

Ryan Parsons

Thesis Prospectus

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Research Question

The most significant demographic consequence of China's economic reforms has been the massive movement of people from China's countryside to its urban areas. Recent estimates suggest that China's "floating population"—the sum of permanent and short-term migrants—has reached as many as 240 million people. This migration has taken place under the evolving restrictions of China's *hukou* system, originally enacted to restrict such movement. This thesis will examine the relevant policies of two Chinese cities—Shanghai and Kunming—and attempt to answer two questions about these policies. How liberal have these cities become with regards to the distinction between urban and rural citizens? And to what extent does the relative liberalness of these policies reflect the broader social narrative of rural migrants as they are portrayed by today's cultural and media elite? Several scholars note that China's migration policy in the post-reform period has created two distinct classes of citizen; the final goal of this thesis will be to determine to what extent that still distinction exists.

Contextual Background

China's *hukou* system is a vestige of the central government's pre-reform planned economy. The central government sought to restrict urbanization for both ideological and economic reasons, so it began assigning people a *hukou* based on their place of birth. Housing and work assignments were restricted to the area listed on one's *hukou*, and *hukou*'s could only

be changed through marriage or other exceptional circumstances.¹ The motivations for these restrictions originated in the central government's broader economic goals for China. Marxist ideology views urbanization as a consequence of capitalism; a logical corollary to this thought is that restricting urbanization would restrict the spread of capitalism. More pragmatically, maintaining a tight control over population movement allowed the central government to coordinate industrialization efforts and establish agricultural communes. The rigid enforcement of the *hukou* system essentially created two classes of citizen in China; urbanites, who had access to an extensive social welfare net, and peasants, whose rural villages lacked strong social services.²

In 1979, the central government of China enacted a series of economic reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy by adopting market-based policies. The most immediate consequence for China's millions of peasants was the dismantling of communes. The return to market-based agriculture created an overwhelming surplus of labor in the countryside. Although the economic, political, and social impacts of the reform period were also dramatic, the demographic shift that began in the 1980s has completely changed the landscape of labor in China and has given rise to a host of new social issues. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, rural workers were able to migrate to cities, but they retained their official identity as rural citizens. Thus, while they were able to seek employment in construction and other private sector industries, they were denied access to the cities' generous social welfare programs and other public services. As a result, significant portions of China's urban population was relegated to second-class status; they could live and

¹ Solinger, Dorothy J. Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market. Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd (1999) pp. 34

² *Ibid* 35

work in Shenzhen or Shanghai, but they could not necessarily receive any form of social security, enroll their children in local schools, or make use of various health care programs.

The *hukou* system has changed with other economic reforms; though detailed policy varies city to city, rural migrants can work and live in cities with fewer restrictions than in the past. Only government offices and other state-owned enterprises restrict employment based on a citizen's *hukou*. However, the liberalization of China's internal immigration policies has moved at a slower pace than more general economic reforms; there is little incentive to extend social welfare programs to this flood of rural labor, and these migrants are still improving their standard of living dramatically regardless of access to public services. This has created an unpleasant situation where urban residents belong to different social classes that are legally defined based on birthplace. Dorothy Solinger notes that although economic reforms allowed rural workers to move to urban areas, the systemic bias in favor of urban residents remained, albeit at a more muted level than before. The goal of these initial reforms, Solinger claims, was not to fully enfranchise rural residents, but to untether them and convert them to a floating source of labor.³ Despite the continued institutional bias against rural migrants, the floating population in China continues to grow rapidly; official government statistics assert that the size of the floating population had reached over 147 million people in 2005;⁴ news sources suggest this number could be as high as 240 million today.⁵ These numbers represent a significant proportion of China's population; as these migration patterns move towards permanent, rather than seasonal, labor migration, there is likely to be an increased demand for social equality.

³ *ibid.* 45

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics. "Communiqué on Major Data of 1% National Population Sample Survey in 2005." 16 March 2006. [National Bureau of Statistics of China](http://www.stats.gov.cn/was40/gjtjj_en_detail.jsp?searchword=floating+population&channelid=9528&record=2). 12 September 2010 <http://www.stats.gov.cn/was40/gjtjj_en_detail.jsp?searchword=floating+population&channelid=9528&record=2> pp. 1

⁵ Tam, Fiona. "Jobless Migrants Should Not Be Seen as Likely Criminals." [South China Morning Post](#) 12 June 2010. pp. 6

The perception among China's cultural elite of rural migrants has evolved alongside the legal landscape that defines and regulates them. At the onset of the reform period, migrant workers were, by default, associated with any social ills that plagued urban communities. Stereotypes about migrant workers were unapologetically derogatory; Dror Kochan cites an extreme characterization of this dominant narrative:

Regardless of whether it is the conversation of ordinary urbanites or the opinions of important government officials that one is listening to, regardless of whether one is watching a popular film or television program or reading the work of an authoritative expert, one will be given more or less the same description of rural people who enter urban areas: that is that they are, in the main, stupid, dirty, lacking in breeding, and without any sense of shame. You will be told that the country people pouring into the cities are, if not active, then latent, robbers and plunderers, prostitutes and pimps, 'out-of-plan guerrillas' and carriers and transmitters of contagious disease.⁶

This perception of migrant workers was manifest in both contemporary film and news media; news reports at the time suggested that any increase in crime in urban areas was correlated with the ever-growing "floating population." Though the proportion of arrested criminals constitutes only a small portion of the migrant population in a given city, officials in cities such as Kunming have been quick to blame rising crime rates on the "floating population" as a whole.⁷ In Beijing, where rural migrants accounted for a tenth of the population by 1993, migrants were portrayed as unemployed transients that needed to be controlled.⁸

The narrative surrounding migrants began to change in the 1990s as China's cultural elite dismissed the rigid association between migrant workers and social ills and began to discuss migrants in human terms. Kochan highlights a number of documentaries, films, and television

⁶ Kochan, Dror. Visual Representation of Internal Migration and Social Change in China. *China Information*. (2009) pp. 287

⁷ Zhongguo Xinwen She [China News Agency]. "Crime in Kunming Linked to "Floating Population"." BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 29 July 1989. pp. 1

⁸ Gittings, John. "China Tackles Urban Crime." The Guardian 16 July 1993. pp. 16

series that focus on the plights of individual migrants and attempt to humanize them.⁹ The South China Morning Post in 2010 called on the government of Shenzhen, a city where more than three-fourths of the population are not permanent residents, to avoid past stereotypes about migrant workers and relax restrictions on them.¹⁰ The narrative of rural-to-urban migration is making a definitive shift towards a more accepting attitude; the question is whether municipal governments are following suit.

China's floating population is well-studied from a macro-perspective; both domestic and international academics have documented and described the broad patterns of labor migration that began during the reform period. This thesis will attempt to use that framework to analyze the legal and social status of migrants at the municipal level. This thesis will focus on two cities: Shanghai and Kunming. As China's largest and arguably most globalized city, Shanghai is a magnet for labor migration and is considered the more progressive of China's major cities. Kunming, though still a regional center for labor migration, is a smaller and more conservative city and will assumedly provide the basis for a meaningful comparison.

Methodology and Data

This thesis will address two primary questions. First, what is the current legal and social status of migrant workers in Kunming and Shanghai? This question will be addressed by qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources describing the laws regulating migration and the official status of migrants in these respective cities. This portion of the thesis will also examine discussions of migrants in local news media outlets to determine how these policies are being enforced. Finally, the researcher will make use of available statistical resources to provide

⁹ Kochan 287-289

¹⁰ Tam 6

a portrait of the social status of rural migrants in these two cities by considering variables such as access to primary education, unemployment rates, and access to health insurance.

The second question to be addressed by this thesis is to characterize the current cultural narrative that surrounds rural migrants. This will be completed by considering meta-analyses of contemporary media such as the research done by Dror Kochan, by analysis of current film and documentary representations of migrants, by acquiring anecdotal accounts of attitudes towards migrants from websites such as Tianya and other social networking sites, and, when available, by analyzing opinion polls that relate to migrant workers. The ultimate goal of this portion of the thesis is to provide a general understanding of how contemporary urban China views migrant workers.

The exact theoretical methods to be used for this analysis will be determined after more background research on China's floating population and more general research on the theories about labor migration and the right to freedom movement. This research will take advantage of English-language academic resources as well as Chinese-language academic resources and primary sources. Ultimately, this thesis aims to provide a meaningful analysis of the relative liberalness of Shanghai and Kunming's migrant-related policies and the extent to which they are congruent with popular opinion. The results of this analysis will provide some perspective on the issue Solinger raises in her research: are China's rural citizens and rural migrants still relegated to second-class status, or has public policy made progress in erasing the distinction between rural and urban citizens?

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