

Managing Internal Migration in Modern China: Regional Interests, Accommodation, and Forced Removal

For the last three decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has seen an incredible increase in rural-to-urban migration. Internal migrants and increased urbanization have been affiliated with recent economic growth and the emergence of a more open market system, something that was not possible before the economic reforms that began December, 1978. What makes China's post-reform internal migration so spectacular is the immense size of the migrant population, which has grown from about 7 million in 1982,¹ to over 250 million today.² The largest subgroup migrating is rural migrants, who are moving towards China's major metropolitan centers. Although China's citizens now have far greater freedom of movement than they did in the initial decades of the PRC, there are still policies hampering population mobility to the cities. In addition, municipal campaigns seek to remove unregistered migrants from cities.

Large cities near China's pacific coast, including Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and Guangzhou, have normally been the intended destinations for those from the countryside wishing to find employment in the industrial sector and factory work. Beginning with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the communist regime had to confront—on a very large scale—the rapid growth of both urban and rural populations, urban unemployment, and the rising level of rural-to-urban migration. All of which were obstructions for the PRC government's goals of meeting industrial quotas and reaching plan fulfillment in their regions.

This paper asks two primary questions surrounding internal migration in China. First, how have the PRC's tactics of prohibiting and managing internal migration towards the cities changed over time? By discussing and answering this first question, the paper takes a chronologically descriptive approach concerning the geographic and political history of the

PRC's attempts at suppressing, controlling, and managing rural-to-urban migration as well as how those attempts have changed over a period of roughly seventy years. Early on, the PRC relied on forcefully repatriating migrants back to the countryside. Despite being much more flexible today, massive campaigns to expel migrants from the cities have persisted into the modern day. This brings into focus the paper's second primary question: How has the PRC undergone a shift from radically prohibiting internal mobility (especially towards the cities) to adopting a much more managerial stance towards controlling internal migration towards the cities? Additionally, this study showcases how rural-urban migration has fueled regional conflict between coastal and inland provinces largely beginning in the late 1980s. While providing a description of the implemented migration policies through time, this paper, using state-run media sources also provides a glimpse into how internal migration was interpreted through the eyes of PRC leadership since the 1950s. While not completely exhaustive, this paper allows the reader an overview of how internal migration policy has been conducted in the world's most populous country since the founding of the PRC in 1949.

A brief mention on the benefits and drawbacks of organizing a paper around state-run media sources is warranted. Using state-run media sources on internal migration, primarily the *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)*, the PRC's mouthpiece for all things political still to this day, provides a unique perspective through the eyes of PRC leadership, concerning mobility in the country. Of course, there are inherent weaknesses to focusing on such news articles. However, one of the few ways to showcase the political mindset on internal migration since 1949 in China is to investigate it through state-run media reports, thus, offering a unique way to understand migration policy in the PRC. Additionally, by thrusting state-run media into the discussion of internal migration a major drawback is unavoidably, bias. How do we know the numbers

described in a media report on migration from 1953 are accurate? Can a newspaper article concerning migration in the country published during China's cultural revolution be trusted to be accurate in any way? In the end, these questions concerning bias and accuracy cannot adequately be answered. Nevertheless, among the research questions stated above, it is a primary objective of this paper to provide an objective and chronological account of migration policy in the PRC since 1949. By heavily relying on media accounts of migration and urbanization across China over a seven decade period, the position is held that these media reports offer a rare glimpse into the PRC's philosophy concerning migration, and how that philosophy changes over time—something media accounts from China's tumultuous modern history can help to describe here. The study also draws on certain published documents available online from the PRC central government, as well as the National Population and Family Planning Commission of the PRC, and the Chinese Statistical Bureau.

Despite the huge impact migrant labor from the countryside has had on the rise of the contemporary PRC and its incredible turn to capitalism since 1978, the historical and regional complexities of controlling such a huge movement of people, and the reaction given to it by urban authorities are still strongly rooted in the limited freedom of movement that was established during the Maoist era. These strictures to mobility are strongly engrained from the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tradition of limiting migration for socio-political stability. Over time, the reasons for expelling migrants from the cities had changed, but the attempts at doing so remained constant. This article offers a description of how internal migration is at times aggressively dealt with, and how rural-urban migration is often a result of rapid economic change. Finally, after describing some the potential human rights issues that come with blocking and restricting internal movement in China, this paper concludes by conveying how instead of

relying on ad hoc or revanchist campaigns for aggressively dealing with rural-urban migrants, the instability of the global economic system may instead push migrants away from cities as the strength of China's contemporary manufacturing sector waxes and wanes.

Internal migration in the PRC has not been investigated through a historical lens, and even less has been written on the forced expulsions of migrants from the PRC's largest cities—during both the pre- and post-reform eras. Investigating chronologically the PRC's goals of suppressing, limiting, and managing rural-to-urban migration via the *hukou* system, this paper begins to show how differences of opinion arose between provincial leaders as well as the motivations officials have for clearing them out of the city. While not an attempt to bash the PRC's policies of dealing with rural-to-urban migration, this work attempts to show that new approaches have been taken to deal with the migratory movements as well as the continuation of old methods.

Rural-Urban Migration in Contemporary China

After rural-urban migration quickly escalated in the mid-1980s, urbanites, along with state media, began to see a rise in the number of people from the countryside that were poorer, spoke different dialects, and lived in different communities from those originally from the city. Labeled the “floating population” for the first time by state media in August of 1985, these migrants were seen by urban authorities as being unstable, directionless, or even dangerous.³ However, their perceived “floating” nature, or *liudong* in the Chinese language, was not due to their movements across the country or their low economic status alone, but was attached to their lack of attaining an urban household registration or *hukou*, which fixed an individual as being either urban or rural in official status. The latter of these statuses handed one a life of hardship in the countryside that revolved around farming small plots of land that did not belong to them, but

to the state. However, with the commencement of economic reform in the late 1970s, rural migrants were granted the option for temporary residence in the cities, setting off the huge migratory process that has led urban governments to strictly deal with the urbanization process in several different ways.

In 1949, the year of the PRC's founding, more than 60 million people lived in China's cities. Six million lived in Shanghai; over 2 million lived in both Beijing and Tianjin, and over 1 million in Guangzhou.⁴ In the beginning, the PRC leadership found itself greatly inexperienced in managing large cities.⁵ Establishing and maintaining social order was the primary focus of the communist regime. The evolution and implementation of the PRC's *hukou* system—the population registration system that exists to this day—differentiated urban and rural residential groups to control population movement towards the cities and shape state industrial projects located in China's urban centers. In 1949, at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central-Committee of the Communist Party of China, PRC Chairman Mao Zedong announced, “the center of gravity of the party's work has shifted from the village to the city,” and, “we must do our utmost to learn how to administer and build the cities.”⁶ If China was to industrialize under the guidance of Mao Zedong, the PRC would need to confront the issue of rural-to-urban migration aggressively.

The idea of registering the population was not new to China. During China's long history, the registration system was primarily used for the gathering of rural and urban statistics, which were both crucial for tax collection as well as military conscription purposes in times of strife or unrest. The Xia Dynasty (twenty-first–sixteenth century B.C.) was the first to develop a population census and basic form of household registration, while the Shang Dynasty (sixteenth–eleventh century B.C.) developed its own form of household records management which, was

also meticulously managed. It was not until the Zhou Dynasty (eleventh–eighth century B.C.) that primitive forms of *hukou*-like institutions would be devised.⁷ According to Fei-ling Wang, an associate professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology's Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, “credible evidence” of *hukou*-type population registration and migration controls can be found in the mutual-responsibility or *baojia* system, which can be traced back to the late Spring and Autumn eras (eighth–fifth century B.C.) in feudal states like the Zheng and the Qi.⁸ By the middle of the Warring States Period (fifth–third century B.C.), in 375 B.C., the Qin Kingdom in China’s west adopted the *baojia* system to organize households and as a tool for the stabilization of taxation.⁹ After the Qin had unified China in 221 B.C., the entire Qin territory adopted the *baojia* system. Expanding on the past *baojia* system, everyone was required to report age, residence, gender, and profession to local leaders during the Qin Dynasty.

Following the Qin, the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) strengthened the registration system for similar purposes of taxation and conscription, and became one of the dynasty’s nine basic laws.¹⁰ The Han imperial registration system enforced punishments as strict as the death penalty in order to restrict internal migration and to minimize the number of *liumin* (migrant people).¹¹ The attempt to control internal migrants in China has been part of the country’s history for more than 2,000 years. The Qin and Han systems of population registration were incorporated into almost all subsequent dynasties in China. From very early on, the idea of population registration would hold an important function of social control and stability.

Many scholars have constructed different views on when China formally adopted the *baojia* system. Some, like John King Fairbank and Frederick Mote mention *baojia* being primarily adopted during the Song Dynasty (960–1279).¹² Later during the Song Dynasty, the system would become the basis for organizing militias and local defense.¹³ In 1548, during the

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), regulations on *baojia* were created, yet no form of *baojia* was mandatory during this period, although, some county-level officials did choose to enforce a *baojia*-like system in their jurisdiction.¹⁴ The subsequent Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) enforced *baojia* in all places¹⁵ and even developed a separate system specifically for tax collecting called *lijia*.¹⁶ However, the *baojia* system was, on the whole, ineffective throughout most of the Qing Dynasty, and lead to widespread corruption and abuse of power in the local-setting.¹⁷

The *hukou* system was frequently combined with the *baojia*, and it survived all the way into the Qing Dynasty, but people for the most part were freer to move during the final three centuries of dynastic rule. Privately organized geographical movements largely outweighed the restriction of mobility during the late imperial (ca. 1700–1911) and Republican (1911–1949) periods, despite the continuation of ancient practices of registration and taxation through the *baojia* and *hukou* system.¹⁸

During the Republican era (1911–1949) the state never truly held any control over the Chinese population. The combined sway of the struggling Nationalist government, warlordism, foreign interventions and invasion, and civil war against the communists overwhelmed the government. With the fundamental pursuit of the party's survival on the minds of the Nationalists, officials had more pressing concerns than controlling population movements, largely allowing the population both rural and urban, to move freely. However, some measures were taken to adopt a population registration system modeled around the *baojia* system. For the implementation of social-control purposes, the Nationalist government would further institutionalize the existing *hukou/baojia* system with a series of regulations. The Nationalists declared the *hukou* law in 1931 and created the *Detailed Regulations on the Implementation of*

Hukou Law in 1934, and revised the system further in 1941 with the *Regulations on Hukou Verifications*. However, it was the Japanese occupiers (1937–1945), who would first introduce and effectively implement a form of registration in the cities.

The Japanese in the late 1930s, through collaboration with those in the city's government, assigned "citizens cards" (*liangmin zheng*) to city residents so that Japanese soldiers could better monitor people's movements in and out of the city.¹⁹ These "citizens cards" assisted in monitoring "illegal activities" and were critical to making the occupation viable.²⁰ Japanese-controlled pacification teams, made up of city collaborationists also issued "loyal subject certificates." Every Chinese resident in the city needed to obtain one of these certificates as proof that he or she had accepted the new regime's authority.²¹ After World War II, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek would issue "identity cards" (*shenfen zheng*), which were for the search and subduing of communists in the city.²² Although the Nationalist government attempted to extend the long-lasting registration system that had been shaped by dynastic and Japanese methods in 1945, it was not used as a tool to restrict migrants from entering the cities. The system was widely used for the "verification of household records" as well as for land measurement—however, for Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, the system had little success once implemented and was always intended as a compulsory military service mechanism.²³ The pre-1949 registration systems in China were not however, meant as a functional, all-embracing tool to control the population and its movements in peacetime.²⁴ With the exception of the "citizen's cards" used by the Japanese occupiers, most forms of registration in China were for the collection of detailed statistics, which were needed for taxation purposes and conscription.

Also important to the historical development of the PRC's *hukou* system was the Soviet passbook system (*propiska*), and the role Soviet advisors played in determining a social order in

China, which could be used for socialist developmental transcendence in China.²⁵ Although it was not nearly as rigid or strictly enforced as would be the PRC's *hukou* system,²⁶ the *propiska* specified that every resident residing in provincial capitals, or in cities with populations of more than half a million people, were required to have their residency permit stamped inside of their pass books.²⁷ The Soviet *propiska* was meant for the "passportization" of the Soviet population, which addressed several similar objectives as the Chinese *hukou* system, such as eliminating all "social parasitism," as well as, and most importantly for urban leaders, limiting the rural exodus and safeguarding the social harmony of the towns and cities.²⁸ This attempt to halt peasant movement, and keep them in the countryside, where they could be more productive to the state, was a primary motivation for the PRC's development of the *hukou* system.



Figure 1. Photograph of a contemporary *hukou* booklet for an individual citizen.
Source: Photograph taken by author.

During the early 1950s, the new Chinese socialist state was preparing to be a monopolist employer throughout China by controlling every aspect of work, labor, and population

movement. Consequently, it was the rapid industrialization of the cities, and the huge output demands of the 1950s that dictated the pace and rate of rural-to-urban migration in the PRC.²⁹ Similar to the Soviet model of mobility control, the facilitation of planning, the preserving of social order, the distribution of benefits, and the organization of urban services was strictly held together by the *hukou* system. The *hukou* system under the PRC not only attempted to restrict access to the cities for rural migrants, but also provided the principal basis for establishing identity and status in the PRC to this day. The *hukou* established a two-class system which determined who did and did not belong in the cities. During the development of the PRC's *hukou* system, migration rates would fluctuate drastically and were often dictated by frequent economic and political campaigns. The establishment of the PRC's command economy system led to the development of a new, more all-encompassing version of mobility control in the PRC, which required meticulous coordination of both macro and micro facets of Chinese society. In the years following the PRC's establishment in 1949, strict measures were devised by the government to suppress the free movement of the Chinese population.

Defending Against Urbanization: The PRC's Establishment of a Migration Control System, 1949-1980s

Rural peoples do not have a plan, and thus, blindly flow to the city which made the cities unemployment worse, but we also need to realize that this is a natural phenomenon and is different from that of old China...This is something we can solve.

—Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), 1952³⁰

A huge number of farmers have moved towards the cities from various locations. Provincial governments and the central government should adopt proper methods to convince them to stop.

—Renmin Ribao, 1953³¹

By 1949, the PRC was steadily establishing its new authority. In Beijing, on the eve of the official creation of the PRC, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, which was made up of representatives of the major political organizations under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party, took place on September 30, 1949.³² The conference adopted what became known as the "common program," which served as the provisional constitution for roughly five years.³³ This provisional constitution allowed for an abundance of abilities and rights when compared with later regulations, some of these freedoms were never mentioned again in official Chinese documentation; one of which was the freedom to migrate and reside anywhere.³⁴ Article 5 of the 1949 Common Program stated: "The people of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of thought, speech, publication, assembly, association, correspondence, *domicile, change of domicile*, religious belief and the freedom of holding processions and demonstrations."³⁵

Although, the Common Program stated that one had the freedom of domicile and change of domicile under the new communist regime, the *hukou* registration system was in fact under development and planned for usage in urban areas.

Before the Common Program was even promulgated, in March of 1949, government staff conducted *hukou* administering "exercises" in the large coastal city of Tianjin before beginning to apply urban *hukou* checks and registrations throughout the entire city.³⁶ Although the PRC's *hukou* system was in its beginning stages, its role to single out, as well as to block migrants from residing in the cities, was effectively used from 1949 onwards. In Beijing alone, over 12,000 "spies," former Nationalist army personnel, drug users, and unregistered people from the countryside were found through the use of the evolving *hukou* system.³⁷ Like many of China's

previous dynasties, social order and the monitoring of migration, especially to the cities, became one of the highest priorities for the PRC government.

Immediately, the PRC's acknowledged the need to properly feed and employ its urban unemployed (those who were residing in their original urban place of origin). Secondly, "unproductive" peoples were to be removed from the largest cities like Shanghai and Beijing.³⁸ The relocation of migrants in the cities and the city's unemployed served the purposes of transforming the frontier landscape with productive manpower, as well as curing the urban problem of "unemployment," as described by a *People's Daily* editorial from May 7, 1950:

Both Beijing and Tianjin organized and relocated people to the northeast and other regions to participate in rural production. Brotherly assistance from the people's government will help local farmers and create important achievements. The movement will not only partially solve the problems of the victims of unemployment but will also populate these sparsely populated regions with laborers.

In the summer of 1955, the PRC established the *Directive Concerning the Establishment of a Permanent Household Registration System*, which for the first time in the PRC's history, would initiate a plan for local governments to implement the *hukou* system nationwide.³⁹ The next year, the Ministry of Public Security received total authority from the central government for the management of the *hukou* system and the crucial task of controlling migrants' entrance into the cities and a multi-functional *hukou* system was in place; determining who receives food rationing, urban employment, and medical care.⁴⁰ Finally, on January 9, 1958, the National People's Congress promulgated the *Regulations on Household Registration in the People's Republic of China*, just as Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward campaign was about to begin.⁴¹ This *Regulation* set up the *hukou* system to control the movement of people between rural and

urban areas nationwide.⁴² What largely exists today, the hukou system divided the PRC into a rural agricultural and urban non-agricultural population.

After Mao's death in 1976, developments both economic and political took a new turn. The post-1978 PRC undertook actions which transformed policies for the benefit of rural peasants, who had been barred from the privileges of city living for nearly three decades. As a result, the PRC lost absolute control over population mobility, due to the creation of market reforms. This however forced the PRC to initiate new regulations to preserve order of the migration flows into the cities, rather than completely curtail it. In 1982, the State Council put into place the *Measures of Detaining and Repatriating Floating and Begging People in the Cities*, giving further legal authority to local public security to forcefully deal with unregistered migrants.⁴³

By the Summer of 1985, the Ministry of Public Security approved new regulations for individuals who sought temporary residence in China's cities. The PRC acknowledged that the large amounts of migrants entering the cities could not be halted entirely and continued to create regulations at the local level which intended to limit the migrant population's entrance, not halt it.

The reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping shifted the PRC from a planned socialist economy to a free-market capitalist one. This shift drastically sped up the urbanization process. However, the PRC's expectation of such developments and the high probability that huge numbers of ambitious rural laborers would leave their villages to seek out work forced officials to develop new policies allowing for partial or temporary residence in the cities. As rural-to-urban migration quickly grew, rural migrants began to play a significant role in the informal sector, selling their agricultural goods, working on construction projects, and finding work in the

rapidly growing number of urban factories along the coast. However, the huge increase in urban in-migration strained the tolerance of city dwellers and urban officials in coastal cities who were not only struggling with the initial sluggishness of the economic reforms, but also with a rise in urban unemployment.⁴⁴ By the mid-1980s, the migrants who frequented the cities in search of semi-permanent employment came to be known by as China's "floating population," and would be referred to by this name for the first time by state-run media in August of 1985.⁴⁵

With the onset of increasing rates of migration, some conservative officials along the coast who were strongly against reforms to population mobility predicted disarray as migrants streamed into their cities in large numbers. Other leaders who represented the poorer inland provinces argued that migration was vital to economic growth in their areas, or as one inland provincial governor described, "a path to get rich."⁴⁶ The growth and vigor of the Chinese economy during the 1980s and 1990s created a need for greater labor mobility, while the motivations to migrate have proved as strong as those that draw migrants across international boundaries. However, this fundamental change in labor flow was not accepted by all of the PRC's leadership because the stemming of migration flows toward the cities had become deeply enmeshed in the political and economic structures of urban China.

Rural-Urban Migration and Interprovincial Conflict in Urban China

The more developed rural coastal areas are more likely to recruit more laborers from outside, while those areas which are densely populated and short on resources may expand the export of labor.

—China Daily, 1991⁴⁷

By the early 1990s, the rapidly rising number of migrants led certain inland provinces to intentionally export migrant labor as a tool for economic growth and revenue production. With the advent of free markets, the option for temporary residence and easier availability to foodstuffs, the controlling of the migratory movement across the PRC became increasingly

difficult for coastal cities and provinces. Authorities from inland provinces felt they had little choice but to allow the movement of laborers from within their jurisdiction to the prosperous coastal provinces of Beijing, Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Shanghai, and Tianjin.

Prior to this in the mid-1980s, the internal migrant population had risen, in part due to a central government decision and its consequences. The PRC's 1985 decision to allow farmers nationwide an opportunity for temporary residency (3 to 6 month stay) in the towns greatly influenced ruralites to seek non-agricultural employment far from their village.⁴⁸ The consequence for the coastal governments was an increase in profitability through cheap migrant labor, but also the loosening of state control over population mobility, which allowed the migrant population to reach 18 million by 1984.⁴⁹ Also, by 1984, 98 percent of rural households had been decollectivized, greatly freeing and motivating rural peasants to search for employment in the cities and towns.⁵⁰ In spite of the impressive growth of rural industry and its impact on ruralites mobility and job opportunities, the small town-oriented factories were not enough to resolve the problem of the surplus rural laborers, and the inland provincial governments' goals of economic growth which had been stagnant for decades. By August of 1988, the internal migrant population had reached the 50 million mark.⁵¹ In spite of some authorities professing that rural-to-urban migration was "an indication of social-progress" and an "inevitable trend in reform, open-door policy, and economic development," coastal provinces unceasingly backed their priority of maintaining order in their cities.⁵²

The constant actions to effectively limit the growth of migrant numbers in the cities led to renewed efforts to forcefully expel migrants back to their provinces of origin. In some cases, the motive to clear migrants out of the city was in an effort to prepare the city for special events such as the Asian Games, which were held in Beijing in 1990, where an estimated 200,000 migrants

were cleared from the city.⁵³ That same year, Tianjin also expelled roughly 50,000 migrants to improve the city's image for the games.⁵⁴

Despite the constant removal of migrants from coastal cities by authorities, leaders from inland provinces urged the coastal provinces to acknowledge their desperate economic situation. Throughout the 1990s, most Chinese officials along the coast acknowledged that migrant labor came from all provinces of the country. However, a group of inland provinces with huge rural populations were all considered by many coastal officials to be the top migrant exporting regions since the mid-1980s: Anhui, Guangxi, Guizhou, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Sichuan—all of which rank among the poorest in the country.⁵⁵ In 1993, officials from Sichuan Province said that the steady rise in the migrant population coming from their region was caused by a drop in the revenues earned from farming coupled with only a marginal increase in province's total income during the reform period. Also in 1993, one party chief from Hunan Province voiced his concern towards the coastal provinces while attending the National People's Congress in Beijing stating "for the good of the nation" it would be "unwise" to "forcefully prevent" rural farmers from going eastward and seeking employment and, if anything, the central and coastal governments should "train and organize" migrants more properly, rather than removing them and attempting to prevent them from migrating.⁵⁶ Even officials from China's northeast had emphasized the importance of migration for their region. In February of 1994, a provincial leader from Heilongjiang Province stated, "after one person leaves home, the entire family will be freed from poverty!" While yet another official from nearby Jilin Province further asserted that, "We should send the surplus rural labor force to work elsewhere and deem the action an important way or even a strategic measure to free the people from poverty."⁵⁷ That same year, then Governor of Sichuan Province, Xiao Yang, in an interview with Hong Kong's *South China*

Morning Post, defended the practice of migrants that search for work in the developed coastal regions: “During harvests and other busy times, the rural work hands stay in the fields... in slack seasons, they go outside the province and look for work. They [the migrants] provide cheap labor for the richer provinces and remit their earnings back home. This is a sound economic principle for labor management.”⁵⁸

While leaders of the inland regions defended their claim for exporting labor, coastal provinces continued to put pressure on the migrant sending regions, especially Xiao Yang’s Sichuan Province. Beijing urged Sichuan to establish a quota on the number of migrant “exports” that leave the province, but no agreement was reached. Guangdong Province and its most prosperous cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen agreed to make “financial contributions” to Xiao Yang’s province of Sichuan in an exchange “for an end to unwanted Sichuan laborers,” however, this also failed.⁵⁹ The stance taken by Sichuan’s leaders on the topic of migration shows how important the exporting of labor was for the province’s development. Hence, migration to the coastal provinces was non-negotiable and necessary. From Jiangxi Province alone, the outflow of migrants to other provinces grew from 200,000 in 1990 to 3 million in 1993.⁶⁰

Two Paths in Dealing with Migrants in Coastal Cities

As migrant numbers grew, coastal provinces and cities had two different ways of dealing with migrants. First, to better coordinate and manage the migratory movement in a more productive and orderly way that would benefit both receiving regions and the migrants or, secondly, to continue forcefully expelling migrants from the cities. Coastal leaders commonly chose to better manage urban in-migration but conducted ad hoc drives to remove migrant populations from the city at the same time. To grow economically, some of the country’s inland provinces like Hunan, Guangxi, and the populous Sichuan Province, intentionally took advantage

of the coastal areas' difficulty in controlling and enforcing proper migrant inflow. These provinces which had been largely left out of the development scheme of the reform era saw an opportunity to use their large rural populations to their advantage. As the floating population's numbers grew rapidly into the early 1990s, leaders from the financially impoverished provinces of China's interior vigorously defended themselves and their exporting of rural surplus labor against the criticisms from developed regions. But, as migrants became generators of profit in the cities, some officials from the central and local governments embraced a more relaxed approach to dealing with the migrant population. While at the same time, relying on revanchist campaigns to forcibly remove migrants from the cities to enhance and protect city image.

Accommodation Approaches

By 1994, Hunan Province alone was exporting more than 5 million rural laborers a year. Furthering Guangdong's initial management system six years earlier, Hunan along with seven other southern provinces had begun to establish a labor service cooperation information network—with more than 60 percent of Hunan's counties setting up offices in Guangdong, primarily in the cities Guangzhou and Zhuhai.⁶¹ Some migrant-receiving cities stipulated that each migrant worker group that came from major labor exporting provinces, like Sichuan and Hunan, must have a leader or work coordinator present upon the migrant group's arrival in the city. If it was a larger than normal group, then a government cadre from the sending province would need to accompany them. As the floating population's numbers grew towards the hundred million mark, these coordination rules were still largely ignored by the labor seeking ruralites and their exporting regions.⁶²

Building upon Guangdong Province's establishment of a migrant labor market system, Beijing was also able to better manage the floating population coming from other parts of the

country. Although no quota was reached between Beijing and the sending regions, Beijing had begun to establish a “cooperative relationship” in labor flows with many of its surrounding provinces like Hebei and Henan. The idea to disperse rather than block the migrant population was effective in that it helped move laborers to where their work was needed, which limited the number of jobless migrants in the cities. However, it did not stop the millions of migrants coming towards them. The dispersal method worked in two primary ways—coordinated dispersal, and physical dispersal.

In Tianjin, the coordinated dispersal method was extremely effective, reversing its aggressive policies in prohibiting rural-to-urban migration. In the Hongqiao district of Tianjin, which was a famous gathering place for rural laborers from Hebei and Shandong Provinces, the district labor department had set up an employment agency which helped accommodate the job seeking process for migrants, many of whom spoke distinct provincial and rural dialects. Some agencies were even noted as providing food and lodging service to them.⁶³ However, before these services could be given to migrants in the cities, physical dispersal was at times needed. Another example of physically dispersing migrants instead of blocking them from entering the cities occurred just outside of Shanghai in early 1994, as migrants moved eastward by train. The scene was described by the *China News Agency*:

A fifteen-car train arrived in Shanghai from the city of Fuyang in Anhui Province on February 14. On board were 2,850 laborers from outside the municipality, signaling the beginning of the spring labor influx. Of this group, most were between 20 and 30 years of age, and more than half had never left their home villages before. Most will stay in Shanghai, while others will head to Hangzhou, Wenzhou, Ningbo, and Changzhou to seek work. The Shanghai Public Security Department already has prepared a number of vehicles to transport laborers to other places outside the city, and the Shanghai police have strengthened their forces to keep public order.⁶⁴

While the coastal cities began taking a more accommodative approach to dealing with rural-to-urban migration, the Ministry of Public Security still focused on maintaining public order. As the bureaucracy that oversaw *hukou* registration as well as deportation campaigns, Public Security continued to urge coastal provinces and cities with high rates of in-migration to better coordinate the migratory movements with those provinces that export their labor.⁶⁵ By the summer of 1995, the migrant population was 70 million people. This brought forth increasing challenges for Public Security to properly manage the movement of migrant laborers and the proper distribution of it.⁶⁶ One attempt at better dealing with the incoming migrants was the establishment of Migrant Service Centers throughout the country. The migrant worker service center in Beijing was created in April of 1996, although some cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen had established centers earlier. Unsurprisingly, the first of Beijing's migrant service centers was located in close proximity to one of the city's primary railway stations. These service centers were said to have replaced "illegally run employment centers," and could help "broaden the recruitment of migrant workers" as well as "place the employment of emigrant workers under proper control."⁶⁷ With urban officials' accommodation approach, the PRC was taking a step away from simply giving order to migrants as to where they should go, and began to take into account the job seeking goals of migrants—ultimately benefitting national growth at the same time.⁶⁸

Additionally, during the 1990s, employers in large cities could only recruit laborers without an urban *hukou* if they held a temporary permit through selected local government branches.⁶⁹ In January of 2003, these rules were abolished with the promulgation of the Chinese State Council's *Circular on the Improvement of the Services and Management of Migrant Workers*. According to the *Circular*, local governments no longer had the amount of control over

the recruitment habits of private enterprises, and exclaimed that migrant workers should receive the same rights and status as local *hukou* holders and would not be subjected to the “forced repatriation policy” should they be properly registered.⁷⁰

Continuance of Forced Removal

The forced relocation of migrants and the unemployed during the Mao era was largely done to protect limited resources and most importantly to safeguard the proper socialist development of the cities. In more recent times, the removal of migrants was commonly done not for the progress of industrial or socialist development, but to protect a city’s image, as urbanites and urban authorities saw migrants from the countryside as an eyesore. In some cases, unregistered migrants were forced to leave in order to secure public spaces throughout the city, like during the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the founding of the PRC, when in 1999 an estimated 16,000 people were removed from the central districts of Beijing.⁷¹

In March of 1989, the *People’s Daily* published an article claiming that there were 1.3 million migrants in Beijing. Being the capital of the PRC, the city normally had a particularly aggressive stance towards migrants and repeatedly made efforts to protect the city’s image from the growing number of migrant laborers in the city.⁷² Despite claims made by the poor inland provinces expressing their migrants’ economic contribution to both sending and receiving regions, Beijing continued enforcing its priority of order in the cities. For example, on the morning of March 17, 1989, over 100 of the city’s top public security personnel gathered to “consolidate and ban” certain illegal migrant labor markets that took place throughout the city.⁷³ These labor markets were commonly frequented by women from the countryside in search of employment as housemaids and helpers for the urban elderly. During the officials’ gathering, one of the largest labor markets targeted by authorities was located near to the Jianguomen underpass

in eastern Beijing and was deemed “illegal” by security personnel.⁷⁴ Migrants found at the underpass were urged to find ways of immediately returning to their native villages, and at 4:00 p.m. that same day, Beijing Public Security had detained more than 130 migrants who refused to leave or had nowhere else to go.⁷⁵ Hours later, city media described the disbanded migrant labor market:

The spontaneous labor market under the Jianguomen underpass has been active for 5 years...this market was not thoroughly banned for a long time, and the maximum amount of laborers in the market has reached over 1,000. They [the migrants] come from over 16 different provinces. This market has seriously affected the capital’s public security, traffic order, and city appearance.⁷⁶

Throughout the 1990s, state media had confirmed that many of the major cities and provinces along the coast had resorted to “local protectionism,” by rounding up and removing migrants from the city.⁷⁷

Beginning in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s till today, many of the PRC’s largest cities launched an attack on “illegal migrant schools” to pressure unauthorized city dwellers to leave. Most of the migrant parents, who were scarcely educated themselves, were desperate to provide a better education for their children but could not afford the public school fees or to properly enroll them due to their lack of a local *hukou*. In October 2001, the Public Security officials throughout Beijing’s Fengtai District handed out letters as they blocked the entrance to more than fifty primary schools which served roughly 10,000 young students of migrant laborers. The letter stated, “So that your child can receive a regular education in a safe environment, the Fengtai District Education Committee has decided to close down schools that have not received approval from authorities.” A semester at Fengtai’s migrant schools’ cost under \$40. In a public school, migrant children must pay the tuition, alongside an extra nonresident fee of \$72 and an additional \$100 in so-called “general fees.”⁷⁸ Such fees are

normally out of migrant parents' abilities and commonly results in the children being sent back to the village or attending no school at all. Although detrimental to the success of migrant families, the ad hoc campaigns to rid the cities of migrant schools, which often times lack basic necessities, is not an effective deterrent in preventing the migrant inflow from rural areas since the migrant population has grown rapidly. It does however, pressure migrants to think first about bringing their families to the city, a growing trend which has become an increasingly larger characteristic of rural-to-urban migration in the PRC during the last two decades.

By the mid-2000s, the large-scale efforts to round-up and expel migrants and migrant communities from the city came to be known by urban officials as "strike hard campaigns."⁷⁹ In July 2003, the large industrial city of Shenyang in China's northeast became the first city to claim that it would abolish the temporary permit system.⁸⁰ Shenyang was soon followed by Jinan, Wuhan, Beijing, and later Shanghai.⁸¹ However, these claims were either never fully implemented or not put into effect for long because the cities' top priority remained controlling the migrant population. With more power given to the companies and enterprises in the hiring process due to the 2003 promulgation of the *Circular on the Improvement of the Services and Management of Migrant Workers*, coastal cities continued rounding up migrants and either detaining, or sending them back to their province of origin.

One of the largest attempts at expelling migrants in order to improve a city's image occurred before the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. In September of 2006, the state-run *Beijing Morning Post* reported that as many as 1 million migrant workers in the city could be expelled before the games began in August of 2008.⁸² Although one Beijing official claimed the idea to expel migrants was merely "a suggestion put forward by experts," he confirmed that migrants in the city would be "persuaded to return to their homes."

Beijing officials had also ordered all construction work to cease in the city for the following year in order to free the city from construction-related pollution during the games.⁸³ The abandoning of construction projects also served as a method to force thousands of migrant workers to leave Beijing and return back to their villages in the countryside. One migrant worker returning to Hebei Province said, “The Olympics have finally come to China, and I won’t even be here.” Like thousands of others who packed the capital city’s train stations in the months and weeks before the games, he was encouraged to leave town by a lack of construction work and an unwritten government policy to clear migrant workers out until the tourists, dignitaries, and journalists went home.

Starting in early 2011, the Beijing government passed strict regulations for living conditions in an attempt to improve the city’s image. On February 1, 2011, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development issued a regulation that forbids the renting-out of basements to migrant workers. A few months later, the Beijing government issued another regulation insisting that a rental living space shall not be less than five square meters, affecting an estimated 1 million migrants who share small cramped spaces with other migrant laborers.⁸⁴

From February to April 2011, the city of Shenzhen in south China’s Guangdong Province evicted about 80,000 “potentially unstable people” in a bid to secure social stability and a positive image for the then upcoming Twenty-Sixth Summer Universiade.⁸⁵ In an interview with the *Shenzhen Economic Daily*, the Vice Director of the Shenzhen Police Bureau Shen Shaobao stated that, “people living in Shenzhen without proper identity and those acting suspiciously are what we call unstable residents.” Eight particular groups of people were listed as being “high-alert” category and included “nomads, unemployed vagrants, unregistered residents, and

unclassified floating residents.” Shen further emphasized that city-wide inspections would have a “special focus on the floating population.”⁸⁶

Adding to the attempts made to limit the migrant population in Beijing, on March 25, 2010, the Beijing government publicized that it would be removing between 150,000 and 1 million migrant workers from the city’s central Chaoyang district. Beijing authorities also declared plans to destroy over fifty district villages that had high densities of low-income migrant workers. The relocations and demolitions, one state media report said, were to “improve the population structure” and make Chaoyang district more attractive to “civilized residents.”⁸⁷

And What of Human Rights?

China’s incredible economic boom pulled rural Chinese to cities in search of higher incomes since the launching of the country’s opening and reform period (*gaige kaifang*) under Deng Xiaoping roughly four decades ago. During the past three decades of breakneck economic advancement, China’s population urbanized at untold rates. Between 1990 and the end of 2015, the proportion of China’s population living in urban areas rose from 26 percent to 56 percent.⁸⁸ However, what is clear is that mobility in China has been severely controlled both prior to and after 1949. This is not unique to China. What is unique, are the well-documented host of discriminatory practices and human rights dilemmas a migrant in China faces when undertaking the shift from village to city, thus leaving behind their villages temporarily, or for good. These challenges faced by migrants stem from the existing *hukou* or household registration system that have been discussed in this paper.⁸⁹ While this paper is not specifically focused on the discrimination that internal migrants in China continue to face, it would be incomplete without highlighting some of the challenges *hukou* policy brings to those seeking a new life and employment in China’s cities today. Internal migration will continue to be one of the biggest

challenges the Chinese government will face in the up-coming decades.⁹⁰ China's booming urban skylines, growing economies, and the World's largest export-oriented economy are direct outcomes to internal migration across Chinese provinces. Economic development and rapid urbanization have fueled the largest migrations of human beings the planet has ever seen and largely in the form of countryside to cities in the form of people in search of higher wages and improving their lives and their families. By 2016, China had an estimated internal migrant population of around 250 million people.⁹¹ Despite China's unprecedented growth in such a short period of time, millions of internal migrants still find themselves as second-class citizens due to China's internal passport system once in China's cities.⁹²

In 2006, the Chinese State Council passed a directive showing the way for local governments to guarantee equal rights and opportunities to migrant workers in China's cities.⁹³ This, however, has not ensured the erasure of the many discriminatory practices rural newcomers to the China's cities may continue to face today in 2020. But who make up China's floating population today? While many socio-demographic groups make up China's floating population, migrant workers tend to be poorly educated, physically mobile and economically ambitious. While large number of China's internal migrants are older in age, there has been a significant rise in young migrants.⁹⁴ As previously mentioned, many migrants find work in manufacturing, construction projects, and short-term employment opportunities in urban centers. Before concluding this paper, what follows is a brief list of human rights challenges rural-urban migrants face in China today.

One of the most concerning human rights challenges rural-urban migrants face is a significantly lower-level of health standards compared to urban-hukou holders. Additionally, migrants in China are often chastised by some public and health officials as being a serious

health threat or even dangerous to the cities they move to. The rise in tuberculosis or HIV rates in certain migrant dominated cities like Shenzhen, Zhuhai, or Guangzhou are often seen as products of individual rural to urban migrants rather than the lacking healthcare systems given to the floating population in general. In a 2012 study on the health of migrants in the city of Shenzhen, Katherine Mason argues that migrants to the city are often seen as “biological non-citizens” who are often denied treatment as health subjects and are seen more as scapegoats to protect the very institutional structures that exclude them from proper health treatment.⁹⁵ While strides have been made in providing healthcare to migrants in China’s cities, they remain severely disadvantaged compared to urban *hukou* holders.

According to a 2014 study by Zhao et al., roughly 82 percent of surveyed rural newcomers to the city are were covered by basic insurance in their home villages through the *hukou* but not at their places of residence after migration.⁹⁶ Starting in 1998, Beijing created the Basic Medical Insurance System for Urban Employees, or BMISUE, which acts as an insurance program for urban dwellers to buy into if needed. In 2003, in order to improve the health conditions of rural citizens, the PRC founded the New Rural Cooperative Medical System (NRCMS) for all rural residents. Twelve years later, the Chinese government consolidated BMISUR and NRCMS to establish the Basic Medical Insurance System for Urban and Rural Residents (BMISURR). The new program aims to cover all citizens previously enrolled in BMISUR or NRCMS. This system follows the principle of open market health care and following a voluntary participation in health care systems that are supported by individual payments with government subsidies. While these buy in programs have aided in some regards for improving the health care for some of China’s floating population, seniors who make up the floating population who have been able to change their residence from village to city act as a

“special social” group that moves between different village and city and “are qualified to enroll in more than one kind of insurance program.”⁹⁷ The problem for many migrants is the issue of cost and accessing affordable health care programs in the city while working very low-paying and often dangerous jobs.

While strides have been made, as expected, a rural *hukou* status usually denies one or significantly limits access to quality public health facilities in the city. Clearly this creates a public health challenge for China especially when considering many migrants work in manual labor jobs, are faced with numerous occupational hazards on construction sites and often share living quarters in rented village houses outside the city among other migrant workers. Any pedestrian walking through Beijing, Shanghai, or other large Chinese urban centers will easily find migrant workers napping during the afternoons in parks or other near other infrastructure areas that provide shade. Many migrant constructions can be seen resting or living in the construction sites themselves while a project is being completed. In short, what exists of China’s *hukou* system today brings clear occupational and health risks to those who are without guaranteed health care in the city.

Access to education is also another significant human rights challenge migrants face in China when in the cities. Migrants in the city with a rural *hukou* often must pay fees that are far higher than they earn and are often under the table for their children to go to school. Many migrants opt to not bring their children to the city with them because of the high cost of finding schooling for their children and their lack of access to public education outside of their home village. It is estimated that roughly 20 million of non-urban *hukou* migrants in China are children between 6 and 14.⁹⁸ Difficulty in accessing public school in the cities for the children of migrant workers has resulted in countless villages in the Chinese countryside that for most for the year

are populated by the elderly and “left-behind children” because of the strictures *hukou* policy continues to bring in accessing schooling for migrant children.⁹⁹ It has been identified that migrant children who attend lower quality informal schooling often have significant challenges assimilating with their urban peers as well as the quality of education they retain when in school compared to urban or migrant children who were able to attend official public schooling in cities.¹⁰⁰

Like health care and education, gender discrimination, unpaid wages, and unfair working conditions all continue to be major human rights hurdles for those who make up China’s floating population. Finding improved occupational attainment is a central issue in discussions of female migration throughout developing countries, including China. On the topic of gender discrimination for migrant women, because of the specific societal and geographic contexts in China, female migrants in China tend to bear a larger disadvantage while simultaneously facing more difficult occupational attainment from that of Chinese male migrants. While both male and female migrants in China engage in low-skill, low-paid industries and services, it is estimated that a large quantity of Chinese female migrants are still trapped in the agricultural sector following migration.¹⁰¹ Strict patriarchal norms also often discouraged women to migrate, thus limiting them to the lowest-paid and least respected jobs following migration. Other discriminatory challenges faced by female migrant workers in China are more institutional rather than societal or patriarchal. For instance, despite making up roughly one-third of all internal migrants in China, female migrants tend to be paid significantly less than men when formal employment is found in urban China.¹⁰² Additionally, since the *hukou* places rural migrants into a precarious and often temporary position in the cities, female laborers from the countryside are far more likely to endure sexual harassment or abuse and far less likely to report it.¹⁰³

Both female and male migrant workers are also victims to unpaid wages when working in the city. Since they are not in their designated *hukou* region, they have few outlets to protest unpaid wages in urban areas, thus, squandering their social security. China has tried to address the problem of unpaid migrant workers in recent years by increasing regulations and oversight, which include jail terms and fines for company executives who are found guilty of not paying wages. However, the social and economic burden of delayed or unpaid wages takes a significant toll for rural *hukou* holders in the city. However, in the beginning of 2020, China's Ministry of Justice has developed a public legal service helping migrant workers who have faced unpaid wage issues with a legal assistance program. The endeavor sends lawyers, grassroots-level legal workers, and legal assistance volunteers to factories that employ migrant workers (many of whom are female in factory settings) so to to provide legal counseling services and how to move forward with unpaid wage grievances.

Migrant workers can also now seek help through an established hotline or at public legal service centers; thus, showcasing just how real the issue of unpaid wages is for rural *hukou* holders working in the cities. While this is a valuable stride forward to helping migrant workers get the proper payment, they rightfully earned there are still significant strictures to transferring funds and social security benefits back to their home regions and towns to due often differing local regulations.

Lastly, the issue of harsh or unfair working conditions for migrant workers in China has been a constant point of contention surrounding the *hukou*'s influence in China. Unfair working conditions exist because of the existence of the *hukou* registration. The *hukou* often constrains migrants from attaining full-time work and often without labor contracts. This makes them quasi-illegal immigrants in urban centers despite being in their own country. This also makes a good

breeding ground for certain employers to try and avoid paying wages due to migrants' weak position in urban society. The PRC has recently undertaken many steps in urban centers around China to develop and retrain "low-skilled" migrant workers for improved employment opportunities. This is an important goal for the government to achieve if China seeks to simultaneously employ the rural poor and strive develop China's economic competitiveness with the United States.

Conclusion

The *hukou* system commonly prohibits rural residents from obtaining many of the same services as their urban counterparts, including health and unemployment insurance, pensions, free education for their children, and subsidized housing. It is true that many cities across China do allow for application for permanent residency, however, in many cases, very real human rights dilemmas continue to occur for rural-urban migrants in China to this day. The differences of opinion that arose over China's "floating population" between the poorer inland provinces and the wealthier, more developed coastal provinces are still a matter of contention. However, despite the continuation of local campaigns that aim to clear out migrants, some cities have tried to make life a little bit easier for migrant laborers. For example, in 2009, the Beijing government supported local lawyers to assist migrant workers with effective legal aid when injured on the job.¹⁰⁴ In 2011, Shenyang had built a series of libraries throughout the city specifically for migrant workers.¹⁰⁵ Many cities have increased the number of service centers to help migrants find employment in the city. However, the forced removal of rural-urban migrants from the cities remains an important way of controlling urbanization in the PRC and one of only a handful of tactics put into place during the Mao era that stills influences Chinese urbanism today. The attempt at forcefully deterring rural-urban migrants has done little to slow China's rapid

urbanization process. Forcefully removing rural-urban migrants through round-up campaigns is now largely done to protect the cities' image rather than to safeguard socialist doctrine and planning like it was during the 1950s and 1960s. The expelling of migrants from the city may have some small effect on controlling the floating population's total numbers in the urban centers, but as long as a significant gap exists between the rural and urban living standards, peasants from the countryside will continue to evade migration controls in hope of improving their quality of life.

At first, the post-1978 reform era policies relaxed the measures on mobility adopted by the PRC toward the migrating peasants, yet never fully allowed them to integrate into urban society. Migrants could thus enter the cities, but the state would not need to care for them. The economic energies along the coast that produced the push and pull factors that prompted migrants to move across provincial boundaries in post-Mao China was strikingly similar to migrants crossing international borders. The economic growth of modern China relied on its capacity to offer these industries with cheap, abundant, and closely controlled labor. As the demand for workers was concentrated within the coastal provinces, it suddenly drew rural laborers across provincial boundaries from the poor inland provinces. This led to different approaches to dealing with urbanization rates.

However, as the global economy waxes and wanes, China's cities may not need to revert to campaigns to restrict the entrance of migrants into its cities. The global economy that established China as an export-oriented superpower is now rearranging the economic geography on the country. This in turn has implications for employment opportunities for the hundreds of millions of migrant workers working in China's factories today. with the emergence of a global recession, how will migrants from the Chinese countryside be able to move to the cities if, one

after another, the factories begin to shut down? In 2007, for instance, the shoe manufacturing industry in Guangdong Province, which supplies half the global demand for footwear, saw 1,000 shoe making factories shut down after laying off nearly 200,000 workers. That same year, millions of migrant workers from Sichuan, Hunan, Guangxi, and other inland provinces started to leave Guangdong to return to their villages in the countryside, creating a huge backflow of migration away from the coast. In the first ten months of 2008 alone, more than 15,000 small to medium-sized manufacturers either shut down their industries in Guangdong or relocated to Southeast Asia. In the city of Dongguan, 117 factories closed between September and October, leaving more than 20,000 workers without pay.¹⁰⁶ The next year, roughly 10 percent of the 65,000 Hong Kong-owned factories in the Pearl River Delta (Guangdong) closed after major profit losses.¹⁰⁷ In February of 2009, the central government issued a notice that required companies to notify city labor authorities before layoffs of over 20 employees was to occur. There were no clarified legal penalties for those companies that did not adhere to the policy. In April of that same year, the central government released figures showing that since 2008 around 25 million migrant workers had lost their jobs throughout the entire country as a result of business failures and factory closings.¹⁰⁸ As the rural-urban gap in China continues to widen, will migrants from the countryside be compelled to continue their migration towards the coast even during the current financial crisis? Will the world economic situation fuel a change in opinions between the migrant-sending and receiving regions of the PRC, or will they remain as dynamic as they have been since China's turn to free-market capitalism?

ENDNOTES

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