scarcely or have no contact with them at all. The effects of growing up without the love and support needed from parents take a toll on left-behind children. Chinese media has even given a name to the emotional distress suffered by most of these children, dubbing it the “left-behind syndrome”.

Left-behind children grow up deprived of their parents’ guidance and affection, which results in most cases in mental health issues. Children who are left to live with relatives at a very young age and whose parents fail to return to the village on a regular basis end up forgetting their parents’ faces. Those who do remember their parents are often overwhelmed by the feeling of loss they experience every time their parents leave to find work. Without parents who will listen to their problems and support them in front of adversity, and under the care of family members who do not have the time (in some cases grandparents have to take care of up to seven grandchildren) or interest to offer them help, left-behind children become reserved and introverted and learn not to express their needs. Hence, left-behind children are “more likely to feel depressed, emotional, anxious, fearful, become easily irritated and intransigent, and have a lower self-esteem” (China Labour Bulletin 2009). Some children even hurt themselves in order to attract the attention of their parents in hopes they will return to the villages. In the most extreme cases, left-behind children have been found to commit suicide.

Furthermore, left-behind children are more prone to become victims of violence. Young girls, without the protection or advice of their parents, fall prey to sexual assault, usually by acquaintances or neighbors of the victims. These girls are usually given money in return for their silence but, because the assailters are aware girls live separated from their parents, they know it is highly unlikely they will report them to anyone. Left-behind children and teenagers are also more exposed to abduction into criminal groups, the sex industry and forced labor.

Without the appropriate authority figures, left behind children are also more prone bad behavior, dropping off school and even to juvenile delinquency, such as public disturbances, pick-pocketing, and theft. According to the head of the research department of the Supreme Court, juvenile delinquency has had a 13 percent increase annually since 2000, with 70 percent of the juvenile delinquents were left-behind children. Facing such difficult upbringings, most left-behind children perform badly in school. Even when they are aware their parents’ efforts in migrating are directed at them getting a better education, it is hard for these children to find academic support when living with grandparents who received a very poor education and cannot help them with their school work.
The Chinese government has been increasingly concerned with the fate of left-behind children and has launched a number of initiatives to improve their living conditions. The most ambitious one is the creation of boarding schools in rural areas, to which the central government dedicated 900 million yuan from 2004 to 2006, in order to provide left-behind children a safe environment in which they can be properly supervised and cared for by teachers. However, boarding schools are still few and lack basic resources—some even lack proper sanitation. The budget that should be allocated to creating enough boarding schools for all left-behind children is far from the reach of the Chinese central government. Thus, other low-key initiatives have been developed, such as providing special telephone lines in schools so children can talk to their parents more often or a program for “loving buddies” or “stand-in parents” (China Labour Bulletin 2009). These stand-in parents are volunteers from the same area, mostly teachers and local party officials, who are assigned a left-behind child to look after and to ensure children, have an adult to confide in if they are experiencing any difficulties. Because this program is voluntary, effects vary a great deal depending on the actual implication of the stand-in parents in the lives of the left-behind children. Even though these initiatives seem like a step in the right direction, there is still a long way to go to improve the situation of left-behind children.

Rural migrants are increasingly deciding to bring their children to the cities with them if they plan to establish themselves there indefinitely, and a growing number of children of migrants are being born in cities. Because hukou status is inherited from either parent, the fact that a child of migrants is born in the city does not have any positive effect on the child’s access to either urban healthcare or public schooling. On the contrary, as we have seen, most migrant women, especially those pertaining to the “floating population”, do not have any healthcare coverage which results in deficient maternity and early childhood care.

Migrant children also suffer exclusion from the public school system. In China, school is mandatory for nine years, but local governments have no obligation to enroll migrant children in school as their funding is based solely on the number of children with local hukou. Public schools thus take advantage of the situation and charge large sums to families in the form of “sponsorship fees”. The average cost of public school education for a migrant family child can be up to a 20 percent of the total family income, even more in some for the more economically developed coastal areas such as Shenzhen (China Labour Bulletin, 2009). Even though sponsorship fees and other levies were officially abolished in 2008 and categorized as a criminal offense (Ming, 2014), the reality is that migrant families are still required to provide payments to schools in order to enroll their children.
Besides the high cost of education, public schools require migrant parents present a considerable number of documents in order to enroll their children. For example, until 2008, migrant children in Beijing and Shanghai could only access public schooling if their parents had obtained “Five Licenses”: a temporary residence permit, proof of employment, proof of residence, a certificate from the place of origin showing that the family could not provide caregiving support to its children there, and the hukou booklet. It is estimated, though, that up to 90 percent of migrant workers do not possess all five licenses, therefore their children would be unable to enroll into public schools even if they were able to pay the pertaining fees. Although the requirement in Shanghai has changed since 2008 to only two documents—the citizen identity card of parents and a proof of residency and employment—, the “Five Licenses” are still needed in Beijing (Ming, 2014) Procurement of such documentation is nearly impossible for those rural migrant workers who belong to the liudong renkou, the “floating population”, even more so considering the fact that some children of migrants are born outside of state controlled family planning.

Unable to access public state schools due to a lack of documentation or the impossibility to pay the required fees, most migrant families turn to privately run “migrant schools”. These schools are independent and for-profit, generally run by migrants themselves, who lack the necessary preparation to become teachers. Migrant schools are mostly precarious, lacking proper facilities and equipment. Most of them rely on private donations such as used computers and schoolbooks. Although some urban governments have started to subsidize migrant schools, the funding is limited to those few schools that have been officially approved, which are presumably the ones that already have the most resources. Moreover, official attitude towards migrant schools is ambivalent, as local governments recognize some schools but forcibly close others, allegedly for health and safety reasons. In Beijing, the situation of migrant schools worsened ahead of the 2008 Olympic Games, and other cities followed suit. Regulations on the minimum standards required to set up a school are usually impossible for migrant schools to meet (Goodburn, 2014a, p.14).

Whether migrant children attend public or private schools, their education in the city stops after the nine years of compulsory schooling. Upon graduating middle school, teenagers from migrant families are forced to go back to their place of hukou origin in order to go to high school. Because law mandates college entrance examinations to be taken at the place of hukou origin, public state high schools do not accept migrant students and there are no privately run migrant high schools either. The system of compulsory college entrance examination (gaokao) in the place of hukou origin has its roots in the fact that every province
in China has different cutoff scores for admittance into college or university. Thus, students used to move to those provinces with the lowest cutoff scores to take college entrance examination in order to improve their chances of getting admitted into their university of choice. This scheme has been dubbed *gaokao yimin* (migration for college admission) and has been harshly reprehended by the Chinese government (Wang, 2005, p.243). Excluding non-local *hukou* holders from college entrance examination has been a way to prevent *gaokao yimin*. However, this system also forces migrant children who have lived in a place for most of their life to go back to their places of *hukou* origin where they are unfamiliar with the educational system and the overall lifestyle. Otherwise it prevents them from pursuing higher education at all.

Still, those families with resources and connections can take advantage of the system and relocate their *hukou* in order to obtain better chances of college admission for their offspring. As Fei-Ling Wang explains:

> A game of *hukou* relocation for the sake of higher education is, therefore, routinely played by those with the resources and connections. In one case, for example, several college applicants in Hefei, the capital of Anhui Province, scored far below the minimum admissions score set for their province and could get into only a small community college in 2000. Yet upon learning this, their families managed to relocate their urban *hukou* from Hefei to Beijing and soon became Beijing residents; then all were admitted to the Chinese University of Science and Technology (CUST), one of the best Chinese universities—located right there in Hefei. CUST is required to admit a certain number of students from the much smaller applicant pool in Beijing, where all the top universities are competing. These lucky Hefei applicants got into this highly selective university while their high-school classmates with much higher test scores ended up only in small local colleges. With a change of *hukou* papers, one’s life chances are dramatically altered. One leading way to relocate *hukou* quickly, of course, has been to acquire a blue-seal *hukou* by purchasing upscale housing at the government-designated price in the city of choice. One local newspaper reported people spending several hundred thousand RMB each to buy Beijing *hukou in this way* right before the 2001 college entrance examinations in order that their children would immediately have dramatically much better chances in life. (Wang, 2005, p.144)

Meanwhile, most children of migrant worker parents, both those who stay behind in villages and those who spend some of their formative years in the city, face extremely competitive college entrance examinations with the further disadvantage of having received a poor level of education. Given that college admission is one of the main ways to ensure permanent *hukou nongzhuanfei*, narrowing the possibilities of underprivileged students’ access to higher education perpetuates the divide between rural and urban China and thwarts upward mobility.
THE DEBATE AROUND THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF HUKOU

In recent years, the media in China and worldwide has been quick to announce any reform involving hukou as the final effort that will lead to the eventual abolition of the whole hukou system (Asia Sentinel, 2014). None of these efforts have however been definitive and still today the hukou-based exclusion mechanism continues to play a great role in the social stratification of China even though it is true that the system has been relaxed especially in specific places or for specific communities. For the hukou system to stop being a mechanism of legal exclusion and become merely a system of population registration there is still a long way to go, if this is to happen at all.

However, the actual influence of hukou in determining the life chances of migrant workers is contested. While some authors still regard hukou as the major source of exclusion and inequality in China, others question its role and whether migrant workers would actually want to change their hukou status if they were able to. As an example of this discussion, two papers by Zhan (2011) and Chan and Buckingham (2008) are confronted in order to illustrate how the same examples can be used in order to draw opposite conclusions in regards to the significance of hukou at present.

Chan and Buckingham argue that even if the reforms of hukou which have taken place to date have been considered breakthroughs, they still only affect mostly three specific groups: the wealthy, the highly educated and to a lesser extent those seeking family reunification. Shenzhen’s 2005 regulations for obtaining the city's permanent hukou, for example stipulate that “the following three groups of people living in the city are eligible to apply for a local hukou: professionals and those with university degrees; major investors; and those eligible for migration to cities under national special policies (such as members of "split" families where their families hold local hukou and reside in Shenzhen, and demobilized servicemen)” (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.595).

Furthermore, some of these reforms mainly target those with local rural hukou in areas that have been already highly urbanized. In some cities or city districts, an initiative has been implemented to unify those with agricultural and non-agricultural hukou status into one single category called jumin hukou (resident household registration). All those holding jumin hukou from one particular place are thus supposed to possess the same rights and benefits. An example of such initiative can be found in the Shijingshan district of Beijing, in which the population with agricultural hukou constitutes only 4.6 percent of the total (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.598). In some areas of the highly urbanized Pearl River Delta, hukou
status change is offered as compensation for land expropriation to those still holding agricultural hukou, as any plot of land able to use for construction is highly valued. Still, as Chan and Buckingham argue, these new initiatives are only aimed at local residents and do nothing to improve the life of migrant workers, whichever their hukou status.

In contrast, Zhan alleges that there are enough schemes in place already that would facilitate a change in hukou status, especially in towns and small cities. Still, migrants do not take advantage of these opportunities, presumably because they are not interested in doing so. Zhan points out that since the 2001 reform implementation which considerably eased hukou transfers into towns and small cities in the whole of the PRC, the rate of growth in urban hukou registration has remained stable and consistent with the registration growth before the reforms (Zhan, 2011, p.252). Hence, this new policy appears to not have been successful because migrant workers are not interested in changing their hukou status even when it is substantially easier for them to do so.

Zhan’s argument can be countered with Chan and Buckingham’s reasoning that towns and small cities are not the main destination of migrant workers due to the lack job opportunities and amenities present in bigger cities (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.596). In addition, the fact that transferring hukou under this new policy means giving up their plot of land back in their home villages can be huge deterrent for some migrant workers, either because they come from areas where crops are specially profitable or because they have relatives still living and working in the family plot —parents, spouses or young children who are left behind to go to school in the village. There is yet another option that is explored by neither of the authors: in order to register in these small cities, one still needs to provide proof of either stable employment, ability to maintain a stable income, or regular residence. It is possible that those who would most benefit from a hukou transfer are those who are still unable to produce proof of either stable work, income or residence —for example, self-employed migrant workers who survive by street vending would be disqualified from the first two requirements and migrant workers who live in the dormitories of factories with a high employee turnover would disqualify for all three.

Another example analyzed in both papers is that of the city of Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province. Shijiazhuang adopted in 2001 an initiative to reform hukou that was regarded as one of the most progressive in China and a possible model for other cities to follow (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.602). Local authorities in Shijiazhuang lowered conditions to obtain local hukou and extended the possibility of hukou transfer, beyond the wealthy, highly educated and the family members of city residents, to a new category of
“workers”. Shijiazhuang had at the time around 300,000 migrant workers who could have potentially benefitted from this reform. Although the numbers provided in both papers do not exactly match, an approximate of 70,000 migrant workers registered local *hukou* in the year following the reform, 15,000 did so in the following year, but by the third year, the number had dropped to less than 700 (Zhan, 2011, p.245; Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.602).

While Zhan qualifies the response to the reform as “nonchalant” and uses this example to remark the irrelevance of *hukou*, Chan and Buckingham see the results as positive and further inquire into the reasons why these numbers are not higher and why they plummet after the third year. As it turns out, in order to be granted local *hukou* under the “workers” category, it was necessary to present a contract and to prove one had been working in the city for at least two years. Again, most of the beneficiaries were local agricultural *hukou* holders, but most migrant workers were excluded. Furthermore, the Shijiazhuang public security bureau issued in 2003 a directive to increase requirements regarding housing stability—a requirement clearly directed at migrant population—(Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p.602). Subsequently, the number of registrations dropped enormously.

Zhan’s argument about the reluctance of migrant workers to change *hukou* status and the irrelevance *hukou* poses for them, although not necessarily strongly supported by the example of Shijiazhuang, serves to illustrate the debate around the last announcement of *hukou* reforms, which took place in July last year. The 29th of July 2014, the State Council passed a circular, which acts as a basis for future law change, in which it is stated that *hukou* transfer conditions to towns and small cities will be completely removed, restrictions to transfer into medium-sized cities will be relaxed, and a new qualifications-based point system will be implemented in the biggest cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Goodburn, 20014b, 2) Although the circular can read as the beginning of the end of *hukou*-based exclusion, neither urban nor rural *hukou* holders seem content with the initiative.

Those with rural *hukou* fear to give up the right to their land without getting full access to urban services and benefits and thus to get stranded “with one leg in the field and one leg on city streets” (Lu, 2014). Moreover, a rather large number of college graduates from rural origin choose to keep their rural *hukou* upon graduating, even though higher education is one of the few surefire ways to *hukou* conversion. This is because for them, as for the earlier generation of lesser skilled migrant workers, the land right that comes with rural *hukou* serves as a backup plan in the face of unsure job prospects. Urban residents, on the contrary, perceive it as an injustice that rural agricultural *hukou* holders would be able to both keep their land right and obtain urban benefits, and fear that if urban services and welfare are
extended to a large number of people, the quality and coverage of these services might decrease.

However, again, the new round of reforms fails to tackle the millions of migrants that still move every year to megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Shenzhen, the cities with the highest levels of industrialization and development and hence those with the biggest migrant worker “pull factors”. Therefore, despite talks about the “end of hukou”, the State Council circular, even though it will help level the playing field between those holding agricultural and non-agricultural hukou in the same locality, again offers no solution to the millions of hundreds of Chinese citizens considered as “floating population” or temporary migrants. It is safe to say then, that in order for hukou reforms to have an actual impact on the social stratification of China, more attention should be paid to providing more security and better access to services for rural migrant workers who are considered only temporary residents and thus disregarded by local governments.
CONCLUSION

As we have seen, some form of population management system has existed in China for centuries, although its use as a mechanism for movement restriction was maximized under the rule of the CPC. Under Maoist command, and especially in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, the strict set of regulations within the hukou system meant, for example, that those who tried to escape their place of registration were persecuted and that even those who would travel for short periods of time had difficulty obtaining food or other basic products. Finding formal employment without an official hukou transfer was impossible. As a result, the process of urbanization in PRC came to a halt for decades.

After the death of Mao, the economic reforms championed by Deng Xiaoping brought a period of industrial development embodied above all by the Special Economic Zones, areas specially designated to attract foreign capital and create partnerships between foreign and Chinese investors. These highly industrialized areas, which are still today the cornerstone of the PRC economic and industrial development, required a large number of low or medium-skilled labor. Coinciding with a wave of modernization in the countryside, millions of surplus rural labor abandoned their villages in search of jobs in the newly created factories of the SEZs and major cities. Because they were moving out of their hukou registration zones, migrant workers had no social protection whatsoever in their destination zones. Thus, they were, and still are, considered unequal to the local residents of urban areas.

Migrants who move without a proper hukou transfer and hold only a temporary residence certificate or fail to obtain the necessary documentation at their destinations are dubbed liudong renkou, “floating population”, are looked upon by local residents as inferior, and their claims to attain minimal social protection are taken as a threat to the advantageous situation of urban hukou holders (much like the West regard illegal immigrants from poorer continents). Migrant workers, coming from the countryside and with only mandatory education, hold very precarious jobs in the informal sector or in factory production lines. Their accommodation is not much better, as they mostly live either in factory dormitories or in poor, underdeveloped neighborhoods known as urban villages.

Despite there have been efforts by the CPC to reform hukou regulations, the household registration system is still a source of inequality and legal exclusion in China. Since the beginning of the economic reforms championed by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, successive attempts to reform hukou have targeted the highly educated or wealthy — a clear example is
the blue seal *hukou*—migrants, but have failed to engage with the millions of rural migrant workers who hold mostly temporary jobs in big cities and industrial zones.

After a thorough study of the *hukou* system, a series of conclusions can be drawn on the evolution of internal migration in China under the rule of the CPC, and the role *hukou* has played in deterring or allowing migration and determining the life chances of migrant workers. I have organized my conclusions in three distinct groups in order to emphasize the use of *hukou* as a population management mechanism, the negative social consequences of *hukou* regulations, and the prospects posed by a hypothetical abolition of the *hukou* system.

From the viewpoint of the Chinese government, the *hukou* has been useful in impeding a possible financial collapse (i.e. after the Great Leap Forward) and to control the volume and destination of population movement to serve its own policy interests. Three conclusions need to be highlighted:

- By restricting free movement, the CPC has been able to channel China’s enormous amount of surplus labor into the places where it was most needed, and has avoided the depopulation of the countryside.
- By strictly controlling urbanization, China has avoided the massive creation of slums, which has happened in other countries such as India.
- By following the guideline of encouraging urbanization in towns and small cities, moderately controlling urbanization in medium cities, and strictly controlling big cities, the CPC has been able to conduct urban growth in accordance to its own interest.

However, the *hukou* system has created inequality and a dual society in which rural and urban people do not have the same rights and are not equally regarded. It is thus important to remark that:

- The *hukou* system still has a lot of influence on the life outcomes of Chinese citizens, especially of those coming from rural areas and holding low paid jobs.
- *Hukou* regulations not only prevent migrants from obtaining certain jobs, but they affect their living conditions and predetermine the education of their children.
- Reforms of the *hukou* system, especially decentralization of criteria for *hukou* transfer, have eased the possibilities of relocation for the rich, the highly educated or those seeking family reunification but still fail to tackle the millions of migrant workers who are deemed part of the “floating population”.

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Despite the still grim situation of many of migrant workers, younger migrants are more aware of their rights, choose to join insurance schemes more often than their older counterparts and are less afraid to stand up to their employers if they feel wronged. These facts indicate that an improvement of working conditions is more likely to happen for this generation of workers.

Despite the many downsides of the household registration system, a complete abolition of hukou, or a transition into a simple registration mechanism free of legal exclusion, would create many difficulties for the Chinese government and might not be welcomed by citizens. Therefore, it can be concluded that:

- Even with the problems the hukou system poses, an eventual abolition of hukou would present even more difficulties: China cannot afford to provide equal social services for its whole population, as the financial pressure on local governments would make its economy collapse.
- Erasing the distinction between rural and urban population also poses a problem for citizens themselves, as rural hukou holders see their right to land as a lifeline and urban residents strive to keep their right to social services intact.
- Even if hukou is a major source of inequality, abolishing the hukou system would not make Chinese society automatically equal. Other mechanisms have to accompany the reformation of hukou, especially to ensure a fair treatment of migrant labor.

The efforts of the CPC to reform the hukou system, especially under President Xi Jinping (who seems to be especially invested in this issue, as he wrote his doctoral thesis about hukou), look like they are heading in an interesting direction, but it will prove difficult to bridge the separation between the urban and rural spheres in China. Offering equal rights to all citizens is still a distant option unless local policies are reexamined—which local governments have little incentive to do—and big enterprises, especially those with foreign ownership, are made to comply with existent or future regulations—again, local governments have little incentive to do this. Nonetheless, there is a change happening in China, coming both from the government and from civil society, and it will be exciting to see what happens next.
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