

National economic reform and rural migration to China's cities



Deng Xiaoping's policies were instrumental in de-collectivising the Chinese countryside.

A wave of migration from China's countryside to its cities has left a floating mass of dislocated people with little emotional connectivity to the places that receive them. Consequently, *a space of illegality and irregularity* has arisen in the periphery of China's urban areas. As this suburbia grows so does segregation, inequality, poverty and crime. State authorities, powerless to prevent rural to urban movement, opt for a 'demolition-redevelopment' model that forces migrants to locate elsewhere, quelling the growth of peri-urban slums. At the same time, a lack of space and opportunity and an unclear policy of urban integration result in a constant flow back to the countryside.

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DENG XIAOPING'S NATIONAL ECONOMIC REFORM of 1978 de-collectivised the countryside. The rural land that once belonged to the commune was now divided into individual plots and leased to farmers for a period of 15 to 25 years. In theory, these freehold single-family farms allowed peasants to invest money and labour in their own land, paying back part of their gains to the government in taxes. In practice, this household responsibility system failed because farms were too dispersed and a lack of capital and large-scale farming made investment impossible (Wilson 1996: 170). Furthermore, while the government gave farmers the responsibility for rural management and the maintenance of infrastructure, they lacked support from the kind of powerful organisations that had existed during the commune period.

Before the national economic reform, the people's communes were responsible of their own agricultural and industrial gains and production. Communes also took charge of maintaining, repairing or renewing irrigation systems, dams and ditches, as well as carrying the costs of schools and healthcare. Development and gains were based on a structure of collective labour and common good. Rural communes also benefited from campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when urban residents were temporarily sent to rural areas to help in programmes of rapid agricultural development, providing much needed trained and expert staff. Following the de-collectivisation of the countryside there are fewer powerful social organisations to maintain rural infrastructure, and in particular to maintain the irrigation and ditches needed for crop growth. Under the agricultural reforms of 1978, services formerly provided free of charge, or subsidised by the government, had to be paid for by farmers (Wilson 1996: 177). A farmer was expected to pay for local highways, school costs, social insurance, welfare, and for development projects such as building schools, hospitals, police stations, etc. In rural communes, these expenses used to be taken from the collective income, now they are charged to each individual, with the risk of abuse by local officials. Farmers find themselves exposed to bankruptcy when the selling of their crops cannot cover these local fees.

The demise of rural life

Today, farmers survive by engaging in sideline activities, working for industries and enterprises in rural towns and villages. These industries are based in corporate organisations (collective property of local governments) and run with the leadership and entrepreneurship of party members and local

investors. Many rural towns and villages in China have productive industries for basic consumer goods, such as textiles, paper, simple electronics, agricultural tools, bricks for house construction and extraction industries like coal. These industries compete fiercely in the marketplace, ignoring niceties. They are not subsidised by local governments and they do not even have access to bank loans, therefore they are heavily motivated by profit. Many of the textiles and electronics on sale in the US and the EU originate from these rural industries. Village enterprises sold US\$12 billion worth of goods overseas in 1990 (Lardy 1992: 692). In periods when there are no jobs in the factories, or it is harvest time, workers return to tending their crops. In spite of these opportunities to supplement their income, many rural citizens are not protected by welfare. Many services formerly provided by the state now have to be paid by farmers themselves, including roads, wells, schools and electricity. The poorest farmers and their sons are forced to seek jobs elsewhere in rural industries, rural towns and by heading to the cities. They become 'surplus migratory labour', leaving their farms in the hands of woman, children and the elderly, making rural development virtually impossible. This is compounded by the phenomenon of farmers abandoning their uncultivated tracts of land, rather than renting it out for others to farm, because they see the property as their only form of security (Chang & Kwok 1990: 149). The result is a gradual abandonment of agriculture as a way of life in favour of work in rural industries and cities.

Life in provincial towns

Despite the ideological communist aim to reduce the gap between the rural and urban environment, since 1958, the *hukou* (household registration record) has identified every member of the population as 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural', using their residence—which is classified as 'urban' or 'rural'—as a mobility control. Migrant workers required many bureaucratic passes in order to travel and settle in other areas different of their household registration. The communist state severely restricted residential mobility, however, it instituted programmes to send urban residents to the countryside during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. With the economic and political reforms of 1978, restrictions on social mobility changed slightly. The governmental slogan in the 1980s was *li tu bu li xiang* (to leave the land but not to leave the rural areas). The peasant workers (*mingong*) lived in rural areas and commuted to rural towns for work, or migrated to cities as labour without getting an urban *hukou*.

China's 'floating population' is considered a 'dangerous class' (Friedmann, 2005: 63). As such, the urban population rarely mixes with rural migrants who live on the fringes or in factories and on construction sites. It is an 'invisible population' that gathers together in groups originating from the same native place.

This resulted in a 'decentralized urban growth' (Lee 1992: 89-118). Towns and cities became centres of economic activity but not bases of residential expansion. Instead, townships (*xiang*) sprang up and hosted rural *hukou*, where many farmers arriving from other rural villages could work and live. However, since 1984 and the first reform of the household registration system, many former *xiang* have evolved into towns and earned an urban status (*zhen*). By 2000, over 100 million rural residents were making their living in small towns (Stockman 2000: 59). In 2001, a second major registration reform occurred when those rural *hukou* residents possessing a stable job and an urban residence permit were allowed to move to small cities and designated towns of less than 200,000 inhabitants. Today we see, however, that many rural migrants are so poor and in desperate search of work that they arrive in cities illegally, where they have no rights to social housing or health care. These rural migrants, called *mangliu* (blind migrant), are considered a 'temporary' population. They are not officially registered in the cities and have become a 'floating population', living without a fix abode, constantly travelling from place to place. At the same time, many other migrants to be found in urban China are not 'permanent' but *cyclical* (returning home during harvest time or for other occasions) or *repeat* migrants (they return to their native place, only to leave again at a later date) (Friedmann 2005: 65).

Illegal migration to mega-cities

In the mid-1990s, migration affected approximately 80-100 million people (Stockman 2000: 65). Today, most newcomers to China's cities are temporary workers, construction labourers and housemaids. The numbers of temporary residents without formal urban household registration has increased. Cities like Beijing or Shanghai periodically eradicate migrant enclaves and repatriate the population because these areas are considered a threat to the public order (poor living conditions, social disorder and the deterioration of the urban environment). China's 'floating population' is considered a 'dangerous class' (Friedmann, 2005: 63). As such, the urban population rarely mixes with rural migrants who live on the fringes or in factories and on construction sites. It is an 'invisible population' that gathers together in groups originating from the same native place. The state cannot control the numbers of these illegal rural migrants, the majority of whom end up in the informal and illegal economies or doing dangerous, dirty and difficult jobs in family enterprises, manufacturing industries, or as nursemaids to middle-class households. All of them are paid below the minimum wage and exploited. Young women,

in particular, are at high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Migrants live in cramped dormitories or squeezed together in one room because their limited salaries don't stretch to paying for a single room in an urban village. Even in these conditions, migrants still expect to save some money to support their families in the countryside, one of the major reasons why they left home in first place.

Migrants have created a social space that falls outside official planning and implicates a transformation not only of the physical space in the cities but also of society in general (Zhang 2001: 202-3). They form alternative living spaces and build illegal structures, including temporary housing, stores, restaurants and street markets. At times of important international gatherings and events in China, the government mobilises clean-up campaigns and demolishes these illegal constructions. In the cities, illegal enclaves are called 'villages' (*cun*) and are preceded by the name of the province where the migrants come from. Beijing, for example, hosts Henancun, Anhucun and Zhejiangcun. These villages are conglomerations of illegal dwellings located in peri-urban zones (Friedmann 2005: 70). There are also peri-urban villages around big urban centres that attract the settlement of rural migrants who, because of their rural status, cannot obtain state-subsidised housing in the cities (*anju*). These peri-urban villages provide them with opportunities for accessible and affordable housing and to live legally with their rural *hukou*. Often, indigenous villagers in peri-urban areas build housing units in order to rent them out to migrants (Zhang 2005: 248). The current law gives farmers autonomy over their land and they are not obliged to follow building codes. Consequently, many of these housing constructions evade planning regulations. The result is chaotic shanty areas that aggravate problems of spatial segregation. The government's approach to urban development is its 'demolition-development' model. The local government allots indigenous villagers with a new registration household, upgrading them from rural to urban *hukou*. However, the migrant rural population living in these villages automatically acquire a status of illegality, forcing them to relocate and keeping them in a constant state of flux.

The establishment of the People's Republic and a planned social economy induced the political goal to reduce the gap between rural and urban China. However, the good will ended as numerous social mobility restrictions grew and resulted in an even greater physical barrier between both worlds. With the shift from a planned to a free market economy, the aim, again, was to reduce the economic gap between rural and urban areas, privatising business and allowing the construction of competitive industries in rural areas. Manufacturing facilities in cities and peri-urban areas attracted cheap rural labour that helped to make the economy competitive. The government was permissive, granting flexible household restrictions in order to allow for the arrival of millions of workers to urban areas. However, despite attempts to eliminate the duality, rural migrants have not been fully integrated into China's urban social structure. A lack of clear social policy in this respect makes it impossible to solve the problem of the constant movement of a 'floating population'. Without a permanent abode and better housing conditions, the risk that migrants become a permanent urban underclass has become a reality. The migratory enclaves that have developed help them to maintain their social relations and to preserve a group identity, however, these 'villages' also isolate them into ghettos.

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Suburbia in the city of Guilin, Quangxi, China, (2001).
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Villagers selling in an informal street market, Guilin, Quangxi, China, (2001).
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Countryside in Xian, Shaanxi, China (2001).
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Migrant 'village' (cun) in Fangzhuang, Beijing, China (2001).
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