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An Overview of Rural to Urban Migration in China and Social Challenges

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Abstract

The rural to urban migration in China represents one of the greatest internal migrations of people in history as rural populations have moved to cities in response to growing labour demand. One major cause of the increased labour demand was the “Reform and Open Market Policy” initiated at the end of the 1970s. The policy amplified the rural to urban divide by promoting a more thoroughly market-based economy with a corresponding reduction in the importance of agricultural production and a greater emphasis on non-agricultural market sectors. As a result, a series of economic reforms have drastically changed the cultural and social aspects of the rural area over the past three decades. Many social problems have been created due to rural to urban migration. These problems include institutional discrimination because of the restrictive household registration policies; social stigmatisation and discrimination in state-owned employment sectors and among urban residents; psychological distress and feelings of alienation.

Keywords: rural to urban migration; urbanisation in China; Hukou registration; social problems.

Introduction

The rural to urban migration in China represents one of the greatest internal migrations of people in history as rural populations have moved to cities in response to growing labour demand. According to Gong et al. (2012), in the past three decades, China has seen a rise in urban population from 191 million in 1980, to 622 million in 2009. By 2013 more than 260 million rural Chinese had left their hometowns for at least six months, which includes more than 160 million migrant workers moving from rural to urban areas (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014). In 2017, the total population of rural migrants reached to 286 million (2017 The Report of Rural Migrant Workers). The unique aspects of the rural to urban migration in China compared with other developing countries are three folded: first, rural to urban migration in China represents the largest human migration in history; second, internal migration in China is affected by socialist institutions, such as the household registration (hukou) system (Liu, Huang & Zhang, 2017); third, the disadvantaged positions of the rural migrants in cities as defined in the hukou system posed a greater level of difficulty to migrants’ integration into mainstream urban society compared with domestic migrants in western world.

In the following sections, the author will provide the context in which the relationship between migration and its associated social problems in China might be better understood. The author will review the literature on the scope of rural to urban migration in China, including the relationship between urbanisation and labour demand; government control of household registration, and specific problems and concerns with rural to urban migration.

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Urbanisation and labour demand in cities

The “Reform and Open Market Policy” initiated at the end of the 1970s was a crucial landmark of economic reform in the history of P.R.C. While China had already undergone considerable industrialization under Mao (1949-1977), the open market policy amplified the rural to urban divide by promoting a more thoroughly market-based economy with a corresponding reduction in the importance of agricultural production and a greater emphasis on non-agricultural market sectors (Deng & Cordilia, 1999; Lewis & Xue, 2003; Liang, 2001; Meng & Zhang, 2001; Zhu, 2007). With this shift, new businesses and job opportunities grew rapidly in urban areas (Liang, 2001; Liang & Ma, 2014).

Beginning in the 1990s, China launched a series of regional economic development plans to boost economic growth by attracting foreign investment, increasing exports, and importing high technology products into China. Two of the economic zones created by the regional economic development plans—the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta—especially attracted a large number of rural migrants who were seeking employment opportunities (Liang et al., 2014). Rural to urban migration was the dominant source (75%) of urban growth between 1978 and 1999. Recent data has shown that in 2017 alone about 221 million rural migrant workers flowed out of central and western regions to eastern coastal cities for jobs due to the difference in per capita Gross Regional Product (GRP). Beyond these two economic development regions, population growth has also been consistently increasing in other coastal cities over the decades. In many of these cities, labour-intensive industries like manufacturing and construction have predominated.

With the emergence of private enterprises and foreign investment companies, along with the increasing freedom of urban workers who could choose their careers, many urban residents refused to take low-skilled, dirty, and monotonous jobs. As a result, these undesirable jobs were rapidly becoming available to rural migrants. Over time, more businesses began to realise the benefits of hiring migrant workers who were willing to take jobs with low pay and fewer benefits in their desire to learn new skills and migrate permanently. However, the situation began to change when the Chinese government realised that both the economic benefits and the social problems that came with their new policies were disproportionately distributed between rural and urban areas. As a result, many changes (e.g. rules regarding the issuing of temporary work permits and the provision of employee health benefits) have been made for relaxing the hukou registration policy in order to address issues of inequality and social disadvantages of the rural migrants since 2014.

Surplus labours in rural areas

Rural to urban migration since the 1990s signified a new era of the urban labour force. Compared with the 1950s, where a large amount of migration was forced by governmental policies, the current labour movement is largely voluntary (Seeborg, Jin & Zhu, 1999). The surplus labour in the rural area opened up opportunities for many young rural residents to migrate to cities and a serious shortage of labor in cities. One reason for surplus labour in a rural area is the improvement of farming efficiency and land tenure policies in rural areas allowing farmers much more freedom to choose to either stay or leave rural areas. Since 1958, the state council issued a directive aimed to loosen the rigorous restrictions on population mobility from rural to urban areas (Meng & Zhang, 2001). According to Meng and Zhang (2001), the 1970’s rural reform policies greatly improved farming efficiency, which created surplus agricultural laborers in rural areas (95 million rural population were categorized as surplus labour in 1984; in 1986, 114 to 152 million surplus labour in rural areas and by 2000, surplus labour exceeded 300 million). Farmlands were owned by the



state and village collectives, not individual farmers or families (Mullan et al., 2011) while individual households had fixed-term contracts to use the land for their production activities. Over time, the rights of land usage began to resemble private property with longer contracts, reduced frequency of land reallocation, and increased opportunities to rent to others. Most of the younger rural people, especially during the off-seasons, were likely to go to towns or cities to seek more profitable non-agricultural jobs.

In conclusion, there are many rural and urban policies, personal preferences, and economic opportunities in cities that have played, and continue to play, significant roles in rural to urban migration. Generally speaking, the improvement of farming efficiency and land tenure policies in rural areas created surplus labour in the rural area allowing farmers much more freedom to choose to either stay or leave rural areas. Also, policies encouraging local economic development and providing settlement benefits attracted more migrants. As for personal preferences, such as job availability and a high-quality urban lifestyle, cities with these amenities are typically attracted to a large number of rural migrant population as well. Therefore, policies and personal preferences work together to push many more rural people to migrate to the cities.

Social Problems of rural to urban migrants in China

Since the 1980s, the Chinese government policies have held some bias towards urban areas. Rural people were the major driving force for the victory of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, after the 1980's economic reforms, the PRC turned away from rural people and granted privileges to the urban residents as their interest group (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2008). This resulted in the unequal distribution of benefits between urban and rural residents (Cheng & Wang, 2015; Lu & Song, 2006). Rural migrants earned less money, received far fewer benefits, and had less upward mobility, fewer legal rights, and less legal protection. Moreover, rural residents were not eligible for public education, medical care, or housing compensation in both rural and urban areas; encountering many restrictions on employment, urban settlement, and hukou conversion, as well. Issues related to citizens' rights, social exclusion, urban-rural income gap, and psychological issues were indicated empirically related to marginalised life of rural migrants in the cities (Lu & Song, 2006; Yang et al. 2015).

Citizenship and Human Rights of Rural Migrants

According to Wu and Rosenbaum (2004), a full range of citizens' rights should include social membership, community belonging, and the right of resource sharing. Rural migrants in China face significant challenges to realise all these essential aspects of the citizens' rights in cities, even though they share the same national origin as the urban locals. Sollinger (2003) researched to compare the citizenship and human rights issue on migrant populations in Germany, Japan, and China. He stated the major issues related to rules of entering and staying in terms of who can enter the country and who can obtain residency of various kinds, civic and social privileges, and fair treatment of migrant workers was important to solve citizens' rights issues. His historical review specifically aimed to explain issues of rural migration under the Chinese context, a comparison between the undocumented immigrants in the US and rural to urban migrants who do not have legal documents and certificates to legally reside in the cities. Although the economic growth and urbanisation demanded large numbers labourers from rural areas, the procedure to obtain legal residency (both temporary and permanent) for rural migrants is both difficult and uncertain. These economic barriers further enlarged the rural-urban socio-economic disparity. Thus, rural residents received unfair treatment from the state, like China, since the 1980s, benefited greatly from an urban



development strategy which provides cheap labour without providing sufficient social benefits for the contributors – especially the rural migrants – in return. The Household Registration System (hukou) system is the primary barrier for rural migrants to achieve equal citizens' rights (Cai, 2007; Feng et al., 2002; Liang et al., 2014; Zhu & Osterle, 2017).

Household Registration System (hukou) is a fundamental administrative policy functioning as political, social, and economic mechanisms in the P.R.C. Historically, hukou determined the right of access to land, as well as the distribution of the population. After the establishment of P.R.C, the hukou system required each citizen to register in one and only one place of regular residence. The most common categories of the hukou registration system were non-agricultural areas (cities or towns, or industrial and mining areas) or rural settlements (villages or state-owned farms). The local regular hukou registration defined a person's rights for many activities in a specified locality. Many social benefits, such as education, health care, and retirement compensation, were related to the "status" or type of hukou registration that a person possessed. Only the "non-agricultural" hukou holders were eligible for these benefits.

The non-agricultural hukou and rural hukou not only defined the place (rural or urban) a person came from but also assigned the type of work he or she did. Traditionally, individuals who had a non-agricultural hukou were assigned to work in non-agricultural industries, while individuals who had a rural hukou were assigned agricultural work. However, over years of economic and political development, areas that used to be rural had become urban areas as cities expanded and enveloped them. The people from these areas, however, continued to possess rural hukou even though they no longer participated in agricultural work. So now, by definition, labourers with a rural hukou include two categories: 1) individuals who have rural hukou and who continue to do agricultural work, and 2) individuals who have rural hukou and work in non-agricultural industries. For those who work in non-agricultural industries, they can be: 1) individuals who stayed at their hukou registration place; or 2) individuals who moved from their rural hukou place to cities, known as rural to urban migrants. In this research, the aim is to study this last group, the "rural to urban migrants".

The hukou system encompassed far more than simply controlling the urban population and labour mobility. Rather, it has been a social control mechanism and the main tool to exclude rural people from accessing to state-provided goods, welfare, and entitlements (Chan, 2010). As Liang (2001) discussed, during the economic reform era, the state allowed rural people to work in the cities with valid identifications. All migrants were subjected to report their hukou status to local administrative authorities, especially the Public Safety Office (which is equivalent to the city police department in the US). Those who moved to urban cities temporarily (less than six months) and permanently had to present evidence of employment, school registration or a temporary residency permit granted by an urban hukou registration authority. Rural migrant workers without any forms of authorised documents in cities would be vulnerable to harassment and excluded from labour protection, and many other benefits a local resident entitle with.

Nowadays, rural migrants still have difficulties accessing civil and social welfare only afforded to their urban local counterparts (Chen et al., 2013; Sollinger, 1999; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik et al., 2004). Chen et al. (2013) noted the lack of institutional protection within the working environment where rural migrants tended to be. Although the National Trade Union Law of 1992 demanded all firms set up trade unions, the factories where rural migrant workers tend to work either have not established unions or their unions do not have sufficient protective policies for rural workers. As a consequence, problems such as low income, the low participation rate of the social security system, inadequate housing subsidies for rural migrants has not fundamentally changed.



In recent years, the Chinese government has made efforts to protect the rights of rural labourers in China, especially after multiple cases involving police brutality towards rural migrants. These efforts included new policies on social integration, relaxed household registration system, work permit certificates, state connection, and state sector employment opportunities (Zhu & Osterle, 2017). Despite these efforts, the problem continues to exist; the fundamental civil rights and quality of life are not granted to rural migrants.

Social exclusion and discrimination towards rural migrants

Kuitenbrouwer (2003) defined social exclusion as a state of relative deprivation and involuntary exclusion of an individual's participatory role in society. In China, social exclusion continues to be a process of exclusion prohibiting rural migrants from participating in some areas of social life, and continuing isolation and discrimination towards this disadvantaged group. Wong et al., (2009) identified three types of social exclusions towards rural migrants: 1) an involuntary exclusion from participation in one or more spheres of life (e.g. socio-cultural, political, and economic); 2) a state of relative deprivation characterized by poor housing conditions, lack of opportunity for education, poor health conditions, inadequate access to improve income and employment opportunities; 3) a process of exclusion in areas of social life viewed as fundamental citizens' rights in any given society. For instance, rural migrants rarely have the opportunity of being involved in political and government sectors. Huang et al., (2014) conducted qualitative research which focused on rural migrants who stayed at an unfinished basement apartment in Beijing. These unsafe and unhygienic basement rentals in Beijing are a common way of institutional exclusion to deny the rights of affordable and quality housing for rural migrant workers. The authors stated the housing exclusion policy was due to three major modes of marginalisation. Firstly, rural migrants were considered an inferior social class by urban residents and employers in the cities; secondly, derogatory labelling towards rural migrants exacerbated the discrimination and social exclusion on both their rights of employment and rights of the housing; thirdly, very few social policies addressed the needs and benefits of rural migrants.

Hu (2012) describes the living situation of rural migrant workers in urban areas as involving "four disassociations." Migrant workers are registered in rural areas but work in the cities; therefore there is an institutional disassociation between "household registration" and actual residence. As migrant workers come from rural origins but often work in cities, they are physically dissociated from their rural communities and families, specifically their children. Workers rarely have time to go back to visit their families; this causes increasing disassociation between children of the rural migrants and the migrants themselves. There is also a disassociation from the income migrants earn in the cities they are working in, as it is mainly used to support families back in rural areas rather than for their personal expenses. In summary, rural to urban migrants face various challenges in social, economic, physical and psychological arenas after their migration.

Children of rural migrants are also marginalised because their parents cannot afford the cost of living and education in the cities. Recently, news media focused on issues of these children of rural migrants, calling them the "Left-behind Children" as they grew up in rural areas while their parents were away in cities working. The reasons vary as to why these migrant workers leave their children behind, but a major reason is the children with rural hukou cannot attend the schools where they reside (in the cities) and cannot get appropriate health care. Thus, these children left behind without parental care could possibly experience tremendous psychological stress. As a recent article, published in *The Economist* (2015, October 15), reported "left behind children" and rural migrant children make up an estimated 40% of all Chinese children. Other than lack of parenting and



appropriate education, these left behind children also reportedly experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse and psychological disorders. As many researchers and commentators indicated, hukou registration and its restrictions on the benefits and privileges is the primary cause of the "left behind children" problem.

Han (2010) studied administrative prejudices of the Chinese police force towards rural to urban migrants, and described rural to urban migrants have been treated and continually are seen as a stigmatised social group. First and foremost, there was some bias against rural migrants. Rural migrants have been seen as ignorant because of lower socioeconomic status, as well as their "less polished" appearance, and are assumed to commit more crimes. Because of these biases, they encounter extreme discrimination and unfair treatment from the public safety sectors, especially the police force. In China, a special force of Law enforcement has been established since the 1990s to monitor and check the status of the rural migrants. Rural migrants were subject to being checked, harassed, and even arrested if they lacked any type of permit to stay in the cities where they worked. In fact, in recent years, there were multiple high profile cases of violent confrontations between public safety officers and rural migrants who were under suspicion without legal permits to stay in cities. It raised concerns of public discourse regarding migration, public safety and police brutality issues, and ultimately the stability of society.

In most recent years, the public discourse regarding rural migrants started to shift. This shift predominately demonstrated in the popular and media rhetoric, such as movies, reality TV shows, and documentaries. Through the lengths of the new media platforms, the growing interest is given to criticizing harsh and unfair perceptions towards rural migrants. For instance, a popular song "I am a rural migrant" became an internet sensation in 2016. It created a better understanding of the life of a migrant worker and placed migrant workers and urban dwellers in the same space. As Kochan (2009) stated, "...it was able to illustrate them as people sharing common knowledge and facing mutual problems, thus making them both part of the newly rebuilt and constantly changing urban society in China." (Kochan, 2009, Pp.303)

Economic exclusion and discrimination of the rural migrants.

Rural migrants are largely excluded from highly paid occupations with a good working environment. Unlike urban residents, rural migrants are mainly concentrated in the service and construction industry (Knight et al., 1999). Moreover, most migrant workers take physically demanding jobs as manual labourers, or workers in the textile, garment, and toy factories, etc. (Fritters et al. 2011). According to Li (2006), 80% of rural migrants work at "dirty, heavy, and dangerous jobs." Some jobs are state-owned work units with short term contracts without regular staff housing or pensions. As Demurger et al. (2011) argue, urban residents are given social privilege to work in formal and nation-owned sectors with stable contracts and comprehensive benefits packages. In contrast, rural migrants, who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, have to choose risky work, or depend on informal revenues, sometimes illegal, that barely afford their life in the cities.

Also, rural migrants are excluded from state recruitment avenues both before and after their migration. The majority of rural migrants found their jobs either through private recruiters or informal networks, such as from their rural migrant friends. These experiences clearly illustrate the lack of settlement services (to relocate rural migrants) provided by the Chinese government.

In recent years, the Chinese government began to address the hardships rural migrants facing in the cities. In 2014, the Congress of the P.R.C. stated that policies ensuring a safe working



environment, guaranteed paycheck, affordable housing, health care, and educational opportunities for children of the rural migrants should enforce in the sectors which hire rural migrant workers.

Psychological and physical health issues with urban migrants

Both psychological and physical health issues are becoming much more prevalent among young rural migrant workers. Concerns such as infectious diseases, mental health, occupational health, and women's health are emerging public health concerns related to migration (Mou et al., 2013). As previously mentioned, rural migrants experience many social exclusions and discrimination in cities. Even worse, psychological marginalisation was most detrimental, preventing rural migrants from social integration and healthy urban growth. Research showed the common factors contributing to the psychological marginalisation of the rural migrants were sleep disturbance, poor physical health, anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Wong et al., 2009).

For male rural migrant workers, longer working hours, lower income, older age, and labour-intensive jobs were associated with a high risk of mental health issues. According to a study by Qiu et al. (2011), there has been a high prevalence of depressive symptoms among migrant workers who mainly engaged in labour intensive jobs. They argued proximal factors associated with depressive conditions included self-rated health, self-rated economic status, and city adaptation status. High income and increased use of social support resources were associated with reduced risk of poor mental health. Zhong et al. (2015) researched to examine the relationship between Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and rural migrant workers in Shenzhen, Guangdong. The research included 3,031 migrant workers from 10 factories and stated the risk factors for lifetime MDD included: lower education, poor living conditions, poor self-perceived physical health, early migration before adulthood (18 years), lack of emotional support, and working overtime.

Compared to older migrants, younger migrants may have lower levels of social support and weaker social networks. This is because the younger rural migrants tended to have a shorter time of stay in cities, thus lacking time and opportunities to form local friend circles. More so, the discrepancy between pre-migratory expectation and post-migratory reality may lead to a sense of loss, which could negatively impact mental health amongst young migrants. Additionally, rural migrants could be vulnerable to discrimination and stigmatisation from many social and political actors, and also could become stressed over not being able to find work, places to stay, or affordable health care (Gong et al. 2012). In conclusion, research shows various indicators associated with the psychological and physical health of the rural migrants, such as working and living conditions, economic status, social support, experiences of being stigmatised or discriminated against, and unrealised expectations amongst Chinese migrant workers.

Conclusion

Rural to urban migration has profound import for the stability and functioning of Chinese society. Though it is crucial to recognize the huge contributions rural migrants have made to China's urban growth (Knight et al, 2011; Fang, 2018), rural to urban migrants encounter various problems on a daily basis, such as difficulties in adapting to new urban life, a disparity between the expectations, and realities of economic wellbeing in migrant destinations. Rural migrants are usually moving from locations where traditional gender roles, kin networks, and communal living were deeply embedded values to modern, faster, and more competitive urban destinations. In light of recent policy reform (2018) initiated by the Congress of People's Republic of China (P.R.C.), rural migrant workers should have expected a guaranteed paycheck per month, more affordable healthcare, and social compensation to the rural families. In reality, however, rural migrant workers



continue to face challenges in social, economic, physical and psychological arenas after their migration.

The current research aims to explore the post-reform era of China—a country whose history makes it an excellent case study for examining the relationship between rural migration and its related social problems. The goal of the current study is to help bring to light to the life of rural migrants in China, and to raise public awareness, to help rural migrants to better adapt to their urban life by providing equal opportunities for employment, education, health care, and social recognition.

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