

Rural Discrimination in Twentieth Century China

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In this paper I will argue that the divide between rural and urban areas is a prominent cause of inequality of opportunity in China today. To convey this point I will first show that the Mao regime favored industry and cities at the expense of the countryside during and after the Great Leap Forward. Next I will argue that the reform period that began in the 1980s exacerbated inequalities between town and country. Finally, I will argue that institutional barriers in the realm of education impede the social mobility of rural Chinese citizens in the present day. My goal is to evoke an image of favoritism toward urban residents and sustained, institutionalized discrimination against rural citizens during the last half-century of Chinese history.

The Mao regime pursued policies that had detrimental effects upon the Chinese countryside. A recent article in *Economic and Political Weekly* notes that the Chinese state “has structured inequality in the form of rural-urban hierarchy, producing what in essence is an unequal citizenship regime.”¹ Lee and Selden look to the actions of the Chinese government during and after the Great Leap Forward in order to discern the

¹ Ching Kwan Lee and Mark Selden, “Inequality and Its Enemies in Revolutionary and Reform China,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 52 (Dec. 27, 2008-Jan. 2, 2009). p. 29.

origins of this hierarchy. Following the failure of the Great Leap Forward to place China on an industrial par with the West, the state tightened the household registration (*hukou*) system that had been instituted in 1955. As Lee and Selden note, the effect of this policy was to “lock rural people into their villages and cut off most remaining intra-rural and urban-rural exchanges that were not sanctioned and controlled by the state.” Furthermore, the state requisitioned grain from the countryside at artificially low prices in order to feed its urban population, a policy that worsened famine when it was augmented by rural cadres’ exaggerated reports of grain production.

Discrimination against rural citizens did not cease with restricted mobility and grain requisition. Social benefits accrued to urban residents under the *hukou* system during the Chairman’s tenure. In spite of low wages, city dwellers received cash incomes—whereas peasants received payment in kind—guaranteed lifetime employment, pensions, healthcare, subsidized rations, and superior schools. “The result,” comment Lee and Selden, “was a formal two-track system differentiating city and countryside, state sector and collective enterprises with *hukou* as the mediating institution.”² The authors adduce the high percentage of the 10-30 million deaths resulting from the Great Leap Forward that occurred in the countryside as evidence of the regime’s misfeasance.

² Ibid., p. 30.

Compounding the *hukou* designations and the grain requisitions were the regime's multiple attempts to "send down" urban dwellers to the countryside, a practice that exhausted much needed rural resources. By sending 20 million urban workers to the countryside in 1961, Lee and Selden note, the state "shifted its burden of feeding and providing work for them in famine times to a countryside that already had a large labour [*sic*] surplus and confronted acute hunger." Here we see the Chinese state's exploitative manipulation of population controls, which it continues to use today by tolerating migrant laborers without extending the benefits of urban citizenship to them—thus benefitting from their cheap labor without assuming the costs of providing them with social security benefits.³ This was not the only wave of urban dwellers to be "sent down" to rural communities. Between 1964 and 1976, around 20 million urban schoolchildren were moved out of the cities. "Ostensibly," comment Lee and Selden, these forced migrations were meant "to bridge the urban-rural gap through [the youths'] contributions as farmers to rural development." "In fact," they continue, the movement "relieved the state of the obligation to provide jobs and benefits for them," for "to be sent down was to lose (in most cases permanently) the largesse of the state." By this account, the Mao regime seems to have viewed the countryside as a population valve.

³ Americans who are hasty to condemn the Chinese government for these practices should be wary of their own government's shortcomings in this regard; the *bracero* program similarly tried to garner the economics benefits of cheap labor without assuming its costs.

Inequality between urban and rural areas did not improve with the marketization of the Chinese economy during the 1980s. All indications are that the chasm between town and country has widened during the reform period. An article published in MIT's *Review of Economics and Statistics* makes this point particularly vivid. "Chinese income inequality," write Ximing Wu and Jeffrey M. Perloff, "rose substantially from 1985 to 2001 because of increases in inequality within urban and rural areas and the widening rural-urban income gap."⁴ Wu and Perloff report that some scholars believe "the rural-urban income gap is the driving force for increased overall inequality."⁵ Furthermore, they contradict Kuznets (1953)—who wrote about inequality in developing countries—in suggesting that the "institutional structure of China" will prevent adjustments that might equalize the distribution of income from occurring. Though "migrants from rural areas may seek jobs in urban areas," they write, "China's strict residence registration system usually prevents them from obtaining urban residence status (and hence access to the welfare benefits and subsidies and higher-paying jobs enjoyed by urban residents)." The restrictive consequences of China's *hukou* system have by no means abated since Deng Xiaoping's ascension.

⁴ Ximing Wu and Jeffrey M. Perloff; "China's Income Distribution, 1985-2001," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* (The MIT Press); Vol. 87, No. 4 (Nov., 2005); p. 763.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

Indeed, Wu and Perloff see the restrictions placed upon migrant workers and rural peasants as one factor ensuring the continuance of socioeconomic inequality in China for the foreseeable future. “If barriers to migration remain,” they argue, “then inequality is unlikely to diminish in the future.” As we will see, access to education and social services in China hinges upon the possession of an urban *hukou*, from which rural residents and migrant laborers are restricted. These *hukou* restrictions—originally instituted by the Chinese Communist Party to provide for the urban proletariat it hoped would usher in the age of industrialization—have congealed into a system for perpetuating inequality in the countryside. A large part of rising income and consumption inequality, argue Wu and Perloff, stems from the fact that “the Chinese government restricts free migration from rural to urban areas.”⁶ Yet, “even if such migration were permitted,” they note, “it probably is not possible for the urban economy to accommodate the majority of the gigantic rural population,” and thus “gaps between rural and urban incomes may persist and cause overall inequality to rise for an extended period.”

Lee and Selden corroborate this bleak analysis. “Class labels,” they write in reference “both to social class origins (*chengfen*) and spatial class designations (*hukou*),” “have been constitutive elements defining not only changing economic and social

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 774.

positions but also political positions and subjectivities in Chinese society from the revolutionary epoch of the 1940s through the reforms of the 1980s to the present.”⁷

Though “relaxation of certain *hukou* restrictions since the 1980s has made possible the flood of migrant labourers [*sic*] into Chinese cities,” they continue, “the second class citizenship and stigma on rural residents, including those who have lived and worked in cities for decades,” has not been eliminated.⁸ “Even in today’s cities,” they observe, “access to education for migrants’ children, housing subsidies helping employees to purchase their homes, and even voting rights still hinge on having a *local* urban *hukou*.”⁹ The effect of this requirement is to prevent migrant laborers who have resided in cities for decades from availing themselves of the social services offered to native urbanites.

Such abuse is particularly egregious in the realm of education. Tamara Jacka, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Sally Sargeson have noted the difficulties that migrant workers encounter when it comes to enrolling their children in urban schools. “Migrant workers,” they write, “sometimes have difficulty enrolling their children in schools because they do not hold a local *hukou* (household registration), [and] because some urban public schools discriminate against migrant children, either charging them higher fees or denying them entry.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Chinese universities favor residents of the provinces in which they

⁷ Lee and Selden, p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ Tamara Jacka, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Sally Sargeson; “Education and the Cultivation of Citizens;” *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*; Cambridge University Press, 2013; p. 162.

are located in their admissions decisions. “Consequently,” write the authors, “it is easier for students from provinces with a higher number of universities (especially prestigious universities) per capita to get into a good university than those from other provinces.”¹¹ Such universities are overwhelmingly located on China’s urbanized, eastern seaboard. “Most notoriously,” continue Jacka and her colleagues, “many of the best universities in the country, including Peking University and Qinghua University, are located in Beijing, and a student who holds a Beijing *hukou* can get into a Beijing university with a much lower UEE score than students from other parts of the country.” Compounding this institutionalized discrimination is the poor quality of rural elementary and middle schools. “In the most impoverished of rural areas, the schools are not good enough to give students a chance of competing with those from wealthier districts in the race to secure academic senior secondary school places.”¹² In this fashion rural students are confronted with institutional inequalities even before the college admissions process begins.

The evidence presented above demonstrates that governmental discrimination against rural residents has been a feature of modern Chinese society, and has had major implications in accentuating inequalities between town and country. The Mao regime sought to make the countryside an adjunct of its rush to industrialize along Western

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

lines. This legacy is reflected today in the social inequalities perpetuated by the household registration system, which disenfranchises rural residents, migrant laborers, and their children. The inequalities resulting from this institutionalized discrimination are particularly evident in the realm of education, where rural students face an uphill battle to compete with their urban counterparts.