Article

The Reform of China's Household Registration System: Authoritarianism with Liberal Characteristics.

Marcella Siqueira Cassiano

University of Alberta, Canada.
cassiano@ualberta.ca

Abstract

Under China's state-planned economy period (1949-1978), the Household Registration System or "hukou" endured primarily as a coercive institutional mechanism that collected information on Chinese citizens and created profound social inequalities between urban and rural populations. But today's hukou is markedly different from that of previous decades. Contemporary hukou practices have shifted to accommodate freedom of choice and the opportunity to deal with the risks and responsibilities associated with this right. This shift points to the decoupling of some state-planned practices and to more liberal practices related to the treatment of surveillance as a matter of population welfare.

Introduction

Imagine a pocket-sized booklet containing cards with detailed information about you and your family. The first card registers general information: family classification, either "agricultural" or "non-agricultural," depending on whether you live in the countryside or in the city; the name of the family head; and current and former addresses, which indicate the police station responsible for managing your family's information. The following cards in this booklet contain information about each family member: religious affiliation; birthplace; ancestral origin; relationship to the family head; ID number; military service; blood type; height; and individual address changes and date. Then, consider that if you stay outside your home location for more than three days, you must register your presence with the local police, unless you are staying at a hotel, which updates your geographical status with police-integrated software. If you stay longer than 30 days, you need to apply for a residence permit.

Now, imagine that your assigned family classification shapes important aspects of your life such as access to school. It also determines the cut-off grade in the college entrance examination, and your eligibility to apply for certain jobs in the public sector. To change the classification to improve access and employability, you must purchase a home in a more desirable location. But, the local government dictates the size of the home you must purchase, and thereby its price and location. Alternatively, you can improve your prospects by marrying someone registered in that space, thus giving you a household address in the preferred neighbourhood.

Lastly, think of this booklet as your primary proof of identity and citizenship status; you will need to provide copies of it to carry out all procedures that involve the government: birth registration; health insurance; ID card; driver's licence; school enrollment; marriage; divorce; vehicle licence; passport; death certificate;

Siqueira Cassiano, Marcella. 2017. The Reform of China's Household Registration System: Authoritarianism with Liberal Characteristics. *Surveillance & Society* 15(3/4): 404-417.

<http://library.queensu.ca/ojs/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s), 2017 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license.

bank loans and mortgages; and social benefits. This booklet is not part of some Orwellian fiction, but exists in today's China and is called "Household Registration System," "Hukou Register," or simply "hukou."

With its current format, the Household Registration System has collected data on Chinese citizens for the purposes of policing and resource allocation for about six decades. Formed by the combination of "door" (hu) and "mouth" (kou), the word hukou means "family," "household," "unit," or "population." Notwithstanding its "surveillance" functions (cf. Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Marx 2016), social analysts have tended to study hukou as an institutional mechanism that fosters profound social inequalities in China (Chan and Zhang 1999; Wang 2005; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Chan 2009; Whyte 2010). Analyzing a series of reforms which include a mandate to "flexibilize" the hukou system, the most recent scholarship on hukou questions whether this registration continues to be an important factor in structuring inequality in China. For example, Lu Yilong's (2008) provocative research question "does the hukou still matter?" has divided scholarship into those who argue that hukou continues to be important in reproducing inequality (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Deng and Gustafsson 2014) and those who believe it now plays a far more marginal role (Cheng et al. 2014). This disagreement now defines discussions on the hukou's continuing significance.

My research in Jinan, Shandong Province, reveals, however, that the hukou register is more complex than an "exclusionary" institutional mechanism that delivers the state-centred coercive demands that are tied to its origins. Hukou functions essentially as an artefact of governance; neither "coercive" nor "liberating" governance, but simply "governance" that has the capacity to extract both coercive and voluntary compliance from Chinese citizens. I will demonstrate in this article that hukou operates as a flexible and resilient conduit of power that regulates the thoughts, actions, bonds, opportunities, and choices of users and subjects into private and public goals. On one hand, hukou allows organizations and individuals to connect specific populations, movements, environments, and circumstances to fear, risk, and instability, eroding collective bonds in effective and tacit manners. On the other hand, it can be managerial, impersonal, consensual, beneficial, and collaborative, fulfilling some of the attributes of the "new social control" (Lianos 2012).

I began to explore hukou as a conduit of non-coercive power after observing a shift in how people talk about it. Over the past ten years Chinese friends and informants started talking about hukou with an unexpected indifference. The tone of their comments varied, but the message was always the same: "hukou no longer means anything," "hukou does not matter now," and finally the sentence that provoked the research that supports this article: "hukou is no longer important." Challenged by this statement, I returned to Jinan—the capital of Shandong Province with seven million people—in August 2015 for a nine-month ethnographic study of the current state of the hukou system. This was my second long-term stay in the city. I lived in Jinan for four years in the early 2000s and watched firsthand its transformation into a diverse and prosperous urban centre. During my nine-month follow up study, I interviewed over 250 informants from diverse social backgrounds about a multitude of hukou-related topics. My informants include rural migrants relocated in Jinan, long-term residents, daily commuters from nearby villages working in the city, police officers, government officials, bank clerks, realtors, high-school teachers, and marriage brokers (i.e., matchmakers). I supplemented those interviews with documentary information, field work observations, and a dozen interviews conducted in several villages near Jinan.

I draw on this material to argue that today's hukou generates conformity by fusing freedom of choice, self-satisfaction, social diversity, individual responsibility, and voluntary membership to both formal and informal forms of power. Often opaque and even denied as a governing artefact, hukou has become embedded in "interactions," "environments," (Lianos 2012), and "infrastructures" (Bowker and Star 2000). The hukou system still dominates insofar as it directs people's access to specific resources, especially education, in coercive and exclusionary ways. But, conformity to the hukou system is now embedded in a feeling that associates increasing number of options and possibilities with "freedom" of choice—a hallmark

of liberal democracies. Before I present the findings that illustrate this argument, I will highlight the ethnographic moments that led me to the ideas discussed here. I hope this will provide the reader a few insights into how I dealt with a research subject marked by insignificance on the discursive level and secrecy on the material level. Then, I outline a historical investigation into the events that shape today's hukou as a conduit of options and thus choice. Such events include hukou-related policies and strategies that supported population governance in China in the last sixty years, from the state-planned economy period to today's private market-oriented economy. Lastly, I introduce the Chinese government's ongoing plan to transform the hukou system into a digital database that will contain detailed information on each of its 1.4 billion citizens, connecting them to their family and places of origin.

Field Work in Jinan: Making Hukou Visible

During my initial weeks in Jinan, hukou indeed seemed unimportant, just as my friends and informants had forecasted. The interactions I had about hukou revolved around how people today can choose their own destiny regarding themes that used to be overtly regulated by hukou, such as spatial mobility, family formation, employment, and even education. Even when challenged, research participants offered convincing and detailed evidence about how today's hukou accommodates options and individual desires. I too began to see nothing but freedom surrounding hukou, forgetting that freedom functions as a condition of power. The discourses and narratives about hukou were subtle, homogenising, hard to grasp. So, it took me a while to start to make sense of the discontinuities that constitutes hukou's contemporary power. Such discontinuities were represented by numerous and fragmented narratives of decision-making processes and rationales involving hukou. About two months into my data collection, while waiting in line at the McDonald's and staring at an advertisement about how customers can "now" "choose" hamburger ingredients, I overheard an older woman say: "Hukou 'is up to you now.'" Although I did not initially know what she meant, her comment opened a new research "window" into hukou; it made hukou appear to me as a technology that manages and achieves goals through choice, just like McDonald's strategy of relying on freedom of choice around hamburger ingredients to sell more of the same but with a different configuration.

As I waited to order, I began to think: "Tools of government are like octopi; they ensure their sustainability and effectiveness as a technology of classification and conformity through camouflage and invisibility; changing their colour, texture, and shape to match the surrounding environment. But, unlike the octopus, tools of governance cannot change to match the environment in the blink of an eye." This analogy prompted me try a new strategy to capture the significance of today's hukou as an artefact of governance. Inspired by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star (2000), I tried to make hukou "visible" by discussing with research participants other contexts that are shaped by quite different standards and classifications. This strategy did not provide immediate results, but it gave me a firm and effective entry-point to problematize my interlocutors' homogenising narratives about hukou's insignificance. Interview participants were often astonished to hear my country does not have a household registration system or some sort of ID that connects me to my family members in real time.

Casting light on some of hukou's traditional functions, such as population management and policing, interview participants usually followed-up with questions such as: "Then, how is population managed in your country?" or "how can you tell where people live?" or "is it a safe country?" During these exchanges, many people stared at my eyes silently, reminding me of the often-extensive divide that separates our cultures. A female taxi driver in her early forties asked me after a long pause: "How do you form 'family' without a hukou?" Noticing that I could not make sense of her question, she added: "How do you know the hierarchies inside the household?" These exchanges confirmed the well-documented coercive facets of this household registration system (Cheng 1991; Cheng and Selden 1994; Li and Zhang 2014; Wang 2013; Wang 2005; Wang 2012; Yu 2002), but they also prompted me to re-examine some of the most comprehensive works on hukou. This led me to the realization that the hukou's potential as an effective technology of governance has always been out there, but it has been hidden behind its coercive dimensions

and thus largely invisible to both subjects and analysts. Designed to attend to the needs of a planned-economy, the state used hukou to “relieve” Chinese citizens from the “burden” of making choices about how to solve the economic and social problems that outline their daily lives. Like in Communist Russia, the Chinese state bureaucracy during the planned economy period “consciously directed” (Hayek [1944] 2007) almost every aspect of people’s private lives.

The Hukou Registration During China’s State-Planned Economy Period (1949-1978)

The Chinese dealt with systems of household registration and neighbourhood policing—including alterations in their format and purpose—for at least two thousand years (Dutton 1992). Numerous historical accounts detail the existence of such systems in different places during the imperial and republican periods. One of the first modern accounts of the “household registration” in a nation-wide media outlet is a letter to the editor by a businessman from Xingtai, Hebei Province, published in the *People’s Daily* in August 1948 (Li 1948), about a year before Communist China was founded. He complained about the inconveniences created by the local hukou system which impeded business people from moving freely and in timely ways in and out of the city. Emphasizing the hukou’s red tape and arbitrariness as obstacles to economic development, the man asked the city’s Public Security Bureau to reform the registration system and make it more business-friendly. Although hukou as a system of population governance precedes Communist rule, under the imperial administrations and the Nationalist government was weak, fragmented, chaotic, and never fully effective. It was only during Mao Zedong’s government that the system was designed to regulate human behaviour on a national scale in the course of creating an integrated state project.

Immediately after the foundation of the People’s Republic in October 1949, the central government ordered Beijing Municipality to “clear up the chaos” from the existing household registration and “establish a new system” as an example to all municipalities across the country. Lasting a month, the celebrated “population investigation” quickly revealed that such a registration could do more than count the capital city’s 439,995 households, 1,965,424 individuals, while also registering births, deaths, marriages, and daily commuters (*People’s Daily* 1949). The “security work” also included assessing the potential risks posed to the newly established Communist administration by profiling Beijing’s population and exposing potential enemies of the state. This involved identifying 175 unregistered Kuomintang intelligent agents, 92 counter-revolutionaries, 1,508 dispersed Kuomintang soldiers, and 764 members of “target” gangs, many of which were sent to “re-education” programs that included forced labour. The Public Security Bureau, responsible for managing hukou, also found 6,107 individuals who had an irregular household registration or no registration, and five illegal radio stations and 44 rifles. Following the success of the “Beijing hukou” “clear up,” the central government promised a major national overhaul of the hukou system to advance the interests and needs of the “people,” not the rich elite: “Everyone’s hukou will be checked! We will stop the practice of letting those who provide ‘patronizing gifts’ go unchecked!” (author’s translation) stated the *People’s Daily*, citing an official in the central government to imply that hukou was somehow a form of privilege and injustice.

In July 1951, the Ministry of Public Security deployed a national-wide classification system that organized households in urban areas and their members into six categories: residential; industrial and commercial; public (hotels), floating (boats and ships); religious (temples); and foreign national. It also established that all individuals wishing to change address had to apply for a permit at the police station responsible for the address of origin and destiny. Further, this classification attached procedures to collect demographic information on populations, such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces, household merges and separations, missing and found persons, business activities, illnesses, employment, and unemployment. Titled “Regulations Governing the Urban Population” (State Council 1951), the document outlining this classification system preceded several policy guidelines perfecting China’s system of population governance and transferring its authority to the local police. Such guidelines (cf. Cheng and Selden 1994) included directives that restricted the “blind flow” of rural villagers searching for employment in urban

areas. Among other information, these directives provided details on the conduction of China's first national census under the Communist administration, which accompanied the issuance of the hukou booklet with the current content to urban populations. One of the most significant legacies of the 1951 document was the identification of rural migration and "rurality" with social chaos, risk, danger, and "low" human capital. Although no longer overtly used in policy-making, such ideas and their opposite (i.e., geographical immobility, "urbanity," and social homogeneity) are often used to corroborate symbols of stigma or prestige within interpersonal interactions.

The Communist hukou reached rural populations in January 1958, when the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress enacted the "Regulations on Household Registration in the People's Republic of China" ([1948] 2001), extending the hukou system to the entire population. Referred to as "hukou law," the 1958 regulation provided a formal legal structure for hukou. It presents the Chinese as "citizens" with "rights" and "interests"; no longer as "people" whose "safety and living" had to be safeguarded by the state. Further, none of its 24 articles actually prohibits mobility, as implied by most hukou researchers. Instead, these articles have a "positive" nature as they formalize the need to register populations, obliging and specifying rights and responsibilities related to such a need. Supplementing the hukou law, a constellation of legal-administrative disciplinary techniques (i.e., "technologies of government," cf. Foucault and Gordon 1980) were coupled with hukou by the late 1950s to ensure a rigorous population management and the comprehensive integration of the individual into state-planned economy. Such techniques included individual dossiers, political "status" classification systems, family planning, and food rationing.

Research informants recalled the food rationing policy implemented across urban China between 1953 and 1955 as the main hukou-auxiliary policy. Urban families were issued "coupons" for foodstuff, fuel, fabric, and other basic goods. Without these tickets, which represented a minimum level of daily calorie intake, a person had no means of living outside her hukou address. Further, the food rationing system reinforced the household head's duty to update the household registration in case of birth, marriage, migration, and death, among other changes. When asked about how the hukou system kept people in the countryside in the early 1960s despite the "great famine" (Dikötter 2011), research participants replied consistently: "Coming to the cities with a 'rural' hukou would be useless; you would starve here too!" thus demonstrating how hukou drew much of its strength by supporting and coordinating other technologies of governance. By fixing people to birthplaces and restricting geographical mobility, hukou enabled the Communist state bureaucracy under Mao Zedong to implement a state-planned economic strategy that relied solely on the state bureaucracy to plan and allocate resources across the country. This economic strategy used agricultural labour to finance the country's industrialization, prioritizing the urban over the rural population regarding access to welfare. It also created what the Chinese call "dual social structure," which entailed enforcing two models of governance across the country—one targeting urban spaces and another aimed at rural spaces. Oriented towards state-planned goals, these models of governance operated independently on the micro level but integrating and supplementing each other on the macro level.

To fulfill the productive needs of China's state-planning, the Communist version of the household registration drew on a "standard" (Busch 2011) that entangled "occupation" and "place of origin." Such a standard was supported by an Aristotelian syllogism that can be summarized as follows: if all those who grow crops belong to agricultural household families, and all those live in the countryside grow crops, then all those who live in the countryside belong to agricultural household families. The coercive entanglement of these two distinct and independent variables has become visible today, as China moves towards an economic logic that rewards competition and freedom of choice; unlike the economic logic of the state-planned economy period. Thus, the hukou reforms that followed China's economic reforms and Opening Up Policy in the late 1970s need to be understood as not only transferring the hukou management responsibility from the central government to the cities (cf. Wu 2013; Zhang and Chai 2012) but also as a national-wide initiative to disentangle the hukou classification from a preoccupation with occupation and place of origin.

Another important, and so far unexplored, facet of the Communist hukou system is its ability to regulate two of the Chinese millennial values that form the notion of family: “consanguineous ties of family and lineage” and “native and ancestral place ties” (Fei [1948] 1992; Lin 2013). Embedded in space, kinship, and lineage, family systems have played significant roles in Chinese social interactions and hierarchies for thousands of years (Liang and Tao 1915; Lin 2013). The third article of the 1951 hukou regulation, however, officially included individuals who were not connected by kinship, lineage, and space into the concept of household and highlighted the importance of hierarchy: “whenever there is a *person in charge*, shared lives, and shared room and board there is a household, regardless of the number of people living there and *their relationship*” (author’s translation and emphasis). In doing so, the 1951 regulation downplayed the importance of bloodline as a constituting element of family to include “strangers” and reinforcing the role of hierarchy in the household organization. The hukou booklet contains the name of the household head and his or her relationship to each household member. Further, the 1951 regulation also lowered data collection to the level of the individual (i.e., the household member) for the first time in the history of Chinese household registration systems. Despite modifying the traditional notion of family, the “Communist” register drew on the value of family as the hukou classification displays the words “family” and “household” on its labels, which can be agricultural or non-agricultural “family household.” Meanwhile, the importance of birthplace and ancestral origin (i.e., father’s birthplace) was emphasized and regulated as the hukou booklet collects this information for each household member. Thus, hukou recreated the notion of family without rejecting traditional culture. Using hukou to renovate traditional values exemplifies the extensively explored (Levenson 1964; Schurmann 1967) integration of Mao’s Communism with Confucianist ideologies to explain the Communist ascension to power; specially its success in penetrating and conquering the spatially rooted and powerful patriarchal family order that had been the basis of imperial China’s governance for thousands of years. In fact, by drawing on modified traditional values to regulate, and even create a new notion of family, hukou obtained the legitimacy it needed to camouflage itself into the environment, integrating human behaviour into policy objectives.

Rigorously managed, hukou completely froze geographical movements in China for almost twenty years, until China’s economic reforms and Opening Up policy, which were formally launched in 1978. Such reforms began to gradually eliminate the collective economy and pursue a macroeconomic model that allowed the market to play a “decisive” role (Chi 2013) in the allocation of resources. This implied unleashing competition, consumption and supply, individual entrepreneurship, and the movement of goods, people, and information. Therefore, hukou, as originally established, no longer attended the demands of Chinese society. To accommodate the flows of rural migrants that inundated the cities in pursuit of new opportunities, local governments began to readjust the hukou system to meet the specific needs of a market economy. These needs included labour market management, housing market regulation, and urban planning and development.

The Hukou Registration After China’s Economic Reforms and Opening Up (1978)

In the 1980s, Chinese cities initially experienced in-flows of rural migrants as a threat to their stability and resources. Interview participants often commented on how the Jinan police would go, in the early 1980s, from door to door late at night in search of “black hukou” (i.e., people with no registration) and migrants with expired temporary residence permits. I also heard numerous accounts of people who were assaulted by the police or extorted by neighbours for having irregular documentation or standing. My Jinan accent in speaking Mandarin reminded a participant of how she worked hard to change her original countryside accent to “pass” as a Jinan citizen. Another participant’s mother opposed his relationship with his girlfriend and informed on her to the authorities; revealing that she moved from a nearby village to work irregularly in a shop in Jinan. Without money to pay for a temporary residence permit, most migrants were terrified of an encounter with law enforcement. To survive in Jinan, rural migrants lived in sublets or shacks at their workplace, traded grains brought from the countryside for food coupons, and suffered many of the struggles analyzed by Li Zhang (2001) in her account of the Zhejiang migrant community in Beijing, including

discrimination, extortion, and violence. With the reinjection of cash into the economy in the early 1980s and the end of food rationing in 1992, surviving outside of the hukou administrative jurisdiction became easier, even as fundamental obstacles to the achievement of full urban citizenship remained.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many agricultural hukou holders managed to transfer their hukou to the cities through a national-wide program called “rural to urban”; which allowed cities to stipulate entry conditions and set a quota for in-migrants. Mostly students, these migrants were reclassified as “urban” hukou holders, assigned a bed number in a dormitory on campus, and added to the university’s collective hukou book. Upon graduation, universities transferred the responsibility for hukou registration to the nearest police station, which required the students to have a formal address to issue the individual hukou booklet. Most students, however, did not have an eligible address in the city, and did not want to be reincluded in their parents’ “rural” hukou booklet. In fact, returning to the countryside was not feasible for many because village governments normally redistributed the land of those who transferred their hukou registration to the remaining population. Thus, hundreds of thousands of migrants ended up in limbo: they were classified as urban but had no address in the city to “settle hukou,” as they say in Chinese (luo hukou). This situation technically equated to being homeless.

In 2016, I dined with a former classmate from Shandong University who participated in the “rural to urban” program celebrating her newly-bought home, which allowed her to transfer hukou from a fictitious employer’s address to her own household after a ten-year wait. “I can’t believe I will have my own individual booklet now!” she said in a festive tone. Without money to buy a “legal” home in the city (i.e., a home with deed) and settle hukou, migrants would pay the head of a commercial or industrial unit to be formally listed as an employee in its collective hukou book. In doing so, many were extorted and taken advantage of. Meanwhile, rich rural migrants and migrants from other cities transferred hukou through other migration programs that targeted skilled labour and business entrepreneurs. However, the percentage of these privileged transfers in relation to the total of hukou transferees was small.

The media and other official outlets started to portray rural migrants as a “valuable resource” only in the mid-1990s. The discursive change about the presence of rural migrants in the cities accompanied a wave of local regulations defining “temporary” and “permanent” populations. Based on a policy document regulating temporary populations (Jinan City 1998), Jinan City labelled anyone with a permit to stay in the city more than three days as “temporary population,” while “locals” with household registration in the city were called “permanent hukou.” Reinforcing the 1958 hukou law, Jinan’s policy renewed the need for migrants not staying at hotels and inns to register with the local police and apply for a “temporary residence permit” within three days of arrival. Yet, without contradicting the 1958 law, the 1998 document put forward the principle that employers were responsible for the management, accommodation, and accountability of temporary populations. This transference of hukou responsibility from the government bureaucracy to private entities made rural migrants vulnerable to the then unregulated, and often unfair labour relations that gave Chinese workplaces a terrible reputation across the world. The expressions “permanent” and “temporary” hukou codified in Jinan in 1998 continue to be used in census reports, but migrants in Jinan are now called “outsiders,” in contrast with the permanent population that is called “local.”

The expression “outsider” started to be used in Jinan as a designation for migrants in the mid-2000s. It seems to be correlated with a local policy that intended to drop the derogatory connotation of the term “temporary residence permit,” making it simply “residence permit.” Drafted in 2005 (Jinan City 2005), this policy was enacted only in October 1, 2012 (*Shandong TV and Radio* 2012). To the surprise of most, including me, this policy also recommended eliminating the “agricultural” and “non-agricultural” hukou classifications. Living in Jinan at that time, I witnessed many celebrating this news, while others treated it with disbelief and suspicion. I recall a fruit peddler by the south gate of Shandong University who mistook the elimination of the two classifications by the elimination of the entire hukou system saying: “It is not possible! Hukou is our identity; it is part of our nationhood; it never will be eliminated!” The 2005 policy also outlined a series

of conditions allowing migrants to apply for hukou “settlement” in Jinan; these conditions were related to formal employment, minimum age, marital status, educational level, business investment, payment of taxes, retirement plan membership, and purchase of a legal home in the city. Such conditions translated into today’s five programs for hukou transference: post-graduation, skilled labour, investors, family class, and homebuyer. The latter—homebuyer—is the most popular, as in order to get married, it is absolutely essential to buy a home. Without a home address, newly-wed couples are not allowed to register their household and obtain a hukou booklet. To settle hukou in someone else’s household is not an option because the rule stipulates that each household unit or address must appear in only one hukou registration. Couples that cannot afford to buy a home end up renting one, but they must continue to be listed as a member of their parents’ hukou, which is shameful, a symbol of economic failure in Chinese society.

Hukou Reforms: Updating a Technology of Governance

The “homebuyer” program requires (as of May 2017) outsiders to purchase a home of at least 90 square metres to obtain an urban hukou. This requirement can be lowered to 75 square metres if the applicant has lived within the municipality for at least three years. New or second-hand, the home must not serve as basis for another household registration, thus complying with the national rule “one household per address.” Despite sounding simple and straightforward, this policy represents a major avenue for options, choice, and competition amongst Jinan’s population, locals and migrants, concerning educational resources and residential spaces.

Families originally from Jinan or who have been residing in the city for a long time usually live in the older areas of the city in apartments obtained with state subsidies granted to the urban elite. In Jinan, this scheme lasted until the late 1990s. Comprised of four or five stores and no elevator, these apartments are old, small—usually 60 square metres—but surprisingly expensive; among the most expensive per square-metre in the city. These old apartments are valuable because they are near top-performing schools. Most owners rent them out to rural migrants and move away to more prestigious areas in the east side of the city. However, landlords usually keep their hukou registered in the old address, so their children can attend the best schools in the city. As in most countries, school resources in China are planned and distributed according to “attendance areas,” which is determined by the hukou address. Tenants accept this practice as they cannot use the address from rental homes to apply for hukou transference anyway. In addition, they get to live in the most convenient and better serviced areas of Jinan at a low price.

Many children of landlords commute back and forth to school in their old neighbourhoods by transit, but most are driven by parents in fancy cars and uniformed chauffeurs in black limousines. Traffic congestion around those schools is consequently terrible, justifying Jinan’s ranking as the worst traffic city in China (Zhang 2017). Parents take the time to chat with acquaintances and show off brand-new cars; chauffeurs pull over in drop-off zones and wait for the rush hour to pass while chatting with friends on WeChat. Parking enforcement agents appreciate the hustle and bustle as they are “well-tipped” to turn a blind eye to the whole confusion; some even help the children in and out the cars. Animated peddlers selling *tanghulu* and other candied fruits join the crowds, adding colour to the scene.

Meanwhile, tenants use the sidewalks to transport their children and grandchildren in three-wheeler electric rickshaws to the few schools that enroll citizens who do not hold a Jinan hukou. Many of these schools are located several kilometres away, in a district in the north part of Jinan; a traditional rural migrant enclave, squeezed between the south bank of the Yellow River and downtown, that is notorious for floods and pickpockets. Most tenants, however, leave their children in the village under their grandparents’ care, as they cannot afford to pay the approximately 10,000 yuan “sponsorship” fee that public schools charge to enroll “outsider” hukou holders. While illegal, this “fee” is common and taken for granted, and varies depending on the quality and location of the school. To improve access to education, a tight resource in booming Jinan, the municipal government is currently constructing numerous schools across the city. But,

they will be in the outskirts of Jinan, near recently urbanized villages, and thus unlikely to receive the same level of resources or offer the same quality of education as schools in the core areas.

As most homes in the core areas of the city are smaller than 75 square metres, they are technically not an option for hukou transferees. Consequently, migrants resort to residential developments in the west side, by the West Train Station, and in the north side, on the banks of Yellow River. Tailor-made for hukou transferees, most residential units by the West Train Station offer the minimum size stipulated by the “homebuyer” program. Developers advertise 75 and 90 square metres as popular sizes. Realtors, however, are quick to profile customers and segment the market, offering “special” options in 100 or 150 square metres to some clients. Larger apartments are better finished and located on the top of the tallest towers. Despite its well-designed wide boulevards and nice looking residential developments, the west end has the lowest price per square metre in Jinan, as detailed below.

A former agglomeration of rural villages that were demolished in the early 2000s, the west end is famous for housing a large population of villagers who received an apartment and a “Jinan hukou” as compensation for having their land appropriated by the government. To valorize the area, promote it as a “high-quality” human capital district, and attract residents, Jinan City gave Qilu Daily and Jinan Daily a large lot on the main transit access boulevard, ordering them to relocate their headquarters. With the same intent, Jinan’s government also hired the French architectural firm of Paul Andreu, which designed the Charles de Gaulle Airport and the Grand Arche at La Défense in Paris, and Dubai International Airport, to build a magnificent theatre by the train station. There is also a plan to supply the area with a high school, making it more desirable for families of childbearing age. Meanwhile, developers try to fill in the “school gap” with huge billboards that advertise the bullet train-dedicated West Train Station as a connection to other cities in northern China; these billboards suggest the neighbourhood is as an ideal place for professionals who experience long distance commuting for work. However, a night bike ride in the area reveals that most units have the lights off, indicating that they might be unoccupied.

Developments by the traditional migrant enclave on the south bank of the Yellow River mentioned earlier offer an alternative option for hukou transferees at similar sizes but at higher prices. Known as a “migrant district,” this area was urbanized in late 1970s and therefore better integrated to the city core. Built by the same developers of the west end, condominiums on the south bank also offer apartments smaller than 75 square metres in size. With these smaller units, developers target rural migrants who transferred hukou to Jinan in the 1990s or early 2000s and want to upgrade to a more modern home but still cannot afford larger units or “better” districts. Further, such units constitute a cost-effective option for professionals who opt to commute to Jinan from nearby towns but want a base in the city, instead of relocating their household units.

The number of residential developments on the south bank of the Yellow River is still small in comparison to the west and east ends of the city. A corridor linking Jinan and Qingdao, Shandong Province’s main coastal city and one of China’s most important ports, the east end saw hundreds of rural villages destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people relocated in the last decade to make space for private and public developments. This area has become Jinan’s financial and technological district, with buildings that are taller than most North-American skyscrapers. Jinan City recently relocated the city hall to this area, in a clear demonstration that the city will grow further in that direction. With most units sized between 100 and 300 square metres, developers here target mostly members of Jinan’s urban elite who want to upgrade their home conditions by moving to a larger and more prestigious area. With the starting price of 15,000 yuan per square metre (as of May 2017), the limited number of units containing 90 or 75 square metres are prohibitive for most rural migrants willing to settle hukou in the city. Such units attract professionals from other larger cities such as Qingdao, Tianjin, and Beijing who work in Jinan and opt to settle in the city instead of living in serviced studios and hotels. Many young newly-wed couples from Jinan, sons and daughters of traditional urban families, also choose to buy a home in the east end to register their own hukou, officially forming a new family. By doing so, these couples are no longer listed as “members” of their

parents' household booklet; they get their own hukou booklet, where one individual will be listed as the "household head" and the other as "spouse."

Traditionally, household heads were males, but couples now decide on this arrangement depending on conveniences related to residential real estate investment. Using the hukou system as an instrument to regulate China's real estate market, most local governments restrict the number of home ownership in their administrative jurisdiction per "household head." To get around this rule, newly-wed couples use their first home to register a "lone" household containing one person (i.e., only the household head) and "save" the other spouse to become the household head of a potential second home. While the couple save money for the down payment of the second home, they keep one of the spouses listed in the parents' household registration. Thus, gender hierarchy no longer necessarily decides household headship. Popular among homebuyers in the east end, this practice allows the younger urban elite—who already inherit state-subsided homes granted to their parents during high-socialism—to accumulate as much wealth as possible in the form of real estate.

My most surprising finding regarding the "homebuyer" program relates to rural hukou holders who commute daily from nearby villages to the centre of urban Jinan for work. This social group includes an array of individuals who offer many reasons for not buying a 75-square metre home and settling hukou in the city. After skyrocketing apartment prices and cost of living, they mention the conveniences of life in the countryside as the primary motive to not transfer hukou to the city. Such conveniences include living in a courtyard house instead of a "tiny bird cage hanging in the sky"—as one interviewee once described small urban apartments. "We can't raise chickens, eat fresh, and enjoy the neighbours in the city; people act as strangers to each other in Jinan. I will never move here! In the village, you don't need money for water... If your chickens don't lay eggs, you can walk into your neighbour's yard and ask for a few eggs to make a stir-fried rice. Pollution isn't so thick there," told me a taxi driver in his fifties drawing on a somewhat idyllic vision of the countryside. Before China changed the one-child policy to allow for two-children, a much younger commuter said that he planned to have his second child before transferring his hukou to Jinan city, thus evading the rule that determined only one child per urban hukou family. In addition, participants often presented agriculture subsidies and the extension of welfare programs to the countryside as important motives to stay in the village. "We don't have to live in the city to make a living in the city! Now we can come and go as we please. It is not like before anymore," said a transit bus driver, while his colleague complemented, nodding in agreement: "Hukou is no longer worth your while!" I heard this sentence to exhaustion during data collection. This sentence reveals how hukou has lost much of its original coercive content, illustrating that having an urban hukou during the state-planned economy period equated to having advantages.

As the change of hukou classification from "rural" to "urban" is irreversible, many participants stressed that giving up land rights to get a "Jinan hukou"—to "voluntarily" devolve their farming land to the village government, without any compensation—is a decision that carries a lot of responsibility and risk. "It was easier when we had no choice," said a migrant from Heilongjiang Province who had been in Jinan for almost a decade. He added: "To make sure I will not suffer loss, I decided not to 'move' my hukou here. I rent my land for a company that grows eucalyptus; I signed a 20-year contract." A construction worker from Zhejiang Province who had been working in Jinan since the early 1990s illustrated the decision-making process around hukou and migration from a historical perspective:

When I first came here I would do anything for a Jinan hukou. I went through a tough time at the beginning. Now I don't care about hukou; the 'residence permit' is more than enough. Why would I let go of my 'rural' hukou?! I don't want to let go of my land; my cousin rents it. I receive about 5,000 yuan in rent per year! This money helps me a lot! Also, the government is paying increasingly higher compensation in the land grabs; nobody in the south accepts less than 90,000 yuan per household member today! Land has become a

valuable resource; its price is increasing quickly; it is like an investment. If I 'move' my hukou now, I will certainly regret it. I'd rather wait and see; maybe when I retire.

On my way back from this interview, I collected a comment that provides insights into the current value of a rural hukou classification and the "burden" that making choices around geographical mobility may represent: "Do you study hukou?!" asked my Jinan hukou taxi driver. "I want to get a 'rural' hukou! It's worth a lot of money! A lot of money! In the 1980s, we used to hear about people paying thousands of yuan in bribe to the police to secure a Jinan hukou; today we hear cases of people paying bribes to the village head to get a 'rural' hukou! Who could imagine it!" Although villagers are not allowed (yet) to buy or sell the land they work or the homes they live in, rural land has become a promise of future material prosperity because of the monetary value it embodies. As Chinese cities sprawl to accommodate policy-stirred urbanization and migratory increase of urban populations, local governments are paying increasingly larger compensation values (but usually way below market price) for expropriated land. Also, many rural migrant families with a stable life in the cities opt to keep their hukou back home in the village, so they can keep the rural land and rent it out as an extra source of income.

Since the beginning of the hukou reforms in the early 1980s, more than two million rural villagers formally relocated to Jinan. In total, about 220 million rural villagers have already established hukou in urban areas, with another 100 million expected to follow the same path before 2020 according to China's Deputy Minister of Public Security (Huang 2014). China's internal migration represents the most extensive migratory phenomenon of our contemporary world; a remarkable social event that contributes to shape China's transformation into an economic powerhouse. However, a small but important detail about this phenomenon usually goes unnoticed: the Chinese government has never amended the hukou law of 1958, which is still valid. Instead, China's State Council has supplemented the 1958 law with the "Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration," a document published in July 2014 detailing the principles of the hukou system.

Hukou Reforms and the Digitalization of Hukou: China's National Population Database

In addition to provide a rationale to the distinct local initiatives unified under the umbrella term "hukou reforms," the "Opinions" highlights the most secretive dimension of the hukou system: data collection. This document outlines a plan to transform the hukou register into a "national population database" to facilitate population management. It suggests the creation of a "sound," "practical," and "strengthened" "residence registration system" database containing the following: ID, social security, and healthcare number and information on ethnicity, family planning, education, marriage, employment, income, taxation, housing, credit, and land rights. This document expects such a database to "progressively achieve cross-sectoral and regional sharing and integration of information across departments and regions." Although presented by the "Opinions" as a current goal and a future necessity, the national population database seems to be a work in "advanced" progress according to a collection of "public safety standard operational procedures" issued by the Ministry of Public Security.

Published between 2000 and 2014, this collection includes standards procedures (Ministry of Public Security 2004, 2014) to add four new categories to the original hukou classification (i.e., "agricultural" and "non-agricultural"): "population with hukou registration," "international visitors," "individuals without hukou registration" (i.e., "black" hukou holders), and "others." The classification "others" might include criminal offenders as they have their hukou suspended while in custody. Meanwhile, the variable for "black" hukou suggests that Beijing is tightly monitoring the millions of individuals with no hukou registration; these are usually individuals born after the late 1970s, in breach of the country's family planning policies. The integration of international visitors into the hukou database may explain the drastic reduction in the number of documents required for foreign nationals to apply for a temporary residence permit. It also

suggests that China is tightly controlling the hukou status of Chinese émigrés, who must cancel their hukou upon leaving the country.

In addition, these standard procedures subdivided individuals with a hukou registration into “local hukou population” and “non-local hukou population.” From the governance perspective, the initiative to categorize the population into “locals” and “non-locals” facilitates the allocation of resources in a social and economic environment where space and occupation are linked primarily by individual choice, responsibility, competition, risks, and competition, not coercive state policies. The large number and scope of codes in those operational procedures demonstrate that hukou data gathering has become more detailed, accounting for the increasing diversity of Chinese society.

As soon as the government of China accomplishes the plan outlined in the “Opinions,” it will be able use the household registration system, this millennial concept, not only to “extract” but “create” (Marx 2016) a quasi infinite number of arrangements of meaningful information on individuals and groups. Then, the hukou will fully meet what Gary T. Marx (2016) established as the central condition of the “new surveillance” and Haggerty and Ericson (2000) called “surveillant assemblage”: the capacity to merge previously compartmentalized information into digital databases for purposes of private and public governance. Hukou will continue to rely on the family as the basis to amalgamate individual identity in today’s China, perhaps its most important source of legitimacy. However, the hukou’s power to collect data on households will no longer treat its subjects only as “family members” or “citizens.” Instead, hukou subjects also will be “subjected” as users, customers, employees, students, medical care recipients, welfare recipients, and tax-payers, allowing the government to capture, integrate, and carefully monitor individual choices in a multitude of interactions and settings for public and private goals.

By interpreting hukou as a multifaceted artefact of governance, I intended to show its imprinted capacity to both constrain and liberate its subjects according to public and private needs, and rapidly adapt itself to new environmental conditions. During the state-planned economy period, hukou supported a model of governance that drew on a clear divide between urban and rural life and helped to create two distinct categories of individuals regarding rights and duties within the same nation. Today, as China orients itself towards a market economy, hukou assists the country in unifying its population into a single category organized around citizenship, not place of origin or occupation. The hukou that once helped the Communist Party to govern by limiting the individual now regulates social differentiation by delineating individual choices regarding family formation, education, dwelling, and access to the urban life. Hukou is not only important but an integral part of China’s governance.

Acknowledgements

For their critical suggestions and perspectives on the issues discussed in this article I thank: Máisa P. Braga, Stephen Kuntz, Chen Ming, Zhang Xiheng, Sara Dorow, Lisa Hoffman, Juren Lin, Mark Selden, Gary T. Marx, and the journal’s anonymous referee. I am especially grateful to Kevin D. Haggerty for his support, rigorous academic supervision, and expert guidance, which reinvigorated my research interest for China’s household registration. I received financial support from the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) to conduct the research supporting this article.

References

- Bowker, G. C. and S. L. Star. 2000. *Sorting things out: classification and its consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Busch, L. 2011. *Standards: recipes for reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chan, K. W. 2009. The Chinese Hukou System at Fifty. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50(2): 197-221.
- Chan, K. W. and L. Zhang. 1999. The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes. *The China Quarterly* 1999(160): 818-855.
- Chan, K. W. and W. Buckingham. 2008. Is China Abolishing the Hukou System? *The China Quarterly* 2008(195): 582-606.
- Cheng, T. 1991. *Dialectics of control: The household registration (hukou) system in contemporary china*. Doctoral Thesis. State University of New York at Binghamton.
- Cheng, T. and M. Selden. 1994. The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System. *The China Quarterly* 1994(139): 644-668.
- Cheng, Z., I. Nielsen and R. Smyth. 2014. Access to social insurance in urban China: A comparative study of rural-urban and urban-urban migrants in Beijing. *Habitat International* 41: 243-252.
- Chi, F. 2013. *Bonus from reforms: five trends of transformation and reforms after the CPC's 18th National Congress*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press.
- Deng, Q. and B. Gustafsson. 2014. *The Hukou Converters - China's lesser known rural to urban migrants*. *Journal of Contemporary China*(88): 657-679.
- Dikötter, F. 2011. *Mao's great famine: the history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-1962*. New York : Walker & Co.
- Dutton, M. R. 1992. *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to "the People."* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fei, X. [1948] 1992. *From the soil, the foundations of Chinese society: a translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo, with an introduction and epilogue*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. and C. Gordon. 1980. *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Vintage.
- Haggerty, K. D. and R. V. Ericson. 2000. The surveillant assemblage. *British Journal of Sociology* 51(4): 605-622.
- Hayek, F. A. [1944] 2007. *The road to serfdom: text and documents*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huang, M. 黄明. 2014. "Interview with China's Deputy Minister of Public Security," in *State Council Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration System* (国务院关于进一步户籍改革的意见), edited by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 11-23. Beijing: People's Press (人民出版社). State Council of the People's Republic of China.
- Jinan City. 1998. *Measures for the Administration of Temporary Residents in Jinan City* (济南市暂住人口管理办法). The People's Republic of China, Jinan City Government.
- Jinan City. 2005. *Interim Measures for Deepening the Reform of Household Registration System in Jinan* (济南市深化户籍制度改革暂行办法). The People's Republic of China, Jinan City Government: 1-9.
- Levenson, J. R. 1964. *Modern China and its Confucian past: the problem of intellectual continuity*. Garden City, NY : Doubleday.
- Li, Y 李亚文. 1948. "Xing City household registration management procedures should be properly modified" (邢市户籍管理手续应适当修改), *People's Daily*, August 31, 2.
- Li, Z. and Zhang L. 李振京 和 张林山. 2014. Study on the Reform of China's Household Registration System. (我国户籍制度改革问题研究). Jinan: Shandong People's Press (山东人民出版社).
- Liang, Y. K. and L. K. Tao. 1915. *Village and Town Life in China*. New York: The Macmillan company; London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Lianos, M. 2012. *The new social control: the institutional web, normativity and the social bond*. Ottawa, ON: Red Quill Books.
- Lin, J. 林聚任. 2013. *Lengshuigou—A Century of Change in a North China Village* (一个北方村落的百年变迁). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (社会科学文献出版社).
- Lu, Y. 2008. Does hukou still matter? The household registration system and its impact on social stratification and mobility in China. *Social Sciences in China* 29(2): 56-75.
- Marx, G. T. 2016. *Windows into the soul: surveillance and society in an age of high technology*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Ministry of Public Security. 2004. *Public Security Operational Procedure Standard GA 214.2 - 2004. Specification for resident population management information - Part 2: Household register management information data items*. Beijing, Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China: 1-6.
- Ministry of Public Security. 2014. *Public Security Operational Procedure Standard GA/T 2000.7 - 2014. Information codes for public security industry - Part 7: code of management type of actual population*. Beijing, Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China: 1.
- People's Daily. 1949. "Beijing Completed the Hukou Inspection and the Establishment of a New Household Registration System. The City's Population Has More Than 195,000 People" (京完成户口查对 建立新户籍制度 全市人口共一九五万余人), *People's Daily*, November 10, 4.
- Schurmann, F. 1967. *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Shandong TV and Radio. 2012. New policy of floating population "temporary residence permit" turned into "residence permit." (流动人口新政策“居住证”变身“居住证”). *V.Iqilu*. Jinan, Shandong TV and Radio. Available at: <http://v.iqilu.com/2012/09/28/3818223.shtml> (accessed on May 11, 2017).

- State Council. [1958] 2001. Regulations on Household Registration in the People's Republic of China. *Chinese Law & Government* 34(3): 52.
- State Council. 1951. *Regulations Governing the Urban Populations* (城市户口管理暂行条例). The People's Republic of China, State Council, in *People's Daily*, July 26, 3.
- State Council. 2014. *Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration System*” (国务院关于进一步户籍改革的意见). Beijing: People's Press (人民出版社).
- Wang, F. 王峰. 2013. *The Development and Reform of the Household Registration System* (户籍制度的发展与改革). Beijing: Chinese University of Political Sciences and Law Press (国政法大学出版社).
- Wang, F.-L. 2005. *Organizing through division and exclusion: China's Hukou system*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wang, Q. 王清. 2012. *Interest Differentiation and Institutional Change - Research on the Reform of China 's Household Registration System* (利益分化与制度变迁 - 当代中国户籍制度改革研究). Beijing: Pekin University Press (北京大学出版社).
- Whyte, M. K. 2010. *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press.
- Wu, L. 2013. Decentralization and hukou reforms in China. *Policy and Society* 32(1): 33-42.
- Yu, D. 俞德鹏. 2002. *Urban and Rural Society: From Separation to Opening - A Study on Chinese Household Registration System and Household Registration Law* (城乡社会:从隔离走向开放——中国户籍制度与户籍法研究). Jinan: Shandong People's Press (山东人民出版社).
- Zhang, L. 2001. *Strangers in the city: reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China's floating population*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Q. and Chai, Xiaoyu. 张谦元 and 柴晓宇. 2012. A Study on the Reform of Dual Household Registration System in Urban and Rural Areas (城乡二元户籍制度改革研究). Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press (中国社会科学出版社).
- Zhang, Y. 2017. “Traffic gets heavier in third of cities; Jinan ranks worst,” *China Daily*, January 12. Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-01/12/content_27930007.htm (accessed on May 11, 2017).