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CC6307: The Changing Chinese Institutions

Literature Review on China’s Hukou System

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Introduction

Our peasant friends leave home to work in the cities to make a living and earn some money for their kids’ school tuition…. Even when they encounter misfortune and die far from home, their identities are categorized and the value of their lives is measured by their ‘rural hukou.’ How brutal and sad is that? (Quoted in Wang 2010: 93).

The above was part of an editorial on a fatal bus accident that occurred in Shaanxi province in 2001, which claimed the life of 32 passengers. The ensuing public outcry stemmed from the seemingly “devaluation” of the life of rural-based citizens, whose family members could claim a compensation amount of 30,000 RMB whereas families of urban-based victims were entitled to 50,000 RMB. It prompted a review of the state’s compensation policy, new decrees issued in June 2006 regulated that henceforth compensation would be based on similar rates.

The abovementioned incident is but one of many poignant reminders of the social injustice and grievances engendered by the hukou (household registration) system, which has affected hundreds of millions of Chinese rural migrants. The hukou system has been accused of precipitating a “rural-urban apartheid” system in China, which denigrated rural migrants as “second-class citizens” (Montgomery 2012: 592). Such sentiments are succinctly expressed by one rural migrant, “This (hukou system) is absolutely unfair…. I was born in the wrong family…. Why wasn’t I born in another family, an urban one, or a rich one? I suffered a lot at that time…but what can I do?” (Kong 2012: 295).

The hukou system presents a burgeoning area of sociological research as it has immense ramifications of social transformation to the Chinese institutions in the post-Mao era. The objective of this paper is to provide a review of the recent scholarly literature concerning the impact of the hukou system on Chinese society. The documentary research conducted suggests that scholarly interest in the hukou system
focused predominately on social inequality, and its concomitant impact on occupational mobility, educational opportunities, and social identity. While research has been conducted on correlations between hukou system and the marriage institution, there is a paucity of research on how it has transformed the traditional family structure.

In traditional Chinese society, the family was a closely knitted unit, often with multiple generations living under the same roof. Apart from being a kinship entity, the family was also the fulcrum of important socio-economic and religious activities. Since the reform-era, hundreds of millions of rural Chinese have migrated to the more prosperous cities. As a result from the hukou restrictions, many migrant workers are forced to leave their parents and children behind. As of 2012, there were some 242 million migrant workers, or one-sixth of China’s population (Jiang, Lu and Sato 2012). Given this significant figure, further research is needed to understand how the hukou system has affected the traditional rural family structure.

This paper will not venture into technicalities of how the hukou system operates as it has been extensively discussed (Bian 2002; Wu and Treiman 2004, 2007; Whyte 2010). Given the immense academic research already conducted on the topic, this literature review will leverage more on the scholarly works produced in the past five years (2008 – 2013). These recent papers are indicative of the trend of scholarly interests and will allow for the identification of areas that require further research.

**Review of Literature**

While the origin of the hukou system can be traced to the Warring States period, its contemporary form was modeled after the Soviet concept of propiska (internal
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When it was first instituted in 1958, the hukou system performed three main functions for the socialist command economy: (1) subsidization and resource allocation for urban residents, (2) control internal migration by binding peasants to the land they farmed, and (3) management of “targeted” people such as political subversives. It divides the entire population into two categories: agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) (Tsang 2013: 659).

As part of the state’s collectivist policy, the hukou system was quickly entrenched into Chinese society after its implementation in the 1960s. The hukou book, which the authorities use to manage attributes of a household, is labeled “China’s No 1 Document”, as it controls many important aspects of life for the majority of China’s people (Chan 2009: 198).

Over the past three decades, as China embarked on market reforms, it was no longer essential to shield the cities from rural migrants. There was no dismantling of the hukou system; it was reformed on a number of occasions, but the main framework remains largely unchanged. In the post-Mao reform era, the system allowed for a steady supply of cheap and controlled migrant workers to the prosperous urban centres, which was critical to China’s economic success as the “world’s factory” (Chan 2009).

Statistics by the McKinsey Global Institute indicates that, between 1990 and 2005, 103 million rural Chinese had migrated to the urban areas in search of employment. China’s National Bureau for Statistics estimated that, in 2009, there were around 230 million rural migrant workers in the cities (Montgomery 2012: 595). By 2012, the figure has risen to 242 million migrant workers, one-sixth of China’s population (Jiang, Lu and Sato 2012: 1190).
The *hukou* system has inadvertently segmented Chinese society into three tiers (Montgomery 2012: 595-596). The first tier comprises people with full urban *hukou*, the second tier comprises people who retained their rural *hukou*, but managed to acquire urban residency. The final tier comprises the “floating population” (*liudong renkou*), uneducated low-income workers, and to a lesser extent, graduates in search of white-collar work. Suffice it is to say; the location of one’s *hukou* defines one’s life chances and access to resources. The full urban *hukou* status thus becomes a “holy grail” for many rural migrants. However, a 2007 survey conducted by Amnesty International found that “vast majority of internal migrants are unable to obtain permanent urban *hukou*” (quoted in Montgomery 2012: 599).

The paradoxical coexistence between the *hukou* system and China’s rapidly expanding economy has birthed a wealth of scholarly literature on this subject. The literature shows a high level of state institutionalized discrimination against rural-to-urban migrants. On the one hand, the Chinese government’s economic plans have led to a gargantuan influx of rural-to-urban migrants, the “secret recipe” for China’s economic success (Chan 2009: 197). While on the other hand, the *hukou* system deprives migrant workers of status, rights, and benefits, and reinforces the urban–rural division that makes them “inferior” to their urban counterparts (Kong 2012: 302).

Zhang Huafeng (2010) has conducted a research on occupational mobility between non-migrants, permanent and temporary migrants in Beijing, Wuxi and Zhuhai. His findings indicate that migrant workers, without local *hukou*, have significantly lower job mobility rates and shorter unemployment durations as compared to locals and migrants who hold urban *hukou*. In the survey conducted, two thirds of respondents did not see rural migrants as competing with city folks for better jobs in the local labor market. Only 1 percent of local residents polled attributed the
difficulty in finding jobs to rural migrants. The state subsidizes and protects local workers, while migrant workers face direct competition without any protection when unemployed. Hence, migrant workers are left with little options but to take on employment in sectors that local people are reluctant to do so (Zhang 2010: 63).

While the *hukou* system has been chastised for propagating rural-urban inequality, rural migration does have positive impacts on the countryside (see Fan 2008: 79-80). A number of studies on returning migrants highlighted the positive contributions toward their rural hometown, notably the transfer of skills, capital, experience, and entrepreneurial activities. But other scholars have cast doubt on the extent of the migrant worker economic contributions to their hometown.

The *hukou* system has transformed the marriage institution in the rural regions. Similar to their male counterparts rural women, especially those who lack education credentials and other skills, are handicapped in their quest for social mobility and access to a more privileged lifestyle (Fan and Huang 1998; Fan 2008). For rural women who desire social mobility, marriage is construed to be a bridge to overcome their limited social and economic mobility. Marriage to men beyond the community provides a means for them to circumvent the status of an “outsider” in their new destinations and allows them to attain local *hukou* and gain access to local resources (Fan and Huang 1998: 246).

There have also been cases of men also looking to secure urban *hukou* through marriage. In February 2014, *Zhongguo Zhoukan* (China Weekly) reported on a migrant worker from Hebei, who openly expressed his desire to have a wife with Beijing *hukou* (Peng 2014). The migrant worker rationalized that this would preempt the prohibitive cost of raising a child in Beijing without an urban *hukou*. 
One consequence of the *hukou* system is the production of “racialized” status for rural migrants in Chinese cities (Han 2010; Lin 2013). As mentioned previously, the *hukou* system perpetuates the formation of two distinct group identities, the urban and the rural. Rural migrants without *hukou* are akin to “strangers” and are perceived by urbanites to be “poor, greedy for money, and no education” (Han 2010: 597). They are blamed for a host of problems such as worsening sanitary conditions and deteriorating public order (Han 2010: 598). Despite high demand for their cheap labor, urban residents view migrant workers as an unwanted drain on public resources (see also Montgomery 2012: 607).

As a poignant reminder of the “racist” attitude towards migrant workers, in 2005 the municipal authorities in Ningbo put up a sign at the entrance of a scenic location forbidding rural migrant workers to enter. As pointed out by Han (2010: 606), *hukou* no longer “binds peasants to the land but binds stigma to their laboring, migrant bodies.” For the younger and better-educated migrant workers, they juxtaposed their rural origins with negative connotations of poverty and backwardness, viewing the cities as a stepping-stone to a more modern lifestyle (Fan 2008: 76). This process is known in local colloquial as *chuqu* (going out) (Montgomery 2012: 595).

The inequality between urban residents and migrants in Chinese cities has led to social unrest across China (Wang 2010; Montgomery 2012; Jiang, Lu and Sato 2012). Dissatisfaction over *hukou*-related inequality is most acute amongst those residents who are born rural, an indication that both current policy and past personal experiences have shaped the identity of these migrant workers (Jiang, Lu and Sato 2012).
In the summer of 2011, police mistreatment of a young pregnant migrant worker in the city of Zengcheng, resulted in some 10,000 migrant workers going on a public rampage. Consequently, a prominent government think-tank warned that if the rural-urban inequality persists, migrant workers could pose a serious threat to social stability and fuel further social turmoil (Wang 2010; Montgomery 2012: 615).

An interesting phenomenon that arose from the hukou policy is the emergence of “money boys” (Kong 2012). These male migrant workers do not wish to end up as dagongzai (male laborers); instead they have aspirations to become urban citizens and entrepreneurial xiao laoban (small bosses). (Kong 2012: 303-304). They overcome the inequality imposed on them by the hukou system by selling their body in the gay sex industry that has blossomed in the reform era. Due to the closeted nature of their work, these migrant workers do not stand up against discrimination, and have come to accept their status as “second-class citizens.”

An issue that is intrinsically linked to the hukou system is the education of migrant children, which has become a hot topic at the national level. In 2000, the number of migrant children stood at 14 million, and rose to nearly 20 million in 2005 (Fan 2008: 78). In Beijing, in 2010 alone there were some 240,000 children between ages of 6-14 who do not have permanent residency (Montgomery 2012: 599). As children’s hukou status is dependent on their parents, and not the place of birth or residence, migrant children are often denied access to important social services such as education (Fan 2008; Montgomery 2012; Tsang 2013).

Jessica Montgomery (2012: 600-601) has documented the difficulties faced by migrant workers in their quest to secure the education of their children. First of all, as local governments do not receive additional funding, they lack the infrastructure and
resources to accommodate migrant children living under their jurisdiction. To make up for the shortfall, some schools solicit “donations”, which the typical migrant family can ill afford. Likewise, personal connections (guanxi) are often necessary for admittance, but most migrant workers lack the social and financial capacity to establish guanxi. Furthermore, the public schools require parents to provide proof of employment as a prerequisite to enrollment, which many migrant parents are unable to furnish as they work in informal environments with no labor contracts. An alternative would be the private schools, which most migrant workers cannot afford either, while the quality of some of these private schools remains dubious.

The top public colleges cater to elite students and favor children of home cities (with local urban hukou). Rural students who are competing for a place would have to better their urban counterparts in the national test (Tsang 2013: 663). Wang Fei-ling (2010: 83) has provided an account of how a student with Beijing hukou secured admission into college with a score significantly (a quarter or more) lower than students from Shandong province.

It has been well documented that the hukou system inhibits educational opportunities for migrant children. Conversely, many middle class Chinese families have made use of their hukou status, as well as the danwei (unit), to build guanxi and improve the chances of their children securing places at higher education institutions. These parent hope that this would maintain their children’s upward mobility and their advantaged class status (see Tsang 2013).

As migrant workers seek employment in the urban centers, many children are left behind in the rural areas. Leveraging on data from Hebei and Liaoning provinces, Chad Meyerhoefer and C. J. Chen (2011) found that parental labor migration is
associated with a .7 grade-level lag in educational attainment among girls. Comparatively, boys’ educational progress is also negatively associated with parental migration, but statistically it is less significant. This outcome is likely due to girls spending more time on household production and chores, as a result of parental labor migration, which has limited their educational progress.

**Conclusion**

The documentary research conducted in this literature review suggests that recent studies on the social implication of the *hukou* system have focused predominately on social inequality, and its concomitant impact on social identity, occupational and social mobility, education, and the marriage institution. The trend is consistent with the overarching interest among scholars on the *hukou*’s role in fermenting social inequality and social unrest, and its impact on social mobility. These areas are adequately covered, and are likely to continue to attract interests from researchers. An area that is, perhaps, deserving of more sociological interest could be to explore how the *hukou* system has transformed the family institution among rural migrants.

In traditional society, the family was a closely knitted unit, often with multiple generations living under one roof. With the economic reforms, millions of rural Chinese have migrated to the urban centers in search of a better life. The restrictions on mobility imposed by the *hukou* system has driven a wedge into the family structure, as many migrant workers are forced to leave their parents and children behind, at least at some stage in their sojourn. According to the All-China Women's Federation, one out of every five Chinese children (61 million) typically do not see one or both parents for at least three months (Browne 2014). As highlighted by Meyerhoefer and Chen (2011), in the absence of migrant parents, children are forced to shoulder more responsibilities for home production. According to Scott Rozelle, a
Stanford University professor, more than 70 percent of children in rural China have shown signs of anxiety and depression (quoted in Browne 2014).

These children could do with more parental guidance and affection at this early stage of their life, and likewise the grandparents from their own children (see also Xiao 2012). There was an earlier reference to a Hebei native who desires a wife with Beijing hukou (Peng 2014). Incidentally, this migrant worker had expressed bewilderment that a former co-migrant worker chose to return home, as he felt his hometown had long become “unfamiliar” due to the years spent away. It is another illustration of how rural-urban migration has weakened the family institution, as the closely knitted characteristic of the family structure becomes unraveled.

Another noticeable trend is the growing rate of delinquency and school dropouts among rural children (see Hornby 2013). Educational credential is traditionally seen to a vehicle for upward social mobility in Chinese society. Although the Chinese government has announced plans to reform the hukou system, the aftereffects would likely continue to be felt in the current generation of young families, and the next to come. Hence, the impact of the hukou system on the family structure is an area worthy of further sociological research. After all, the family institution has always been the building block upon which Chinese society is constructed.
References


