

The Modalities of Geographical Mobility in China and their Impacts, 1980–2010

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GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY in China—the critical component of which is rural–urban movement—and the weighty problem of inclusion for the migrants into the ranks of city citizens have always been, at base, primarily matters of the expenditure and transfer of state resources. A secondary but related dimension has been about the institutionalized discrimination (Feagin and Feagin, 1993: 15; Chan, 1996: 145–147) that incomers from the countryside have faced in the metropolises, the result of a set of state-devised barriers (and the attendant attitudes among municipal officials and dwellers that have grown up around and bolstered these barriers). These blockages, and the biases and behaviours that have developed over some 50 years in conjunction with the blocks, in short, have been grounded in the command of material resources and in struggles over their disposition.

Victimization and exploitation of peasants moving into municipalities have been the very visible byproducts of these people's efforts to leave home in search of a higher wage and a better life. Consequently, issues of the human rights of newcomers into the towns and cities and the way these rights are trampled on cannot be ignored. But more central to the dynamics of the drama of China's internal migration have been the disposal of and conflicts over material interests. Unless the fundamental clashes of financial interests that drive the bigotry, biases, and injustices are resolved institutionally, charges of poor treatment and calls for redress and equity are unlikely to be effective.

In the discussion that follows, I first lay out what migration has been about in China, where there are a set of decidedly unique understandings of what a cityward 'migrant' is, and what s/he experiences and might hope or not be able to hope to become. This will entail explaining the official framework in which geographical mobility takes place. I then spell out the causes behind the remarkable exodus of farmers from the rural areas that has refashioned

the shape of Chinese society over the past 30 years. I go on to offer official statistics on the ever-growing numbers of these people, along with data on the nature of their regional flows, and provide demographic information on their ages, educational background, marital status, and so forth. I then describe the lives of migrants in the urban areas, discussing the kinds of jobs they hold, their living and working conditions, and their wages; and the treatment meted out to transients once in the cities. Next, under the heading of the consequences of their transfer, I touch on their remittances home, and also on responses to the discriminatory practices under which they live and labour—from social critics and from the migrants themselves. Finally, I list some recent reforms, and explain why in the past decade or so these have been announced to deal with ills in the system. I end by noting recent developments that portend possible alteration of the overall situation.

Chinese migrants and migration: definitions

Because of the now 60-year-old household registration system (*huji zhidu*, popularly known as the *hukou* system) in China, unlike elsewhere in the world, people who relocate to urban areas comprise two distinct categories: first, there are people who are formally recognized by the state to have migrated (*qianyi*), who have their *hukou* officially switched from rural to urban. After 1960 and before 1980, only those who changed their place of residence with the permission (indeed, usually at the instigation of) the government fell under this classification. And then there is the far more prevalent, and for this article relevant, body of those who move without having had the blessing or validation of the authorities; what is often labelled the ‘floating population’. The census of 2000 recognized as ‘migrants’ those who had lived for more than six months under a particular ‘street’ or neighbourhood authority (*jiedaohui*) other than the one in which s/he was registered (Chan, 2012). But up until 1990 (when the census allowed that the term be given to those who had remained in a county (*xian*), a much larger unit, for a year or longer), persons outside their homes were simply seen as transients.

Transients who are considered as ‘floating’, and whose registration has not been authoritatively altered, are defined on three criteria: they have crossed over some territorial boundary; they have not been able to alter their permanent registration (their *hukou*); and, at least in theory, they ‘flow in and out’ (Wu, 1990: 53–55, 27). Given the restrictions, a switch from rural to urban registration can by no means be made just by moving one’s place of habitation; only an official decision based on very limiting regulations can effect this shift, an event that happens only rarely (Potter and Potter, 1990:

307–310; Cohen, 1993; 159).¹ By the end of the twentieth century, both researchers and the Chinese government were directing their attention to a specific subgroup among the ‘floating population’, the members of the group known as ‘rural migrant labour’, or *nongmingong*, and gathering statistics just on them. The term ‘rural migrant labour’ is used to designate those still possessing a rural *hukou* who have transferred to cities and towns to work, whether for long periods, permanently, seasonally, or in a circulating fashion (Watson, 2009: 88, 90).²

This registration system was initially devised in the interest of shoring up capital-intensive, heavy industrialization, which was targeted to occur only in the cities, and of conserving key resources and food grain to sustain urban labour. To meet these objectives, it was considered critical to prevent an unplanned increase in the numbers of persons permanently resident in urban areas (Li and Hu, 1991: 30). As a result, the share of the urban population was held constant at about a fifth of the total population for at least 20 years (Fan and Mukherjee, 2005: 7). This arrangement found its justification in the planned economy; as one scholar noted in 1990, ‘At all levels and in all localities, administrative management agencies plan their work and projects in accord with the size of the registered permanent population within their respective jurisdictions’ (Wu, 1990: 43). Therefore, during the period of the planned economy, urban bureaucrats were vitally concerned with the numbers of people present in and impacting upon what they conceived as their resource systems (Ostrom, 1990: 29–33). As Chan and Zhang (1999: 821) explained, the *hukou* is ‘a mechanism to block the free flow of resources (including labour) between ... the cities and countryside’.

In the pre-1992 period, when the urban economy was still largely state-planned, owned, and administered, and when rationing still dictated the supply of many critical commodities in urban areas, city bureaucrats closely guarded the goods for which they were responsible—whether grain, water, heating and cooking oil, transport vehicles, housing, or natural gas—and begrudged any diminution of their supply that might attend the entry into their jurisdictions of ‘outsiders’, those not locally registered (Solinger, 1999: chapter 4; Chan and Wang, 2008: 28). Clearly, this was a case of peasant migrants being seen and treated as if they were second-class or even non-citizens in their own countries.

¹ Official changes from rural to urban *hukou* historically occurred when a person was officially recruited for an urban work assignment; peasants generally could become urbanites through serving in the army, rising within the party organization, or making great scholastic achievements. Also, peasants whose land was requisitioned for the use of urban work units were compensated with urban status (often on a one-status-change-per-family basis).

² Watson (2009: 90) notes that 20 per cent may be settling permanently in urban places, 60 per cent are mobile, often switching jobs and locations, and 20 per cent tend to be seasonal.

Thus, at that time keeping peasants out or minimizing their presence was engineered chiefly in order to hoard resources for urban development and the ‘proper’ (or *de jure*) populace of the cities. The obvious superiority that the richer provision of public goods lent the cities fostered an arrogance and disdain among urbanites for people they, along with their administrators, perceived to be interlopers. This perspective lay at the core of the discrimination against and exclusivist policies aimed at peasants in towns that continue to obtain to the present. The mistreatment of rural people in urban workplaces was (and is) a function of their lower-status registration, their lack of belonging to the city, and their consequent vulnerability (Solinger, 1999; Chan, 2009: 207).

By the twenty-first century, however, it has become normal for rural people to live in urban areas. As the state plan atrophied and some dimensions of the national economy opened further and further to market forces in the latter half of the 1990s, the contention over migration and migrants became structured less in the old *horizontal* way of rivalry between rural areas and cities (or between one set of provinces and their cities against others) over resources that were allocated by plan (Solinger, 1999: ch. 3);³ instead, the axis of antagonism and strain became more a *vertical* one.

That is, once the central government delegated to local governments the financial responsibilities for welfare and urban management that it had previously shouldered itself, but without at the same time disbursing to the localities the funds to pay for these services, cities became jealous of their resources for a new reason (Wong, 1991; Wong, 2009). Given ongoing duties to educate and keep healthy and housed their official residents, they have often refused to nurture people from the outside, whom they perceived as trespassers who would strain their budgets. The stress that today prevents municipalities from absorbing migrants on a permanent basis has less to do with city officials rejecting people from rural areas and poorer provinces in order to make do with a planned allotment of public goods; instead it has to do with inadequate budgets on which cities had to manage services and benefits, once the central government ceased subsidizing these activities.

Indeed, Chan and Wang have found that what might be termed *horizontal*, or interprovincial (or rural versus urban), issues became less salient causes for migration by the late 1990s, when migration itself worked to reduce inequalities among regions. Additionally, after 1995, the gap in living standards diminished, if only painfully slowly, after the central government began offering additional investment funding and some of the wherewithal for welfare services to the countryside (Chan and Wang, 2008: 39–44). Through

³ Solinger (1999: ch 3) details the interprovincial battles of the 1990s over incoming and outgoing migrants, with the poorer areas keen to export surplus labour and the wealthier provinces and cities anxious to prevent the inflow.

the 1990s, there was also an increasing convergence in wages for low-skilled migrant labour across regions (Chan, 2001: 139–142; Park, Cai, and Yang, 2008: 15). So in the past 15 years or so, the tensions that make cities oppose long-term settlement by outsiders and disappoint incoming peasants' hopes for more hospitable treatment has had to do mainly with the burdens placed on urban budgets, rather than fighting off encroachments by residents of other regions on a planned supply of material goods.

Thus, whether because of the strictures of the plan or as a result of the incursion of market rationality among urban administrators, people not formally a part of their assigned population have always appeared to these governors at least in part as unwelcome invaders. The bottom line is that China's migrants of the past 30 years began as captives of the state plan, with its allocations by region and unit, and end as hostages of the changed financial relations between central and local levels that came with market reforms.

Causes behind geographical movement

The initial impetus for the sudden breakdown of the pre-1980 blockade against tillers' exit from the country was the Chinese leadership's decision in 1979 to dissolve the two-decade-old commune system. That system had forbidden farmers to leave their rural community (unless as part of a working team whose temporary jobs were contracted between the commune and an urban factory), and, given the ubiquity of rationing of all the necessities of life and the limited resources in the cities, had kept them locked into place.

Once the communes disappeared, and each farm household was assigned a plot of land to cultivate on its own, it was soon apparent that the rural areas contained many more labourers than there was work or land to occupy. Around the same time, restrictions on marketing were eased, and by the mid-1980s the beginnings of a development craze arrived, with a demand for cheap and eager low-skilled workers to fill newly available construction, service, and manufacturing jobs. As top politicians observed the economic payoffs of this shift, they steadily liberalized the rules around urban markets (Solinger, 1985). Together, these forces drove ever more farmers into the urban areas. Meanwhile, it quickly became evident to the millions of now relatively idle peasants that there were opportunities in the cities to enhance their incomes on an unimaginable scale. As the state after 1980 implemented preferential policies to attract foreign investment along the south-east coast, funds increasingly poured into these provinces. The multitudinous posts created in light industrial processing and manufacturing firms by such investment offered yet one more incentive to migrants.

The extent of migration: numbers and regional flows

Numbers

Before the market reforms of the late 1970s onwards took effect, a mere 0.6 per cent of the total population lived in a place that was not their site of official residence (Chan, 2009: 202).⁴ Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, the annual volume of people moving officially (what has been termed *hukou* migrants) was kept constant, at between 16 and 20 million people, through the use of a quota system (Chan, 2001: 130). But in the realm of unofficial movement, according to the state's reckoning, by 1982, 30 million farmers had become migrant workers, a number that shot up, almost steadily, to around 70 million by 1988, and to over 100 million at the beginning of 2001 (*China Daily*, 2003; Chan, 2001: 130).⁵

The average annual flow volume had reached close to 70 million by the late 1990s, producing an annual mobility rate (the percentage of the population that changed its usual residence in a given year) of 6 per cent, up from only 2 to 3 per cent 20 years earlier. Kam Wing Chan has calculated that 40 per cent of the rural labour force left its home township at least once (many later returned home to their villages) over the decades 1980–2000 (Chan, 2001: 132, 133). A national population survey conducted in 2005 found that about 11.3 per cent of China's entire population was 'floating', of whom 86.7 million had registered their presence in cities with the police (Chan, 2012; Li and Li, 2010: 189). By mid-2007, a government survey of nearly 3,000 villages found that in 74 per cent of the villages examined there were no fit workers left to go out to work in distant cities (Bradsher, 2007).

While China's Agricultural Census of 2006 showed a total of 132 million 'rural migrant labourers' (Chan, 2009: 207), if people working in enterprises in the countryside near their own homes were to be counted, that number would have been as high as 225 million by 2008 (Chan, 2010: 362). At the end of August 2010, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released a comprehensive report on rural migrant labour, giving year end figures for 2009. Its investigation revealed that the total was 148.89 million. Among these, whole families accounted for 29.66 million people, while 84.45 million had left their homes but remained within the same township (NBS, 2010).⁶

⁴ Chan (2001) offers this figure for the early 1980s.

⁵ An illustration of the complexities of interpreting the data is that the official *China Daily* on 23 January 2003 noted that 94 million migrated in 2002, a number that was up by 4.7 million over 2001, according to the Ministry of Agriculture (*China Daily*, 2003). Chan suggested (pers. comm.) that data from surveys are defined differently from those derived in other ways.

⁶ My thanks to Kam Wing Chan for bringing this to my attention.

As for the direction of the flow, since its beginnings in the 1980s, it has primarily been toward the south-east coast, in response to the foreign investment that poured in there (Wang, 2005: 110; Chan, 2010: 359).⁷ According to an NBS study, in 2009, 62.5 per cent of the migrants could be found in the 11 provinces and centrally governed municipalities of east China, 17 per cent were in central China's eight provinces, and the remaining 20 per cent were in the 12 western provinces (Chan, 2001: 140).⁸ An interesting finding was that of those leaving home, 8.9 per cent fewer entered the east than in the previous year; while those whose destination was in the central and western regions rose by 3.8 and 4.8 per cent respectively. This is significant because central China is significantly less well off than the east, and the west is even poorer. These are the regions from which most migrants come. That more migrants are finding work in these regions represents a major shift.

A related trend was the growing numbers who were migrating but staying within their own province by 2009. These represented 48.8 per cent of the national total of migrants in 2009, a rise of 8.2 per cent but a considerable fall from 16 years earlier, when as many as 71 per cent stayed in their own provinces (Chan 2001, 139). The report also indicated that 9 per cent were working in the centrally governed municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, or Chongqing); 20 per cent in provincial capitals; 34 per cent in prefecture level cities (generally, those with populations between half a million and one million); 18.5 per cent in county level cities; and 18 per cent in smaller cities and 'other places' (NBS, 2009).

Demography of the migrants

The 2009 NSB survey found that 41.6 per cent were in the age group 16–25, with those aged 26–30 accounting for 20 per cent, those aged 31–40 amounting to another 22 per cent, and those aged 40 and over representing 16 per cent. Married people were 56 per cent of the total. Earlier surveys showed a similarly youthful age structure. As of early 1995, according to a national survey of leavers drawn from a rural population of 35,000, 76 per cent were under the age of 35 (Zhang, Zhao, and Chen, 1995: 27).

The 2009 NSB survey found that men accounted for 65 per cent of migrants. Earlier estimates portray migrants as overwhelmingly male.

⁷ As of 1998, 88 per cent of foreign direct investment was located in eastern, coastal China, pulling peasants from the interior into the positions it created. Chan reported that 70 to 80 per cent of the labour force in two major cities of the Pearl River Delta, Shenzhen and Dongguan, was composed of migrant labour.

⁸ According to Chan, the east was the destination for 83 per cent of migrants in 1998; this has clearly changed in recent years.

Findings vary, but it is clear that sex compositions differed between migration streams. In the export zones of the south-east coast and in the Pearl River Delta, females always predominated (Li and Hu, 1991: 13). Young, impoverished peasant women are hired in droves to turn out toys, electronics products, and textiles in foreign-invested firms. A study carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1995 reported an increase in the percentage of women migrants nationwide, from 30 per cent in 1987 up to 40 per cent just eight years later (Ba jia, 1995).

Migrants tend to be drawn from the better-educated farmers. According to the 2009 NSB survey, the illiterate were only 1 per cent, those with just a primary education accounted for 10.6 per cent, 65 per cent had junior high schooling, and 23.5 per cent education of senior high or above. It would seem that the educational levels of the migrants (like those of the whole rural population) had risen over time. An early 1995 survey found that 3.8 per cent were illiterate or semiliterate, and that 31.6 per cent had only primary school education (Zhang, Zhao and Chen, 1995: 27). A Ministry of Agriculture study found in early 1994 that just 45.4 per cent had been to junior high and 10.3 per cent senior high (Nongyebu, 1995: 45).

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new breed of migrant workers had emerged. The offspring of the original migrants, they were younger, better educated, raised with a higher standard of living than the previous generation, and often born in the cities. These workers have been found to be far more aware of their rights, and so more assertive than were their parents (CLB, 2010b; Yin, 2010).

Migrants' living and working conditions in cities

Like migrants anywhere, those in China tend to be relegated to the dangerous, dirty, and debilitating lines of work. And, as has been the case for nearly 30 years now, their conditions of daily life can be characterized as 'wage exploitation, inadequate food and housing and unsafe working conditions' (Adams, 2009; *China Labour Watch*, 2010).⁹ The 2009 NBS report reported that 39 per cent were in manufacturing; 7.3 per cent in construction work; 12 per cent were service workers; 8 per cent were involved in the hotel, catering, and wholesale and retail trades; and 6 per cent were in transport, communications, packaging, and storing. Of the total, 93.5 per cent were employed and a mere 6.5 per cent self-employed. Put differently (and perhaps calculated somewhat

⁹ *China Labour Watch* reported that the workers continue to suffer from 'low pay, long hours, and no job security', with 11-hour days and six-day weeks common (*China Labour Watch*, 2012). The NBS report for 2009, however, states that the average work-week comprised just 58.4 hours.

differently), migrants accounted for 90 per cent of construction labour in the country and 80 per cent of mining, 60 per cent of all textile workers, and 50 per cent of those in the urban service trades (Watson, 2009: 90). The NBS study showed that 60 per cent work without a contract (Kuhn, 2004: 32).¹⁰

As for their pay, an average wage of about 470 yuan per month was the estimate of the NBS in 1997, but the average net income per person per month amounted to just 300 yuan around that time, remarkably modest but three to four times the average rural income (Wang, 2005: 145). In 2006, despite improvements, interviews with 2,500 migrant workers revealed that the average monthly income, of 1,077 yuan per month, amounted to just 62 per cent of the average for an urban worker (Guan, 2008: 151–152). But according to Watson, more than half of all migrants earned under 800 yuan per month, with a third of them getting between 200 and 600 yuan per month in that same year (Watson, 2009: 93). Du Runsheng, a central government official in the agricultural sector, is quoted as having said that for the two decades following 1980 there had been ‘hardly any increase in the wages of migrant workers in the coastal areas’ (Chan, 2009: 208). And in 2009, two researchers report, average income dropped to as low as 765 yuan per month (down from 850 the year before), after the global financial crisis hit in late 2008 (Orlik and Rozelle, 2009: 21).

The 2009 NBS study did indicate some improvement: it claimed the average monthly income was as high as 1,417, while those receiving under 600 yuan per month represented only 2 per cent of the total. Those getting 800 to 1,200 per month accounted for 32 per cent, while those whose income was 1,200 to 1,600 were another third. Those with incomes between 1,600 and 2,400 yuan per month constituted 20 per cent of the total.

However, an even more important issue than wage levels has been the ongoing problem of wage arrears. A survey announced by the official Xinhua news agency in 2003 admitted that three-quarters of migrants were having trouble collecting their pay (Pan, 2003); by the end of that year, an official campaign initiated by Premier Wen Jiabao demanded that employers pay some 100 billion yuan in back pay owed to migrant workers (Fu, 2004). By January 2004, official sources claimed that about 44 per cent of wages overdue the previous year had been paid, amounting to the astonishing sum of 5.7 yuan (*China Daily*, 2004). However, there are regular reports that unpaid wages remain a problem. As of early 2009, migrant surveys indicated that 20 per cent of workers continued not to be fully compensated for their labour each year (Wang, 2009). Oddly, however, the 2009 NBS report alleges that among migrants hired to work, those owed wages represented

¹⁰ If so, this appears to be a big improvement, since 2004 NBS figures showed up to 80 per cent of migrants were working without contracts (Wang, 2008).

just 1.8 per cent of the total, having fallen by 2.3 percentage points from the year before.

Again relying on the NBS survey of 2009, a third of the migrant workers were living in dormitories supplied by their employer or work unit, while another 18 per cent were residing on their worksite, with half of the total getting free housing and another 7.4 per cent drawing a housing subsidy. Over a third were renting, spending 245 yuan per month on average for this. About 10 per cent were returning home each day, and only a tiny 0.8 per cent had bought their own housing.

The two most serious difficulties faced by migrants in cities are the high cost—or even the impossibility—of arranging standard education for their children, and their low level of access to social security. Urban governments are stingy with these benefits, hoping to conserve their resources for the locally registered, as always, but experiencing this as an issue of strain on their own finances since the economic reforms began. A report by the NGO Human Rights in China, released in May 2002, revealed that at least 1.8 million migrant children were not receiving any education at all, though the group assumed that the number was likely to be much higher. In Beijing's Fengtai District alone, in the autumn of 2001, 50 private schools that migrants had set up themselves were closed by local authorities; Shanghai shut down at least 70 such schools over the three years from 1999 to 2002. Meanwhile, special annual fees that these students were charged were they to attend public schools could range as high as \$1,250 at that time (Human Rights in China, 2002; Fackler, 2002). Not surprisingly, an autumn 2006 survey in five major cities found that just 14 per cent of migrant workers had children in schools in the city where they were then working (Guan, 2008: 153).

In early 2008, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that, with the assistance of private charitable groups, as many as 500,000 children were attending special migrant schools in Beijing. But these were schools of uneven quality, mostly unsanctioned by the state, and yet were the only educational option for the majority of migrant children unless they were to return to their rural homes (Donohue, 2008). As recently as February 2010, plans were afoot to demolish about 20 'unauthorised' private migrant schools serving some 6,000 students in Beijing's Chaoyang district, with local officials there advising parents to send their children back to their hometowns (CLB, 2010). The ulterior motive was to use the space these buildings occupied for economic development (Jacobs, 2010: A11).¹¹

Even where cities have been willing to allow migrants to participate in social security programmes—and local experiments with this have appeared

¹¹ This article also states that about 250,000 children born in Beijing to migrant parents in recent years have no legal right to a public education.

in the past decade—high fees, lengthy residence requirements, and lack of portability discourage the transients, most of whom are young and in decent health, from joining (Davies and Ramia, 2008; Watson, 2009; Saich, 2008: 89; Chan, 2012). Official statistics in the NBS 2009 study admit that the percentages who partake of the benefits constitute only a negligible proportion of all migrants: only 7.6 per cent, 21.8 per cent, 12.2 per cent, 3.9 per cent and 2.3 per cent contribute to pension, work injury, medical, unemployment, and maternity insurance respectively. Even these low figures could well represent only nominal ‘participation’, and do not by any means indicate that the actual numbers are as high as they appear.¹²

Another conspicuous form of mistreatment includes onerous and ubiquitous fees assessed by local officials, who—despite the central government’s repeated orders against this practice—have been unable to resist the opportunities for graft that the presence of powerless peasants in their jurisdictions offers (Yang, 2003).¹³ And besides this fleecing, urban authorities, also against both local regulations and orders from higher levels, have persisted in arresting, detaining, and chasing from their municipalities transients found to be without their necessary papers and permits, and also at times of national celebrations and major events. Demolishing their dwellings is one more typical form of harassment (Eckholm, 1999: 1, 4; Liu, 2002; Bequelin (2003); Cambreleng, 2002; Ransom, 2008).¹⁴ In sum, as Kam Wing Chan has written, ‘Because of policy discrimination, most cannot settle in permanently in the urban destination place and have to engage in seasonal migration or eventually return to their home villages’ (Chan, 2001: 145).

Consequences of migration

Aside from the obvious, indispensable role migrants have played in building the skyscrapers and roads that mark modern Chinese metropolises, in staffing their hotels and restaurants, and in fuelling the country’s export machine, migrants have helped out the countryside as well. Though the movement does suck the young and better-educated rural-born from the agricultural sector, at the same time it cuts down population pressure on the land (Chan, 2001: 146). Although one survey in the year 2000 found that 68 per cent of the 1,000 workers questioned disclosed that after meeting their own expenses they had little money left to send home (CLB, 2000), the *China Daily* claimed two

¹² Pers. comm. from Kam Wing Chan.

¹³ One example is a ruling from the Ministry of Finance and the State Development Planning Commission of October 2001, cited in Chen.

¹⁴ Bequelin (2003) notes more than 3 million cases of detention and repatriation per year as of early 2003.

years later that 327.4 billion yuan had been remitted (*China Daily*, 2003). The 370 billion yuan sent back in 2003 was said to contribute a full 40 per cent of rural income, based on interviews with over 20,000 rural households conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture (Kynge, 2004; Kuhn, 2004: 32).¹⁵ A different account, however, notes that the percentage might have been as low as 8.5 to 13 per cent (Watson, 2009: 93).

Given the enormous contribution that migrants have made to China's economic growth and achievements over the past three decades, it is not surprising that voices have been raised in criticism of the limitations and harshness imposed on them by the *hujū*, or household registration, system. The censure dates back to at least the late 1980s (Liu, 1990: 34–35). In early 2008, an Internet petition urged the National People's Congress to cancel the restrictions associated with the residence permit, and a rights lawyer associated with the letter disappeared soon after (Buckley, 2008). An editorial printed simultaneously in 11 newspapers in March 2010 requested that reform of the system be hastened (Chan, 2010; Ng, 2010: 4),¹⁶ but Internet versions were rapidly removed and the editors of several of the papers were chastised. Ignoring the danger, two months later, a group of lawyers and scholars posted a letter to the State Council decrying the tight bond between the *hujū* system on the one hand and public services and welfare rights on the other. The letter pointed to three major cities that had set up regulations amounting to new barriers against migrants, thereby contravening orders of the premier and the State Council.¹⁷

Protests from the victims of the system, though increasing over time, date back decades (Solinger, 1999: 284–285),¹⁸ and do appear to have had some effect (Chang, 2009; Lee, 2009). Probably, however, neither these nor the objections of intellectuals have been the most influential factors in producing official promises and efforts to ameliorate the situation for the 'outsiders' in the past decade or so. Materially based concerns have probably been more potent. One of these was the labour shortages that began in 2004 in the Pearl River Delta and led to revisions of rules in individual localities. As wages, the prices of agricultural products, and job opportunities in the inland countryside all improved around that time, and as word spread of the poor treatment and low wages accorded transient labour in the Delta, fewer migrants chose to relocate to the south-eastern coast in that period (Harney, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Bradsher, 2010).¹⁹ Accordingly, welfare enhancements and higher

¹⁵ Kuhn states that the wages make up 40 per cent of total income for *some rural* areas (italics added).

¹⁶ A translation of the editorial appeared in *Population and Development Review*, 36(2) (2010).

¹⁷ The letter, dated 26 May 2010, is in the author's possession, thanks to Kam Wing Chan.

¹⁸ The conclusion to this book contains information on organized agitation among migrants going back to the mid-1980s.

¹⁹ The 2008–2009 governmental economic stimulus packages funnelled huge sums into infrastructural projects in the interior, which also worked to keep more manual labour at home.

wages were soon granted to the workers in that area (Cai, 2007; Watson, 2009: 92; *Economist*, 2010).²⁰

The panoply of reforms promulgated by the central government since the late 1990s began with a 1997 State Council policy permitting pilot towns to extend their *hukou*, and one allowing family members (especially children) to acquire the *hukou* if one of their members already possessed it, in 1998 (Chan and Zhang, 1999; Chinese Reform paper, 2000; Yang, 2003; Kwan, 2003; Tao, 2010; Zuo, 2010). After the new millennium began, reforms intensified. Measures such as the elimination in 2001 of the quota system for registration in small cities and towns, stepped-up efforts to terminate detentions for being caught without identification papers, a crusade to end delays in paying wages and to force the payment of existing arrears, culminated at the national level in 2006 with a comprehensive document that included the bestowal of educational and welfare rights on the migrants and their families, and a plan to substitute residence permits (*juzhuzheng*) for the old *hukou* as a way of keeping track of migrants (and other citizens) that would be less detrimental to their status, and give them access to basic welfare services (although at a steep and likely prohibitive price) (Watson, 2009: 105–106; Chan, 2012; Wang, 2005: 93–97).

Despite the central government's frequent rulings and good intentions, and even in spite of announced revisions of their own practices, for the most part localities have failed to observe and enforce the changes, perceiving the new programmes as contrary to their own financial interests (Davies and Ramai, 2008: 141; Saich, 2008: 89; Tao, 2010; Pilling, 2010; Watson, 2009: 104–105; CLB, 2008; Chan, 2012). As Professor Wang Daben, a population expert from East China Normal University explained, 'Cities could not afford to grant the urban *hukou* to all migrant workers because of the huge cost of extending social welfare, including education, housing, and medical services' (Tam, 2010). An additional disincentive since the mid-1990s has been a desire on the part of cities to reserve any job openings they might have for laid-off local residents (Solinger, 2004).

The history of repeated noncompliance at the grass roots suggests that it is more than a lack of will or an absence of a concern for human rights and justice that has prevented cities from accepting and underwriting the residence of farmers within their fold. It will be only when cities find a reason that links proffering the normal privileges and rights of local citizenship to rural outsiders with their own self-interest that there can be any hope for fundamental change in the attitudes and practices of municipal officials.

It may be that a programme pioneered in the major inland metropolis of

²⁰ According to Kynge (2001), an earlier version of this same plan was already announced for smaller cities and towns in October 2001.

Chongqing in August 2010 could become a model. That city, now equipped with the financial wherewithal to support an enlarged population, has mounted an intriguing initiative. This is a drive to entice into its borders a mass of rural people, who would be permanently present to perform the service work essential for sustaining the burgeoning industrial powerhouse that the place is becoming (Zhang and Zhang, 2010). That Chongqing's leaders are also contending to see the city become the 'Hong Kong of the interior' and to have its development zone ranked third nationwide can only add to the impetus. It is just such joining of the vital interests of urban governors with those of the migrants that might be the key to inspiring some confidence in a different future for China's still transient labour.

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