

# **Institutionalized Barriers to Inclusion: A Case Study of China's Rural Migrant Workers in Urban Areas**

Luoyi Zhou  
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## **Summary:**

Internal migration is often differentiated from international migration by perceptions of citizens' free mobility within the territory. However, internal migrants may still face significant barriers to inclusion due to institutional structures that exist within countries. This policy report's aim is to examine the case of China, where the most extensive rural-to-urban migration is taking place in the world, yet which is regulated by the country's unique household registration system (known as *Hukou* in the Chinese language). Designed initially as a tool to prevent the potential rural-to-urban mass influx during the Maoist era, the *hukou* system has generated a clear rural-urban divide and limits the access to social welfare to the region where citizens are officially registered. This policy report considers the rigid *hukou* system antiquated for the current Chinese social context, as it can no longer stop rural-to-urban migration and only contributes to increasing inequalities between rural migrants and the urban host population, while accentuating distinctions in social status and discrimination against rural-to-urban migrants. Furthermore, this report highlights the salient obstacles to the relaxation of *hukou*-based restrictions and provides some policy recommendations that could be useful to create a more inclusive society.

## **Introduction:**

The National Bureau of Statistics of China reveals that, in 2016, the number of rural migrant workers in China reached more than 281 million.<sup>1</sup> By 2025, Chinese cities are estimated to host another 243 million migrants. Migrants in total will account for approximately 40% of the urban population (Woetzel et al., 2009). It is notable that the number of internal migrants in China is greater than the total number of international migrants (244 million in 2015) in the world (United Nations, 2016), making it an important case to understand given that it concerns the well-being of a large population of migrant workers. This significant rural to urban migration in China has entailed continued inequalities between rural and urban populations, with many rural migrant workers experiencing various forms of exclusion in urban areas – from labor exploitation, to poor housing conditions and inadequate access to basic services and education for migrant children (Wang, 2015). This report will examine the barriers to inclusion in different spheres: at the national and local government levels but also in everyday social relationships. It focuses on the institutionalized *hukou* system in China, and widespread social prejudices, as the roots of this exclusion of rural migrant workers and suggests ways forward to turn challenges into opportunities for all concerned.

## **Barriers to inclusion at different levels**

### **1) At a national level: *Hukou*-based discrimination against rural migrant workers**

The *hukou* system was first implemented in China in 1958 with the aim to limit mass migration from rural areas to cities, and to ensure the country's structural stability. It was closely linked to the nature of the command economy to guarantee an adequate supply of produce in agriculture

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<sup>1</sup> Data extracted from the website of Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China. [http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyaowen/201705/t20170502\\_270286.html](http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyaowen/201705/t20170502_270286.html)

(Laurd, 2005). Moreover, the *hukou* system has also been vital for providing demographic data for government central planning (China Labor Bulletin, 2002) and for the socio-political governance of different groups of the population (Wang, 2004). Firstly, the *hukou* system classifies citizens into two broad categories: rural and urban. Citizens with a rural *hukou* status are automatically viewed as “inferior”, due to the fact that they cannot enjoy the same social benefits as their urban counterparts. Secondly, the *hukou* system to a great extent determines where citizens are allowed to live, as citizens are only eligible to access social welfare, such as education, healthcare and pensions, in the place where they are officially registered. Thirdly, *hukou* status is primarily inherited from one’s parents at the time of birth, and therefore, children born to rural migrant workers are similarly designated as rural *hukou* holders, even if they are born in the city. Swapping the rural *hukou* status for an urban one implies a series of laborious, time-consuming and costly bureaucratic procedures. However, in most of the cases, they are unable to swap their registration from rural to urban, as they are hindered by eligibility criteria that they will likely never meet (Farrar, 2016). Rural migrants who only consider working temporarily in urban areas are also unwilling to do so, as obtaining a local urban *hukou* also means abandoning the rural one, as well as all the associated social benefits in their hometown. These migrants live multi-local lives, in both rural and urban areas simultaneously.

The *hukou* system played a major role in preventing mass migration between Chinese urban and rural areas during the Maoist regime. However, the successful implementation of China’s economic reforms since the late 1970s, has brought about significant social transformations in the country. Accompanied by rapid urbanization and industrialization processes, Chinese cities have witnessed a large-scale rural-to-urban migrant influx as a great number of rural workers have rushed into cities in search of better prospects and to realize their aspirations for stable futures for their families. The governmental control over geographic mobility and its ability to enforce the *hukou* system have been significantly weakened, as internal migration continues in large numbers (Liang and Ma, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite all of the dramatic social changes that have taken place since the commencement of the economic reforms, the rigid *hukou* system failed to evolve simultaneously (Yang, 2014). Even though the *hukou* system no longer has a decisive impact in preventing rural-to-urban migration, it still remains crucial in determining, differentially, people’s life chances across the administrative classification of urban and rural categories (Kuang and Liu, 2012). Coupled with their socio-economic disadvantages, rural migrant workers are institutionally excluded from access to decent conditions of life in the city. For example, rural migrant children cannot freely attend to state-run public schools due to their lack of local *hukou* status. Alternatively, they would have to choose either to enter those private-run migrant schools which are characterized by a lower quality of teaching, non-standardized curriculums, precarious facilities yet high tuition fees (Pai, 2012); or become one of China’s 60 million left-behind children growing up in China’s countryside without parental supervision (Sudworth, 2016) if their attempts to enter urban public schools fail. There are still numerous jobs, especially in big companies or in government sectors, that are solely open to urban or local *hukou* holders. In some regions, rural migrants are not eligible for social housing. Moreover, the *hukou* system has also contributed to China’s health inequalities as rural migrant workers are not usually able to access local health services and medical insurance plans, despite their poor life conditions and heavy workloads (Shao et al., 2015). In this regard, the *hukou* system greatly reduces the life quality and the sense of belonging of rural migrant workers in their host society and has further implications for widening the rural-urban social cleavage.

## **2) At a local level: consequences of decentralizing power from central to local government**

The Chinese central government has long acknowledged the malfunction of the *hukou* system and its negative impacts on Chinese society. Since the mid-1980s, the central government has adopted various measures in order to gradually ease the *hukou*-based restrictions, which include the

attempt to detach welfare from *hukou* status and to lower the threshold for urban *hukou* acquisition (Wang, 2015). The government has also pledged to continuously undertake *hukou* reform and to establish a new household registration system by 2020 (An, 2013).

However, as Chan and Buckingham (2008) argue, the cumulative efforts to reform the *hukou* system have actually resulted in a decentralization of power from central to local government. Despite the fact that the central government has made increased commitment to addressing discrimination against internal migrants, enforcement of new regulations has not been effectively carried out at the local level (Amnesty International, 2007). Local governments retain the decisive voice to impose discriminatory policies against rural migrants. In reality, large municipalities have already set up higher thresholds to exclude rural migrants from urban societies. For example, on the issue of rural migrant children's education, the Beijing government has implemented the "Five Certificate Policy", which requires migrant parents to process five certificates (temporary residence permits, work permits, proof of residence, certificates from place of origin, and household registration) in order to prove their local residency (Feng, 2014). Instead of providing an alternative for migrant students to obtain a public school enrollment number (Feng, 2014), the "five-certificate policy" has only exacerbated the concerns of rural migrants, as the requirements are so onerous that virtually no migrant worker in need qualifies (China Hands, 2015). More worryingly, middle-sized cities and small cities are expected to follow the lead of the policy-making of the large municipalities like Beijing or Shanghai to tighten up the restrictions (China Daily, 2016).

### 3) At a societal level: deep-rooted prejudices

The abundance of cheap migrant labour in urban areas has largely contributed to China's meteoric rise in the global economy, which is closely related to the booming of the manufacturing sector (Chan, 2012). However, while making up half of China's urban workforce and half of the country's GDP, rural migrant workers still suffer from a deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination, besides being institutionally denied access to public services (Pai, 2012). The Chinese word for rural migrant workers 农民工, which can be literally translated as "peasant workers", carries a deep-rooted negative connotation, implying their lack of education, low economic abilities and inferior social status (Pai, 2012). Long-established urban dwellers systematically associate rural migrant workers with high mobility, high crime rates and social unrest. Rural migrant workers are often viewed as a threat, competing for scarce urban resources.

Apart from their almost-permanent stamp as "peasant" inherited from the *hukou* system, Pai (2012) also points out the role of media in portraying negative images about rural migrant workers and reinforcing the prejudice against them. An example is how the media describes the rural-to-urban migration as "blind flow" (盲流 in the Chinese language) to outline an irrational, senseless and out-of-control migration influx (Pai, 2012). This type of language has been contributing to shaping and reinforcing the social prejudice against rural migrants.

Owing to this deep-rooted prejudice, long-established Chinese urban dwellers often demonstrate complex attitudes towards rural migrant workers. On the one hand, most urban citizens consider these *hukou*-based restrictions unfair and show great sympathy to the rural migrant workers. On the other hand, they fear that the potential liberalization of the *hukou* system would encourage even more rural migrants to come to the cities to share the already-scarce urban resources. When conducting my research, I interviewed five urban *hukou* status holders, ages ranging from 25-55. Without exception, while demonstrating dissatisfaction towards the current *hukou* system and the dual urban-rural administration, they all said that they would avoid spending time in areas with a high presence of rural migrant workers as they automatically related those areas with danger. Two parents among my interviewees said that they would be reluctant to see a high percentage of rural migrant children in the same classroom as their own children because they feared that they would bring have a "bad influence" on their own children due to their perceptions of a lack of parental

supervision and proper behavioral guidance. This prejudice makes it more challenging for local governments to devise and implement relevant policies in response to the central government initiatives on easing *hukou*-based restrictions, as they have to take into account the predominant opinion of the local citizens.

### Conclusion and policy recommendations:

Large-scale migration from rural to urban areas will continue to be a reality in China, yet numerous barriers remain for rural migrants to access decent conditions of life in the city. The complexity of this issue and different layers of social discrimination that are associated with it, means that an integrated approach is required that involves both central and local governments, as well as communal efforts at a societal level. While priorities are mostly set often in top-down policy-making processes, attention needs also to be paid to changing the public prejudices towards rural migrants. Consequently, given all the above-mentioned factors, the following policy recommendations can be usefully considered.

- 1) At the national level, the central government should uphold its promise to continue to work on *hukou* reforms in order to gradually fit it into the current Chinese social context. Firstly, the institutionalized rural-urban dichotomy should be eliminated. Secondly, all Chinese nationals should be able to access basic social services across the country, such as education and, healthcare, regardless of their geographic residence. Simultaneously, local governments should work on lowering the threshold for rural migrants to access social services, as well as supervising to ensure that local schools, hospitals and companies implement reforms to guarantee equal rights to migrant workers, many of whom live multi-local lives.
- 2) With regard to the negative connotation of the term 农民工 (*peasant workers*), a new term needs to be elaborated when referring to rural migrants workers. Many migrant workers have demonstrated that they dislike being called “peasant workers”. The significance of this change will reach far beyond a matter of language, considering the extent to which the use of language can construct our perceptions. Moreover, changing the term also shows a greater willingness to better integrate rural migrant workers by the host society. Here are some alternative terms that could be used to substitute the current term: “new city dweller” (新城市居民) and “new contract worker” (新型合同工) .
- 3) As for the role of the media, more coverage should be dedicated to changing the socially-constructed prejudice that the urban host population holds towards rural migrants. The predominant discourse describing them as a threat to the social order or competitors to urban resources must be re-elaborated. The media should focus more on the contribution of rural migrants to the rapid urban development that China has been experiencing in the past decades. They should also focus on the benefits that a society can obtain from a more inclusive model. For example, school segregation will do harm for the society in the long-term, while the educational inclusion will decrease inequalities and benefit the society and everyone who lives in it.
- 4) Following the abovementioned policy recommendations, there should be more campaigns dedicated to raising the public awareness of the benefits of a more inclusive and less divided society. Historical lessons from Apartheid in South Africa and formalized racial segregation in the United States can be incorporated as examples of the long-lasting dangers and social divisions that such institutionalized systems can generate.
- 5) There should be more interaction between long-established urban dwellers and the rural new-comers. Specific programmes need to be organized so that the two groups could have opportunities to have real contacts with each other, as a means to break the

stereotypes. For example, urban public schools can start by organizing extra-curricular activities with migrant schools, with the presence of parents of both urban and rural migrant children.

- 6) Legal protection must be enhanced in order to guarantee rural migrants the same working conditions as their urban counterparts. In comparison to their urban counterparts, rural migrants often face serious problems such as working and labour violations such as the subsistence level wage rate, income insecurity, job insecurity and longer working hours (Shi, 2008), which also affect their wellbeing.
- 7) Enhancement of the role of civil society in promoting the equal rights of rural migrant workers and their families. Even though civil society in China still faces numerous restrictions under the current regime, it has emerged to play an increasingly important role in delivering social services and raising public awareness (Zhang, 2003). There has to be an effort at all levels to empower civil society, to encourage its activities and to allow for the creation of new civil society groups and communities.

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