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## 前言

迁移是人类的正常活动。在历史中，人们总是从一个城市，一个地区并一个国家搬到另一个城市。人们出于经济，社会，政治，宗教或环境等多种原因而迁移并继续迁移。然而，尽管移动有各种各样的原因，但是搬家的共同点一直是对更好生活的愿望。这种愿望可能是由祖国所经历的困难驱动的，也可能是由个人冒险意识和发现新世界的情愿造成的。迁移是所有人的普遍人权，每一个人都应该有实现自己的愿望的机会：离开家去找到一点儿幸福的。

中国人口迁移因独特而吸引了国内外观众的关注。当谈到中国人口移民时，人家想到的第一件事情就是这种现象的重要性。到目前为止，中国是世界上人口最多的国家，有将近 14 亿人口，其中大多数居住在沿海地区，靠近高度发达工业中心。根据官方数据，估计有 2.88 亿中国公民离开家乡搬到另一个城市或另一个省，为的是对他们自己和家人带来更好的未来。中国人口迁移是我们时代表示过最大的移民。该移动的主人是农民工，他们从国家的贫穷和落后内地迁移到了繁荣的城市，如北京，上海和工业省广东。

今天，农民工主要从事制造业，建筑业与第三产业。在过去的四十年里，农民工为建设现代中国做出了巨大的贡献：他们修建全国的道路，公寓，办公室并在工厂打工。除了数百万农民工对国家发展做出的实际贡献以外，不能否是中国的劳动已经满足了全球市场的需求：中国制造的产品每天都在世界各地出售。农民工一直是并且还是经济景气的支柱，这使中国成为国际舞台上第二大参与者，这很明显是，没有移民人口的努力和牺牲，本国将永远无法到达当前正在取得众人惊讶的成功。

“内部移民”这一句话一般指的是在一个国家政治边界之内发生的人口移动。说到中国，学者将迁移现象描述为一个国家政治边界之内发生的人口移动，由国家本身指导和控制。中华人民共和国成立以来，共产党的成功引导了人口流动并影响到迁移模式，以期满足政治和社会当时的经济要求。户口是领导者手里最有效的控制工具，也不可分割地联结各个公民的出生地同一系列法律和公民权利：户籍制度被认为是影响当代中国的城乡分开的起源。例如，拥有农

村户口意味着不享受所社区会员服务以及原村庄或县的福利，主要包括医疗，教育，工作养老金，保健和住房津贴。一旦农村户口持有人离开了户籍所在地到其他地方居住，可以是最近的城市或遥远的地区，他们放弃了公民权，一旦到达目的地，他们就没有把握。因此，户籍制度对一个人应该住的地方有一个巨大的影响。以限制人流并以禁止为决定自己国家自由流动的那些人获得基本公共服务。因此，国家不保障对大多移民享有医疗和教育权，为的是他们没有本地户口。中国户籍制度及其它对中国人口迁移的影响造成了不平等的社会。在这种情况下，数百万的农民工虽然在国家大都市辛劳一辈子，但是还被视为二等公民，过着朝不保夕的生活。

今天，流动性奠定是我们的世界和社会的主要特点之一。人口流动对一个国家，其人民的心态和习惯，以及他们对生活变化的应对方式都产生很大的影响，这决定着他们是否拒绝或接受上述变化。环顾中国，普通观众通常看到的是能从农业国装变成现代的蓬勃经济体系的一个快速发展的国家，这个经济体充满了大城市与摩天大楼。在过去的十年里，中国已经成为了国际经济增长舆论场，现在又成了发展中国家的一个激励模式。然而，一个国家单独发展的经济环境，还不足以对其整体下定义：为了充分地了解当代中国的现实，不应停留在表面，而应更深入地审视和研究其文化和人民。研究中国的迁移现象以其特点，可以让外界更深入地了解中国的历史和文化，也为理解和解释一个与我们不同的现实可以提供手段。而且，迁移史是一个国家的历史，中国国内移民是中国民族遗产的主要的组成部分。除了把迁移视为一个国家及其居民的DNA这一概念外，移民研究也很重要，因为我们通过研究才更多了解一个国家与其人民之间的真正关系。以中国为例，研究移民问题说明了中国如何面对移

民问题，政府如何对待移民者，因此也就是对待本国公民。正如我在这篇论文所说，很明显，中国对移民者的行为对当地社区以及他们对新来者的反应方式有直接的影响。

本文的目的是从历史经济和人观点分析当代中国的内部迁移现象，并描述最新迁移方式与 2014 年发布的 <国家新型城镇化计划> 之间的关系。我的论点是仔细研究关中国迁移的现有文学，制度和法规，迁移以及管理内人口流动的实验。本中文使用的资料有英文和中文两种，主要是学术文献与媒体材料。在北京首都师范大学海外学习期间，我亲自己中国国家图书馆拿到了一部分论文材料。

本文共分为三章。

第一章是论文主体的简要介绍，为理解当前的移民情况以及特殊提供了工具。本文首先介绍了移民的情况和对移民者的感性认识，然后详细介绍了从中华人民共和国成立到现在国内移民方式的变化：在历史叙述中，特别重要的是移民发展产生重大影响的经济和政治事件。为了更好地理解人口流动的程序，本文描述了户口系统及其它对人口和经济结构的主要影响。

第二章描写了当代中国农民工的状态。尽管移民者是本国公民和经济发展的劳苦工匠，但是他们依然面临歧视，贫穷以及由此产生的不平等。本章的目的是仔细描述移民者与其他他们住的社会和经济环境之间的关系。本文特别强调的是城市里移民的生活与工作方式：一直， 社会和市场排斥是定居和融合的障碍，依然阻碍所有人在工作多年的城市里建立新的生活。最后一部分分析了移民者与故乡地之间关系：一方面，潜意识农村家庭和农村经济的一个价值来源，另一方面是家庭分离和留守家庭现象的主要原因。

在本国的移民现实中，第三章分析了国家新型城市化规划的背景。为了把这个主题了解得更仔细，本章首先介绍了户口系统的演化，并特别注意到目前为止应对系统产生重大影响的主要事件和规则。虽然户口还是限制中国公民自由流动，但近年几来，中国领导者对更加人道待遇处理国内移民问题表现出越来越大的兴趣，因此实施了旨在改善普通公民生活得进一步改革。国家新型城市化规划于 2014 年 3 月启动的，这项规划是国家第一次对户口系统进行标准化的尝试：到 2020 年，向 1 亿农村居民保障户口系统，旨在加快城镇化进程城市化和激励农村居民在中小城市定居。中国领导者雄心激励的计划引起了国内外观众的关注。

无论如何，迄今为止，依然有许多问题出现：以人为中心的城市化背后的真正意图是什么？本计划是否会影响当前的迁移模式并引起趋势反转？这项雄心鼓励的计划面临哪些挑战，中国人民的城市化前景如何？在接下来的论文中，基于最新发现，我将说明正在进行的以人为中心的城市化的关键政策和目标，并尝试回他这些问题。

## Introduction

Migration is a normal human activity. Throughout history, people have always moved from one town, region and country to settle in another one. People have migrated and continue to migrate for diverse reasons, ranging from economic, social, political, religious or environmental. However, despite the motives for migration, the common denominator for relocation has always been the desire for a better life. This desire might be driven by the hardships experienced in ones' home country or it might be born from ones' personal sense of adventure and appetite for discovering new worlds and eventually reaching new homes. Migration represents a universal human right for all people, and everybody should have the possibility to realise their desire to find a little happiness away from home.

Migration in China has attracted the attention of both national and international audiences thanks to its peculiarities. The first thing that comes to mind when one talks about Chinese migration is the magnitude of the phenomenon. To date, China is the most populous country in the world, with nearly 1.4 billion residents, most of which lives in the coastal zones and close to highly developed industrial centers. According to official data, 288 million Chinese citizens are estimated to have left their hometowns to move to another city or another province, in the hope for a better future for themselves and their families, giving rise to the biggest migration that our time has ever witnessed. The main protagonists of the movement are rural migrant workers, who migrate from the country's poor and underdeveloped inner regions to thriving cities like Beijing, Shanghai and the industrial province of Guangdong. Today, rural migrant workers, in Chinese *nóngmíngōng*, are engaged mainly in manufacturing, construction and the tertiary sector. Over the last forty years, *nóngmíngōng* have given a huge contribution in the construction of a modern country, by building roads, apartments, offices and selling their manual work in factories. Besides the real contribution made by millions of rural workers to the country's development, one cannot deny that China's workforce has met the demand of global markets: made in China products are shipped and sold every day all around the world. Rural migrant workers have been and still are the backbone of the economic boom that made China the second large player in the international arena and it is clear that without the work

and the sacrifices of its migrant population, the country would have never reached the surprising success that it is currently experiencing.

Generally speaking, the expression “internal migration” describes the movement of people that occurs inside the political borders of the State. When talking about China, scholars depict the migratory phenomenon as the movement of people that occurs inside the political border of the State, guided and controlled by the State itself. Since the establishment of the PRC, the Communist Party has managed to steer population flows and to influence migratory patterns with the aim of satisfying the political and economic needs of the time. One of the most effective control tools in the hands of the leadership is the *hùkǒu*, the Chinese household registration system that inextricably binds citizens’ place of birth to a series of legal and civil rights and is considered to be the origin of the urban-rural divide affecting contemporary China. For example, having a rural *hùkǒu* means being tied down by the community membership-based services and welfare of the village or county of origin, which mainly include healthcare assistance, education, work pensions and insurance and housing subsidies. Once a rural *hùkǒu* holder moves to a place different from its original residence, which can be the closest city or a distant region, they leave their citizenship rights behind them and they would have no certainty once arrived in the new destination. Therefore, the household registration system has a decisive influence on where a person should live, by actually limiting their physical circulation and by denying access to basic public services to those who decide to freely move in their own country. It follows that the State does not guarantee the right to medical care and education to the majority of its migrants, since they do not possess a local *hùkǒu*. The existence of this system and its influence on the Chinese migratory phenomenon has led to the creation of an unbalanced society, where millions of rural migrants are treated as second-class citizens in the cities they build with the strength of their backs and the sweat of their brows, living a life of precarity and instability.

Today, mobility is one of the main characteristics defining our world and our society. Population movement can say a lot about a country, the mindset and the habits of its people, and the way they react to changes in their life, if they decide to reject them or embrace them. When looking at China, what the ordinary spectator usually

sees is a fast growing nation, which has been able to transform from a country of rice farmers into a modern thriving economy crawling with megacities and skyscrapers. Over the last ten years, China has become the center of the international debate on economic growth, and is now a model of inspiration for the developing world. However, the economic environment in which a country develops alone is not enough to define it in its entirety: in order to have full understanding of the contemporary Chinese reality, one should not stop on the surface, but look deeper down and study its culture and its people. Studying China's migratory phenomenon and its peculiarities would offer to the outside eye a deeper insight into the country's history and culture, and would provide the means for understanding and interpreting a reality that is very different from ours. Moreover, the history of migration is the history of a country, and Chinese internal migration is an essential part of China's notable national legacy. Besides the idea of perceiving migration as the DNA of a nation and its inhabitants, migration studies are of importance because they allow us to understand what is the true relationship between a country and its people. In the case of China, studying migration tells how the country deals with migratory issues, how the government treats its migrants and therefore, its own citizens. As I will argue in the following thesis, it is evident that China's behaviour towards its migrant population has direct repercussions on local communities and the way they respond to newcomers.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the phenomenon of internal migration in contemporary China from a historical, economic and human point of view and to describe the relation between the latest migratory patterns and the National New-type Urbanisation Plan issued in 2014. I based my argument on a careful examination of the existent literature on Chinese migration, its institutions and regulations, migrants and experiments to manage internal population flows. The sources used for this paper are both in English and Chinese language and are mainly academic literature and media material. I personally gathered part of the material for my thesis at the National Library of China, during my overseas study at the Capital Normal University of Beijing.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter serves as introduction to the main body of the thesis; it provides the tools to understand the current migratory

situation and its specificities. A general introduction about migration and the perception of migrants throughout time is followed by a detailed overview on changing internal migratory patterns from the establishment of the People's Republic of China until nowadays; during the historical narration, particular attention is given to economic and political events that have had a significant impact on the development of migration. In order to better understand the mechanism behind population flow, a description of the *hùkǒu* system and its main consequences on demographic and economic configurations are provided.

The second chapter paints a picture of rural migrant workers in contemporary China. Although migrants are the hard-working artisans of the country's civil and economic development, they still face problems like discrimination, poverty and hence inequality. The aim of the chapter is to describe in detail the relationship between migrants and the social and economic environment in which they live. Particular emphasis is given to the way of living and working in the city from the migrants' perspective: institutional, social and market exclusion are barriers to settlement and integration, and still prevents people from building a new life in the city where they work for years. The last section is dedicated to the analysis of the relationship existing between migrants and their land of origin: while, on one side, migration is a valuable source of income for rural households and rural economy, on the other side, it is the main reason for family separation and the phenomenon of left-behind households.

The third chapter analyses the National New-type Urbanisation Plan contextualised in the migratory reality of the country. In order to give a full understanding of the topic, the chapter opens with the description of the evolution of the *hùkǒu* system, with a particular focus on the main events and regulations that have significantly shaped the system until nowadays. Even though *hùkǒu* is still a major constraint to free movement for Chinese citizens, in more recent years the leadership has shown a growing interest toward a more humane approach to internal migration and hence has implemented further reforms aimed at making the lives of ordinary citizens. Launched in March 2014, the National New-type Urbanisation Plan is the first national attempt of standardising the *hùkǒu* system: by granting urban *hùkǒu* to 100 million rural residents up to 2020, the plan aims at accelerating the process of

urbanisation and encouraging rural residents to settle in small and medium size cities. The ambitious plan of the Chinese leadership has attracted the attention of national and international audiences. However, to date many are the questions arising: what are the real intentions behind the human-centered urbanisation? Would the plan affect the current migration patterns and cause an inversion of tendency? What are the challenges faced by this ambitious plan and what are the future prospects for the urbanisation of Chinese people? In the following thesis, based on the latest findings, I will illustrate the key policies and goals of the ongoing human-centered urbanisation and I will try to answer these questions.

# 1 An introduction to internal migration in contemporary China

## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 An introduction about migration in China

Over the past forty years, migrations in China have attracted attention both in China and throughout the world. Even though the migratory phenomena experienced by China can be in part compared to the experiences of other developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Chinese internal and international migration has and will always have its own peculiarities. According to the anthropologist Frank Nikolaas Pieke, Chinese migration owes its singularity to three factors.<sup>1</sup> First, the country boasts the world's largest moving population and, taking into account only the internal dimension, there were an estimated 288 million rural migrant workers in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Second, the country has a unique history of control over internal and international mobility, which can be dated back to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and was reinforced during the Maoist era through powerful policy instruments that are still in force for the time being. Third, the Chinese perception of migration has its roots in the identity culture of its people, where patrilinearity, ancestor worship, the importance of in-group and common origin are key values of society. Some scholars have also referred to the phenomenon as migration “with Chinese characteristics”<sup>3</sup>: China's migration trends are definitely unique on both internal and international fronts. Regarding the domestic dimension, while low-skilled migrant workers in economically thriving countries come from abroad, China is able to satisfy the market demand for cheap labour by making full use of its internal labour pool. When looking at the global environment, emigration of skilled talents and wealthy families are the reality. At the present day, millions of Chinese are living overseas, and the main reason for emigration is not the

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<sup>1</sup> Pieke, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Guojia tongjiju 国家统计局, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Rietig, 2014.

lack of economic opportunities, but the search for a better quality of life and personal freedom.

Generally speaking, the expression “internal migration” refers to the movement of people that occurs inside the political borders of the State. When talking about China, migration is described by scholars as the movement of people that occurs inside the political borders of the State, promoted and controlled by the State itself. Population analysts acknowledge that migration is the most problematic demographic variable to track as the movement of people implies two locations. The Chinese case makes things more difficult to understand because, besides its large population and huge territory, the country’s institutional boundaries prevent researchers from keeping track of migratory movements that take place outside the State jurisdiction.<sup>4</sup> The existence of a double track system (registered and non-registered migration) finds its origin in China’s household registration system (*hùjí tǐzhì*, also known as *hùkǒu*). Even though in the official papers is named *hùjí*, it is commonly called *hùkǒu*, where *hù* means family and *kǒu* means familiar. The household registration system requires Chinese citizens to register as residents of a particular area and hence it provides demographic information about people living in each region. However, far more than a sophisticated population census system, it has the power to decide where a person should live, by actually limiting his or her physical circulation and by denying basic rights to those who decide to freely move in their own country. In a country where access to legal and citizen rights like housing, education, job and healthcare are compromised by a system where people who are born in the countryside are not supposed to move to the city and vice versa, freedom of movement can become a relative concept. Many authors compare the residency status of Chinese migrants to that of international migrants, who have to deal with temporary work visas or, under some circumstances, flee to a foreign country illegally. The access to legal and social rights, together with the possibility of a good job and a good standard of living, are precluded to those who do not have a local *hùkǒu*. The resulting scenario is a society with first-citizens and second-class citizens. Such an unbalanced situation has direct implications on the life of million rural migrant workers, who left their village to work in the cities as

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<sup>4</sup> Lary, 1999.

construction workers or housemaids and live a life of precarity and instability. Protagonists of the biggest migration that the twenty-first century have ever witnessed, millions of peasants move far away from home to work under terrible conditions to help their families back to the village; their accommodation is often provided by the employer, construction workers live in shacks and factory workers in cheaply built dormitories; above all, they have to face many difficulties in terms of safety at work, certainty of salary, pensions, health insurance, education for their children and discrimination.

Over the years, the leadership managed to steer the flow of population through *hùkǒu* together with economic policies, with the purpose of satisfying the politic and economic necessities of the time. If in the Maoist era obtaining a transfer of *hùkǒu* was the only way to leave ones' birth place, with the reforms *hùkǒu* became an instrument of institutional exclusion: authorities still exercise a strong influence on migrants' life choices and opportunities. In conclusion, it is fair to say that the *hùkǒu* system institutionalises inequality and consolidates the State's administrative control over its people.<sup>5</sup>

The objective of this first chapter is to provide an overview of the phenomenon of internal migration in the People's Republic of China (PRC), with particular attention to the economic and political events that had an impact on migration patterns. In order to better understand the mechanisms behind population flow, a description of the *hùkǒu* system and its main consequences on demographic and economic configurations are provided. Here follows a brief introduction of the definition of migrant workers and its representation over the years.

### 1.1.2 Definition and representation of China's migrant workers

The way in which workers and peasants are portrayed by media and how they appear in people imagination mainly depends on the relationship between the labour and the political view of the time. Wanning Sun finds in the representations of workers over the years of Communist rule a propagandistic tool to promote the vision of the leadership and create a set of values, beliefs and symbols in which a particular social

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<sup>5</sup> Wang, 2005.

group can recognise itself.<sup>6</sup> Even before the foundation of the PRC, by combining the Soviet ideas of mobilisation with the Chinese notion of collectivist cooperation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) managed to mobilise the rural population. Immediately after its birth, the new State had to give peasants and workers previously exploited by landlords a new identity. Migrants themselves were seen as “victims of imperialism and feudalism, forced to migrate by poverty, torn away from their proper place, their home.”<sup>7</sup> At that time, the turbulent movements of people towards the cities and the Northeast were viewed by the new leadership as a manifestation of a people without control and self-respect. Before and after the revolutionary period, Chinese peasants and workers became the “political and moral backbone”<sup>8</sup> of the socialist country and were depicted by the public discourse as the most valuable asset of the State. However, after the planned economy was replaced by the logic of the market, workers gradually lost their political status and became what is called by the scholar Lu Xinyu “subalterns”.<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary China, the expression subaltern working class is often used to refer to the rural migrant workers, *nóngmíngōng*. *Nóngmíngōng* are people with rural backgrounds with a non-local agricultural *hùkǒu* status, who moved to and work in the city. The Chinese word *nóngmíngōng* literally means “farmer-worker” and it best suits to the ambivalence of migrants, people who were born and maintain their *hùkǒu* back in their village, far away from the city where they are temporary selling their work (*dǎgōng*). Another expression for *nóngmíngōng* is floating population, in Chinese *liúdòng rénkǒu*, which includes all those people changing their residence without changing their *hùkǒu*. The expression floating population mainly refers to urban-rural migration and alludes to the sense of social instability that the act of migration itself entails. Kam Wing Chan calls floaters “self-flowing population” (*zìliú rénkǒu*) as their mobility is outside the leadership plans; one part of the government fears those movements, expression of chaos and anarchy, and hence the official media often call them with the derogatory term *mángliú* (in English “blind flow”).<sup>10</sup> Although the

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<sup>6</sup> Sun, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Cit. in Mallee, H., & Pieke, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Cit. in Sun, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Cit. in Zhao, 2010. pp. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Cit. in Chan, 1999. pp. 52.

majority of officials, researchers and urban residents themselves see the new class of urban workers as the essential part of the urban economy and the heart of industrialisation, many still accuse *nóngmíngōng* of being cause for the increase in the crime rate, crowding the stations and, more in general, the decrease of life quality in the cities.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the expression *nóngmíngōng* is today perceived by migrants as discriminatory. Therefore, it is not uncommon for migrants to call themselves *dǎgōngzú*, group of manual workers, *dǎgōngzǎi* for men and *dǎgōngmèi* for women. Sociologist Rachel Murphy suggested that behind the neologism there is the act of doing a manual job, selling one's own work to someone, in Chinese *dǎgōng*.<sup>12</sup> Since the Mandarin word for work is *gōngzuò*, it is clear that there is a difference in the perception of migrant and non-migrant work: *dǎgōng* is exclusively used to refer to seasonal, temporary and casual job and hence puts *dǎgōngzú* in a subaltern position of instability.

It is possible to say that words and labels used to address workers in history have proved to reflect their representation among society and therefore their social identity. Back to the Maoist era, the term worker (*gōngrén*) stood for dignity and the ownership of the means of production. Socialist workers were not selling their *dǎgōng* to the capitalist market, but they were engaged in “labour” (*láodòng*), and were serving their country with pride and sacrifice. What gave labour beauty and dignity was the belief of creating a new economic and social order where “individual would thrive with all others”.<sup>13</sup> Regarded as the leading class, factory workers took part in the work process with enthusiasm; besides ideological reasons, their positive attitude can be justified by the fact that they enjoyed security, relatively equal income, medical care and pension. This was possible thanks to the organization of urban labour in the socialist era, which was administrated through work units. The work unit (*dānwèi*) was the basis of economic organisation in urban China and the “quintessential urban institution of Chinese State socialism”.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, factories, schools, hospitals and government departments were all considered *dānwèi*. In absence of the market, workers' life chances were fully depending on the State and their *dānwèi*. From a wider

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<sup>11</sup> Young, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Cit. in Wang, 2019. pp. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Cit. in Lin, 2019. pp. 333.

perspective, the government encouraged the creation of a system that guaranteed job security for urban workers, known as the iron rice bowl. The term refers to a system where the State takes care of its citizens “from the cradle to the grave” through the presence of work units that guarantee safe housing, education and health subsidies, as a fair compensation for low state wages.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, in the first decades of the PRC, being a *gōngrén* was the best position a common citizen could aspire to, whether for its revolutionary meaning or the social benefits guaranteed to the sons of the State. *Gōngrén* were basically factory or company employees, working for the State. As planned economy was dismantled, privileges associated to the state job were gone too. Today, *nóngmíngōng* perceive themselves in a completely different position compared to the workers of the past. Living far from home, experiencing working and living hard conditions, they do not see their citizens’ rights recognised, and what is worse, are often object of discrimination and contempt.<sup>16</sup>

Many scholars have tried to put into words the transformation of Chinese workers’ identity, by labeling them new industrial workers or new workers (*xīngōngrén*). However, there is a new identity developing among the new generation of migrant workers in China: *gōngyǒu*. The term *gōngyǒu* can be translated as maintenance worker, workmate or working partner. The word became popular in the 2000s among migrant workers because of its neutral connotation, and it was a way to distance themselves from the official designation *nóngmíngōng*. *Gōngyǒu* are usually precarious rural migrants, who work in mines, factories and tertiary sector; due to high workers mobility during their migratory experience, the name and identity of *gōngyǒu* can easily spread in different industries and cities; for this reason, it is possible to notice that this new identity reflects the core features of the precariat. Yu Chunsen identified in this late trend the willingness of workers to develop a new type of collective identity.<sup>17</sup> The fact that more and more workers refer themselves as *gōngyǒu*

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<sup>15</sup> In the 1990s, in order to rise employment, enterprises replaced the old iron rice bowl with performance based hiring, firing and compensation. With the privatisation of the industrial sector, and the introduction of a new rewarding system typical of capitalist economies, where higher performance meant higher wages, people saw in urban and industrial centers the possibility of changing their life.

<sup>16</sup> Sun, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Yu, 2018.

*u* constitutes a hope for the future development of a unified class identity. From the words of the author it is possible to understand that unlike the urban middle class or laid-off workers, the appearing of the new class of *gōngyǒu* testifies to the possible emergence of class consciousness among Chinese workers.

However, the representation of rural migrant workers and the name itself by which they are called in the official discourse is not always perceived as positive by migrants and citizens in general.

“The word *nóngmíngōng* is a derogatory term, and does not belong to us anymore. It should change, like our society changes. We should call ourselves new workers, or simply workers. It is the least they can do to show some respect to us.”<sup>18</sup>

These are the words of a young *xīngōngrén*, speaking in an interview with the online magazine *China Files* six years ago. Young rural-urban migrants are referred to by the media as new-generation migrants, and are the new driving force behind China’s migrant labour. Born between 1980 and 1990, they have more individualistic goals and higher expectations than the previous generation, educated but lack of practical knowledge both in the agricultural sector as well as in the city life.

In an interview with CNN on December 2017, the Chinese writer Lijia Zhang defends the position of rural migrant workers who have been called by the state media “*dìduàn rénkǒu*”<sup>19</sup>, which means low-end population and refers to those with low-skilled job and a low level of education.<sup>20</sup> She stated that “the so-called low-end population are the unsung heroes of China’s economic miracle (...) they provide such a huge service: they pave the road, construct the buildings, they clean up the rubbish.” During the interview, Zhang expresses all her disappointment, praising the work of migrants who have been serving the industrial construction of the State with their devotion and sacrifice for the last forty years.

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<sup>18</sup> *China-Files*, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> The Chinese expression “*dìduàn rénkǒu*” became viral on the Chinese media after the evictions that took place in Beijing during the autumn of 2017. In response to the fire that broke out in the city’s southern suburb inhabited by migrant workers and killed 19 people, people living in the area were forced to leave for security reasons.

<sup>20</sup> CNN, 2017. (2017, December 13). Migrants are the unsung heroes of China, [Online video].

## 1.2 Historical and geographical patterns of migration

Migration in the PRC has taken different forms over the years, and it reflected the central view of the time. The reforms and opening-up marked an historical watershed between past and present China, and they were the driving force of change in migration flows, together with the death of the old socialist leadership. The most representative movements in the Maoist era were registered from the city to the countryside, and the authorities took advantage of the planned migration (*jìhuà qiànyì*) to send away surplus labour from the urban areas, but first of all, to get rid of target elements dangerous for the stability of the new established order: intellectuals, cadres and youth. When the command economy was replaced by the logic of the market, people were finally free to come back home. Millions of peasants flocked from the countryside to towns to work in factories and constructions, in an historical moment where industrialisation was the main driving force for population movement. That was only the beginning of the biggest human migration of our century, which is still continuing today. However, the volume of internal migration is expected to reduce in the following years, as other factors are coming into play.

### 1.2.1 Internal migration before the Maoist era

The current migration is believed to be a logical consequence of the economic development that China has experienced in the last decades, and a natural ally of industrialisation. Actually, there is a link between the current events and what happened during the last centuries of the Chinese empire; scholars claim that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century population movements were mainly pulled by labour and land markets. The Qing era witnessed huge movements of people, both on the internal and international fronts. Focussing on the domestic dimension, it is possible to say that the State played a fundamental role in driving people movements, pushed both by military and economic purposes. The military migration saw 2 million soldiers moving to the southwest region of Sichuan and the Northeast.<sup>21</sup> With the aim of increasing land tax revenues, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Qing encouraged rural migration, by distributing free land, tools, animals and housing to new habitants.

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<sup>21</sup> *China Simplified*, 2016

Moved by the desire of a new life, millions of farmers left their homes and moved to the Chinese frontier.<sup>22</sup> Although the program of State incentives was short lived, the movement of people became more and more evident in the following years, to the point that by 1900, 25 million Chinese had moved to what ones was known as the Chinese frontier. James Lee and R. Bin Wong reported that between the eighteenth and the early twentieth century, of those 25 million migrants, 10 million settled to the Upper Yangzi, 3 million moved to Southwest China and 12 million moved to the Northeast.<sup>23</sup> The result of late Qing movements had a great impact on the demographic composition of the population, as one third of Chinese was still inhabiting those areas forty years ago.

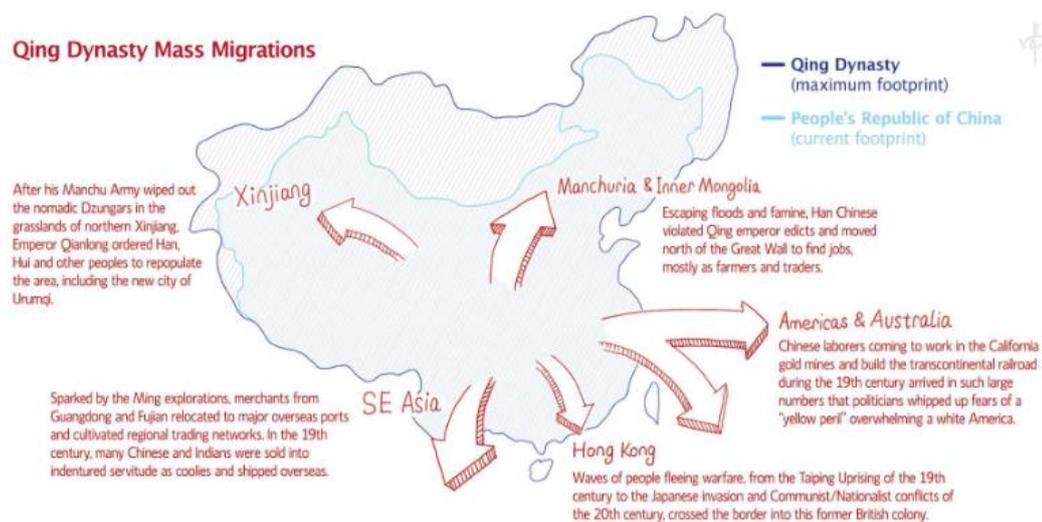


Figure 1. *China Simplified*. (2016, January 22). "Chinese Mass Migration: Past, Present & Future".

The researcher Diana Lary pointed out the relation between late-Qing migrations to the more developed coastal regions and Manchuria and the movements in contemporary China, which can be both categorised as labour migrations.<sup>24</sup> Main features of pre-Republican Era labour migration were temporary contracts, remittance and recruitment through personal connection. Another trait that allowed the settlement of real migrant communities in the target regions was the establishment of migration

<sup>22</sup> Here frontier refers to the actual provinces of Hebei, Liaoning, Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, Jiangnan, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan.

<sup>23</sup> Lee & Wong, 1991, pp. 50-75.

<sup>24</sup> Lary, 1999.

chains, described by the author as “lines of personal connections along which later migrants move to join former migrants.”<sup>25</sup>

The period between 1912 and 1949 saw long term migrations on massive scale; the causes have been described to be of different nature. Besides the fear of banditry and the consequences of civil war that were devastating the country, people were still economically attracted by Manchuria and port towns, where they could escape war and hope for a new life.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of labour migration, it is possible to say that the internal migration flows were interrupted after the communists officially took power in the country; with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the internal flow of human capital saw a significant change of direction.

### 1.2.2 Planned migration in the Maoist era

Migration flows in the Chinese Mainland in the first three decades of Communist rule were the expression of the socialist cause and the creation of a new socialist order, pushing the phenomenon into a new direction, where movement was not anymore justified only by the economic state, but also by ideology. The Maoist era was characterised by political and politico-economic migrations, mainly imposed by the State through the transfer of *hùkǒu*, an instrument of command economy and strict social control.

In order to understand the reasons why millions of people fled from the countryside, why most of them were sent back and why a consistent part of the population was relocated, it is important to give an historical background of those years.

From an administrative point of view, the first decade under the communist guide gave a big contribution to the construction of the new basis of the State. Started in the north western regions, governed by the CCP even before the establishment of the PRC, collectivisation of agriculture was officially launched in 1951. Farmers were encouraged to create communes and to share land, tools and animals. Results were

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<sup>25</sup> Cit. in Lary, 1999. pp. 31.

<sup>26</sup> The Chinese Civil War (1927-49) was an armed conflict fought in China between the Nationalists, or Kuomintang, and the Communists before the establishment of the PRC.

huge: by the end of 1955, 70 million families worked together in 1.9 million cooperatives, and half a year later they had already reached 110 million. Collectivisation was completed in 1958, when one commune held 100 up to 250 families together. In 1953 the First Five-Year Plan launched an intensive program of industrial growth and socialisation. The core of the program was steel and coal production, which was planned to grow at a higher speed than the country could really bear. The truth was that the country economy and the people were not ready to keep such a fast pace, and the outcome was disastrous: with the failure of the Great Leap Forward, China entered what is still known to be the greatest famine of the twentieth century that will end only in 1962.

#### 1.2.2.1 Types of migration

When talking about migration in the Maoist Era, scholars often highlight three dimensions characteristic of the period: rural-to-urban and urban-to-rural migration, economic and political reasons pushing for migration, spontaneous and organised movements.<sup>27</sup> It is possible to notice that for each migratory phenomenon corresponds to a set of dimensions listed above, so that a migration in a specific historical moment can be identified as rural-urban, economic and organized. In this paragraph, I will only consider the economic-political and voluntary-involuntary dimensions and I will use the categorization proposed in *Internal and International Migration* as a guideline to gather three micro-groups of movements: economic and spontaneous, economic and organized, political and organized.<sup>28</sup>

- Economic and spontaneous movements took place since the early 1950s and saw Chinese peasants pouring into the cities. Because of the lack of an efficient control system and the ambiguity of rules on movement in the first half of the decade, Beijing had some difficulties in managing the flow. Christian Howe stated that only in the period going from 1953 to 1957, 8,000,000 moved from rural to urban areas and that till 1978 internal migration in both directions interested 186 million people.<sup>29</sup> The majority of peasants who decided to leave

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<sup>27</sup> Lary, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Mallee & Pieke, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Howe, 1971.

the countryside and move alone or with their families to the major economic centers, did it to escape from the upheavals of rural reorganisation and because they were attracted by the myth of industrialisation promoted by the CCP. Anyway, the flood of peasants in economic centers represented an obstacle to modernisation and to the credibility of the new government, since on one side overpopulation in the cities would have led to the growth of unemployment (which was already an issue) and on the other side would have discredited the development strategy undertaken by the Communist leadership. In an historical moment when rural revolution was at the center of the political discourse and action, the government could not let people run away from the countryside. The result was the strengthening of controls of movement and mass specific directives aimed at preventing migration, which culminated in the creation of the *hùkǒu* system in 1958, system that I will explain in detail in the following paragraph.

Besides the rural to urban dimension, people moved on horizontal (rural to rural) and downward (higher to lower level city) patterns looking for a new job, which was easier not only because of the lack of proper regulations, but also because local authorities were not an obstacle to the movement, on the contrary, they welcomed new peasants.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, cadres in charge of overpopulated and poor areas, were happy to get rid of surplus labour and did not even report it to the central government. The phenomenon of the so-called *zìfǎ* reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution<sup>31</sup>, when the confusion made movement easier.<sup>32</sup> Diana Lary states that “from 1949 to the middle 1980s, at least 10 million *zìfǎ* migrants moved permanently within China.”<sup>33</sup>

China have always had a long history of natural disasters that forced people to relocation. The influxes of 1954 and 1957 were all related to natural

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<sup>30</sup> Here refers to provincial-level units, prefectural-level unit, county-level unit, township-level unit and village-level unit.

<sup>31</sup> The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was launched by Mao Zedong with the aim of purging any capitalist or traditional elements from society and to establish Maoism as dominant ideology in the CCP. The movement had tremendous consequences: China’s economy and society were irreparably damaged and an estimated 2 million people were killed.

<sup>32</sup> Here the author refers to purposeful migrations, in contrast to those involving people moving almost without will power (*zìliú*).

<sup>33</sup> Cit. in Lary, 1999. pp. 44.

calamities; a particular contribution to the phenomenon was given by Henan, which was hit by a combination of natural disasters and government dislocation in 1956. 160.000 people were moved to the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Heilongjiang, but others escaped without being registered. Famine migration was further encouraged by the provinces themselves when the Great Leap Forward, launched by CCP in 1958 with the intent of transforming China from an agrarian economy into a socialist society through industrialization and collectivization, turned out to be a disaster: the only province of Shandong saw a decline in population of 2.5 million, of which only 2 million managed to escape.<sup>34</sup>

- Economic and organised movements were and still are at the basis of socialist transformation in PRC. In order to pursue the Five-Year Plans and state directives, millions of houses were destroyed and people were forced to move to border regions to make way for dams. During the years of the Great Leap Forward, 1.2 million people were sent away from Shandong and more than 5.7 million small- and medium-size dams were built. A more recent example of relocation for the socialist progress is the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which end out in the displacement of more than 1.2 million people.<sup>35</sup>

A direct consequence of industrialisation was the establishment of plants in inland regions like Gansu, Henan and Inner Mongolia and the resulting transfer of workers. In the middle 1960s, moved by the fear of a possible war, Chinese started to move factories and hundreds of thousands of labourers to the interior provinces of the Southwest and the Northwest with the aim of building a “Third front”.<sup>36</sup> People were recruited mainly in the North of China (Shandong) and sent to those areas to contribute to the socialist construction, by working in mines, constructions and transportation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lary, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> The Three Gorges Dam is the world’s largest hydropower project and most notorious dam. However, it had terrible consequences: 1.2 million people displaced, 13 cities, 140 towns and more than 1000 villages flooded, to gain more than 600 km. The project was completed in 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Cit. in Lary (1999). pp. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Lary, 1999.

Organised movements were also those involving farmers who were fled into the cities against the government plan. In order to reduce the unemployment rate in the cities, the authorities reversed the rural-urban flows with every means. The strict regulation on movement of people was possible thanks to the combination of transportation control, rural collectives and rationing of food and necessities.<sup>38</sup>

- Politically-motivated resettlement programs were the core of population movements in the Maoist years. Places like Shandong, the Yangzi Valley, Shanxi and the East coast were a precious resource for the State political goals too. With the apparent intent of bringing new land into cultivation and redistributing people in the most wild and inhospitable regions of the country, the CCP sent Han Chinese to Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang, between the 1950s and the 1960s. As the adverse conditions of the land were well known, the political discourse was centered on patriotism and exile was seen as a glorious sacrifice. The real intentions of the leadership were to dilute the minority populations inhabiting those areas with Han settlers and they did it by building infrastructures and orienting the local economies along the socialist line. Anyway, because of inadequate planning and the inability of bureaucrats to transform the glowing promises into reality, many migrants decided to come back to their place of origin.<sup>39</sup>

Punishment migration became a common practice in the Maoist Era, and it revealed to be an effective way to get rid of everyone who was seen as a potential threat to the socialist revolution. The targets of the political campaigns were varied; with the 1957-59 Anti-Rightist Campaigns, thousands of intellectuals were pointed out as enemies of the people and banished to labour camps.<sup>40</sup> The system of labour camps, in Chinese *láogǎi*, was intended as a system of reform through labour and moved millions of people around the

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<sup>38</sup> Cheng & Selden, 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Bernstein, 1987.

<sup>40</sup> The Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-59) was a purge against the rightists within the CCP and abroad. The Party considered rightists all those people who criticized the government, like intellectuals who seemed to favour capitalism and criticize collectivism. An estimated 550.000 people were politically persecuted.

country, temporarily or definitely, with border regions as major destinations. It is estimated that between 1951 and 1973, 102.000 civilians were sent to military farms in Xinjiang.<sup>41</sup>

The phenomenon of sending people to the countryside reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution, when 22 million youth and cadres were forced to leave the urban districts to live and work in the Chinese countryside, as part of the “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Village Movement”. Contrary to what happened with the forced migrations described below, most of young educated urban dwellers were not confined to border regions, but were simply moved to rural counties in neighbouring areas. It is worth to mention here the difference between sent-down urban educated youth (*xiàxiāng zhīqing*) and rural-born youths (*huǐxiāng zhīqing*), whose duty was to return and spent a life in the countryside. Protagonists of rural resettlement were also the Red Guards, who were mobilised in the first years of the Cultural Revolution, but then, as they became a threat to the stability of the state, were invited to join the re-education programs too. After 1968, what ones was a resettlement plan became a programmatic educational policy, which saw the mobilisation of 14 million youth till 1976.<sup>42</sup>

The Rustication movement was officially stopped in November 1980, after years of opposition to the plan from the Chinese youth. The death of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the old revolutionary class leaders led to a gradual mass anti-rustication campaign that contributed to the inversion of tendency in migration patterns typical of the reform era.

Even in the early stages of their reign, Communists believed that as China was meant to be a planned society, migration together with other aspects of life should have been officially-organised. Ideology was the catalyst for the implementation of migration campaigns, despite their political or economic nature. In fact, the only

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<sup>41</sup> Lary, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Sousmikat, 1999.

economic concerns taken into consideration when planning migration were those strictly connected with the state goals, in short, politics.<sup>43</sup>

### 1.2.3 1979-2000s: The “age of migration”

In this paragraph I will talk about the migratory movements that took place in China after the economic reforms in the 1980s. While in the pre-reform period, organised political and economic movements were, for the most part, involuntary and citizens were forced to leave their home in the name of the socialist cause, most of the migrations in the reform era, including state initiatives, were voluntary. The “age of migration” refers to the migratory movements involving people physically changing their residence place, mainly because of job or marriage reasons, but without the conferral of local citizen’s rights and access to voting, education, social welfare and any kind of benefits at the destination.<sup>44</sup>

In order to understand the factors that helped the change of route in Chinese migration patterns, a brief explanation of historical facts is appropriate.

The failure of the Cultural Revolution and the consequent dissatisfaction that spread among the population allowed the CCP to take the distance from the old revolutionary guard and approach the socialist transformation instead. In December 1978, the Party leader Deng Xiaoping launched the policies of “Reform and Opening-Up”, (*gǎigé kāifàng*), which marked the beginning of the new market economy in China. The reforms aimed to promote the idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics, by gradually replacing the State sector with the private one. In the first stage, when the market mechanisms played along-side central planning legacies, the plan approved by the leadership involved the de-collectivization of agriculture, the establishment of special economic zones to facilitate foreign investments, and permissions for entrepreneurs to start business activities. Investments were concentrated in coastal areas and eastern regions, and the construction of new plants of production was a new attraction for local people. The old communes were dismantled and replaced with the household responsibility system, which allowed

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<sup>43</sup> Lary, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Chan, 2009.

farmers to cultivate a piece of land and sell a portion of their crops to the state. The introduction of the new system enabled the birth of free markets and the growth of agricultural productivity at the same time. In the late 1980s, the second stage of the reforms took place: SOEs headed toward privatisation, price controls were lifted and protectionist policies regulation were launched.<sup>45</sup> In the first stage of reforms, SOEs were given greater autonomy and were free to re-invest a portion of their profit in production and technical innovation, and to keep a reserve fund. In a second moment, enterprises could finally sell products outside the State plan, but at a higher price. The real change that took place in those years was the replacement of traditional administrative relations between the State and enterprises with contractual relations. Despite the measures undertaken by the government, the economic performance of the majority of SOEs did not reach a high level as expected. The situation improved when, in 1995, the government allowed smaller SOEs to be leased or sold: by 1998, around 15.000 SOEs had been partially or fully privatized.<sup>46</sup> Anyway, improvement of economic performance did not necessary mean improvement in working situation: starting from the mid-1990s, a multitude of workers employed in the state sector lost their jobs and became *xiàngǎng* (in English, laid-off). Suffice is to say that between 1994 and 2005 21 million workers were fired from SOEs. *Xiàngǎng* are defined in literature as workers who began working before the introduction of the contract system and had a formal and permanent job in the State sector, but following the downturn of SOEs lost their State job without finding other work in society. It is worth mentioning that millions of laid-offs led to the return of many rural migrants to their villages; this phenomenon has been identified as a wave of return migration, even if temporary, that affected China in the mid-1990s<sup>47</sup>. In the late 1990s the official media constantly trumpeted the significance of the private sector in providing employment for workers pushed aside by the State sector.

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<sup>45</sup> Mallee & Pierke, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Solinger, 2002.

### 1.2.3.1 The return of labour migration



Figure 2. Fan, C. C. (2005). *Interprovincial migration, population redistribution, and regional development in China: 1990 and 2000 census comparison.*

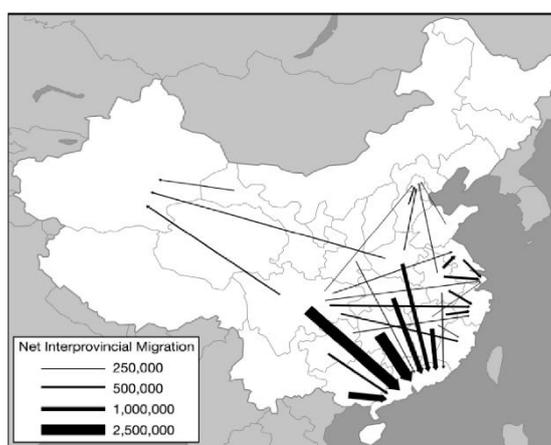


Figure 3. Fan, C. C. (2005). *Interprovincial migration, population redistribution, and regional development in China: 1990 and 2000 census comparison.*

Immediate consequence of the economic reforms in China was the dramatic growth in population mobility, in particular from rural under developed areas to industrial centers. From a macro geographic perspective, data show how eastern regions experienced a gain in interprovincial migration, with Beijing, Guangdong and Shanghai as highest profile destinations.<sup>48</sup> Figure 2 reports the changes registered between 1985 and 1990, while figure 3 describes the

migratory movements in the late 1990s. By comparing the two periods, Cindy Fan made visually clear the change in both the directions and the entity of movements.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, she states that migration has an increasing role in redistributing population among provinces. As mentioned before, one of the peculiarities of the phenomenon is the ability of creating migrant chains, through which new workers follow the previous patterns travelled by family members and fellow villagers. Migration flows from central and western China to the coastal areas increased exponentially in the last period. Because of the considerable foreign incentives and the speedy urbanisation, the province of Guangdong increased its attractiveness till becoming a “nationwide magnet to migrants.”<sup>50</sup> However, the new

<sup>48</sup> Data from National Bureau of Statistics (2002); State Statistical Bureau (1992).

<sup>49</sup> Fan, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Cit. in Fan, 2005. pp. 301.

“fever” for the cities led to the increase in heterogeneity in economic development among provinces.

In the early 1980s, labour migration reappeared on the Chinese scene, especially because of the return to the household farming and the fostering of private markets. Together with these two factors, researcher Kam Wing Chan attributes the mass population shifts to the relaxation of migratory control and development of urban food and labour markets, the rapid expansion of urban economy, which created millions of low-skilled jobs and the consequent widening of the gap in life standards between urban and rural areas.<sup>51</sup> The change in mobility and the return of a labour market led to the spatial redistribution of the work force, challenged the established attitudes and norms, reorganised the structure of working and living opportunities and defined the pluralisation of urban society. The dismantlement of communes together with the unified state assignment system, in Chinese *tōngyī fēnpèi*, which used to assign students jobs, sectors, and even regions, opened a breach into the so-called iron rice bowl, described in the previous paragraph. Because of the favorable conditions offered by the new economic environment, people voluntarily moved from one region to another one, or simply from different areas in the same region. Peasants living in the suburbs started to commute every day to the cities to trade their own vegetables and handicrafts, and workers moved to eastern and coastal areas to work in labour intensive and technology intensive industries.<sup>52</sup> At this point, it is worth to mention that in the first stages of reform, the authorities tried to limit the flow to the cities by implementing measures that tightened migration approval process and the hiring of contract workers from the countryside.

An important factor is the relaxation of movement control over Chinese population in the years of the reforms. The temporary relaxation of the *hùkǒu* system, which “systematically allocated rights and public good entitlements on the bases of place of residence and the occupational designation of ‘agricultural’ or ‘non-agricultural’” allowed the free and voluntary movement of people.<sup>53</sup> Anyway, as I will explain in detail in the following paragraph, most of the migrations of those years were

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<sup>51</sup> Chan, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Liang & White, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Cit. in Murphy, 2008.

classified as non-registered migrations: non registered migrants kept their original *hùkǒu* and therefore had no access to any kind of public goods and services provided by their new destinations. According to Fan, Chinese authorities fostered a migrant labour regime to accelerate mobility at low cost, by not giving urban *hùkǒu* to rural workers but allowing them to work in the cities at the same time.<sup>54</sup> The truth is that “as the private economy grew the demand for labour grew and migration became not only possible but desirable to both migrants and businesses requiring labour at competitive market prices. As migration increased the economy grew and as the economy grew migration was further encouraged”.<sup>55</sup>

The new economic model found in the unlimited cheap labour supply was a precious source of implementation: unskilled workers coming from poor areas were willing to exchange their benefits with higher payments, contributing to the growth of what became the world’s biggest manufacturing country. Good evidence of this is the fact that in the first 1990s, migrants were not seen as a problem anymore, but as a part of inevitable historical modernisation process.

#### 1.2.4 Last twenty years

Since then, there have been a number of positive changes concerning the employment of rural migrants. Society gradually recognised their contribution to social, and economic development of urban centers, and urban residents began to change their attitudes towards migrant workers. In one document issued in 2004, the central government stated that “rural migrant workers have become a crucial component of the industrial workforce, and create wealth for cities and generate tax revenues.”<sup>56</sup>

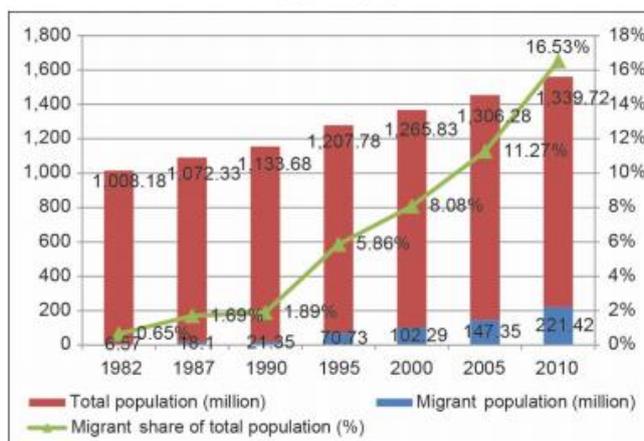
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<sup>54</sup> Fan, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Cit. in Young, 2013. pp. 26

<sup>56</sup> Cit. in Murphy, 2008. pp. 28.

**Figure 1: Number and Share of Migrants in the People's Republic of China, 1982–2010**



Sources: Data on migrants 1982–2005 are from Duan et al. (2008); data on migrants in 2010 are from NBSC (2011); and data on total population are from NBSC (1983), NBSC (1988), NBSC (1991a), NBSC (1991b), NBSC (1995), NBSC (2006), and NBSC (2011).

Figure 4. Murphy, R. (Ed.). (2008). *Labour migration and social development in contemporary China*. Routledge.

China's dominance in the manufacturing system made the country a major player in global economy, a country that went down in history as the "factory of the world" in the Twenty-first century. In the last decades, China assisted to an epic scale migration supplying almost infinite low-cost human capital to power its economic engine.

Interprovincial migration registered a significant increase, from 10.7 million people in 1995 to 55.2 million people in 2010. In 2010, non-registered migrant workers were 85.8 million.<sup>57</sup> The flow of migration underwent a change after the world financial crisis and the consequent damage to the country economy in 2008. Even if China relied on the army of low-ended workers to overcome the crisis, even if, compared to other economic players of that time, got out of the catastrophe apparently unharmed, the events had an impact on the destiny of many Chinese workers. Factories in Guangdong and Zhejiang, the most appealing regions for workers, ceased their activities, some of them did it at a drop of a hat and without paying salaries to employees. Data shows that, in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, 27 million workers were laid off and had no other choice but return to their villages. Almost all of them were *nóngmíngōng* employed in construction and manufacturing.

<sup>57</sup> Chan, 1999.

The wave of layoffs resulted in dissatisfaction and protests, where angry citizens were demanding full payment and fair compensation. In order to mitigate the employment pressure resulting from the massive wave of return migration, the government invested in construction projects, like highways, railroads, and airports in remote areas.<sup>58</sup>

As China is gradually moving its production abroad, the number of workers employed in the manufacturing and construction sector considerably decreased in the last ten years. According to Lu and Xia, between 2000 and 2010, the main force attracting migrants to the city has been the tertiary sector.<sup>59</sup> Services officially overcame manufacturing in 2013 as largest absorber of rural surplus and labour force. The service sector is now engaging more and more migrants in self-employed activities too. Another important tendency resulted from the economic situation is the increase of short-distance migrations over long-distance and interregional migrations in the last decade: the change was facilitated by the opening up of smaller cities in inner areas. The geographic polarisation characteristic of the previous decades has been almost rebalanced: in 2018, 42% of *nóngmíngōng* were employed in central and western regions.<sup>60</sup> Together with the desire of obtaining higher wages and better job opportunities, people are now considering factors like better basic education and medical service before relocating. Another reason why moving across long distance in search for a job in the big city is less appealing than in the past for young workers is that major industrial centers like Beijing and Shanghai are imposing restrictions on people coming from outside. The authorities are trying by any means to stop the continuous flow to the overpopulated cities of China; episodes of evictions of migrant workers from shanty towns in the outskirts of Beijing in the last two years were a practical demonstration of the government will to get rid of surplus population.<sup>61</sup>

### 1.3 The household registration system and its consequences on internal migration

A unique aspect of migration in China is that the two variables defining migration, movement and citizenship, do not necessarily run in tandem: even if a person

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<sup>58</sup> Xu et al., 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Lu & Xia, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Lu and Xia, 2016.

moves to a place different from his or her residence, he or she will be in all likelihood tied down by the community membership-based services and welfare of the place of origin. The reason why this happens is the existence of the *hùkǒu*, the Chinese household registration system, which despite the dramatic social and economic changes taking place in contemporary China, is still regarded as the anchor of the current model. In this paragraph I will introduce the topic by defining its origin and structure, and the intrinsic relationship between *hùkǒu*, migration and the industrial transformation of the country.

### 1.3.1 Origin, structure and functions of *hùkǒu* in the PRC

The distinctiveness of internal migration in China can undoubtedly be found in the close link to the *hùkǒu* system, and a scale of values according to which urban residents enjoy greater prestige than their rural counterpart. The origins of this particular form of registration can be dated back to the Imperial Age, and can be found in elsewhere in Asia. Household registers first appeared in ancient China as a means to determine the obligation to pay taxes, deliver *corvée* labour, recruit troops and to select candidates for state offices. What distinguishes the Chinese model from for example, the Taiwanese and Japanese models, is its role in limiting internal mobility, and the subsequent emergence of a sort of a “two level citizenship” inside China’s population itself.<sup>62</sup> The present system is modelled on the Soviet *propiska*, in English “internal passport”. The principle behind the *hùkǒu* is the registration of families (*hu*) and all their components (*kou*), on the basis of their place of birth.

The household registration system has been defined by sociologist Fei-Ling Wang as the “major source of sociopolitical control and governance in the People’s Republic of China”.<sup>63</sup> According to Wang, the *hùkǒu* system has had a crucial role in organising and monitoring through division, exclusion and discrimination of its own people. *Hùkǒu* is the key of the direction and allocation of resources, and still shapes the economic and social landscape of contemporary China. The *hùkǒu* is a necessary document in the life of every Chinese citizen: with no documentation they cannot

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<sup>62</sup> Chen & Feng, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Cit. in Wang, 2010. Pp. 80.

receive education, get married, get a passport and travel, be employed, get a business license, and do simple things like fix the telephone line of their houses.

The system of registering population and household has a long history: in the pre-1949 era, it was a tool for collecting taxes and recruiting soldiers, and sometimes for controlling targeted groups of the population. First restored after the founding of the PRC, was used by the Communists to record the residence of urban population and to monitor anti-government elements.<sup>64</sup> Communists saw in the *hùkǒu* an effective regulator of the new command economy. As the plan of the leadership was centered on the development of heavy industry and the preference of cities over the countryside, the government issued several directives and regulations in the first half of the 1950s to protect the cities from overurbanisation, aimed at control the undesirable blind influx of peasants into the urban areas.<sup>65</sup> The legal foundation of the *hùkǒu* system as we know it today comes from two regulations that is worth to mention here: the “Regulation on *Hùkǒu* Registration of the People’s Republic of China” and the “Regulation on Residents’ Personal Identification Cards in the People’s Republic of China”, adopted respectively on January and September 1958. The two decrees required that all internal migration must have been subjected to approvals from the authorities at the destination, and each citizen was classified as rural or urban. The classification in “agricultural” and “non-agricultural” *hùkǒu* defined the access to any kind of food and services provided by the State; as we will see later, if a rural citizen with an agricultural *hùkǒu* had left their place of registration, they would automatically have renounced to the services offered by their place of origin, and would not have benefited from any services available in the place of destination. The complexity of obtaining the *hùkǒu* transfer, together with the strict control on housing, transportation and food rationing, guaranteed the implementation of the socialist dual economy, with a consequent widening of the gap between urban and rural areas.<sup>66</sup> Cheng and Selden identified in the 1958 regulations the establishment of two different hierarchies for income, housing and grain, access to education, medical services and employment

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<sup>64</sup> Chang, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Cheng & Selden, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> To obtain the *hùkǒu* transfer people need the moving-in certificate from its employment or school work unit approved by the city authority and apply for a permit at his rural police station to move out.

opportunities.<sup>67</sup> The widening of the gap between rural and urban *hùkǒu* holders was both the cause and the consequence of a command economy where the countryside, inhabited by the 85% of total population, was simply a provider of grain, labour and capital for the urban-industrial sector. At that time, the *hùkǒu* system has been a prerogative for the creation of two different societies and because of its hereditary nature has given birth to a social underclass of peasants.<sup>68</sup>

After years of apparent immobility, migration began to rise in the 1980s and the demand for labour and population mobility on one side and the logics of the new market on the other side sharply led to the reshaping of the system. An example is the national policy allowing temporary residence launched in 1985: citizens were finally allowed to move to a location different from their registration place for a limited period of time.<sup>69</sup> Even if relatively free to move, local residents were denied of benefits and rights, as no change in the *hùkǒu* was registered. However, if a person was caught with no regular temporary residence, measures were fines, detention, forced repatriation and, in some cases, jail sentences. Many scholars claimed that was the implementation of the system itself to accommodate the growing number of unskilled workers who found themselves with no job to fill the factories for low wages and to contribute to the export oriented industrialization strategy that led China to the unprecedented economic boom in the 1990s.

To this day, the authorities in charge of the administration of *hùkǒu* are the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the local public security bureaus and police stations, who created a net of capillary control all over the country. In many cases, the central government authorised provincial and municipal governments to make experimental changes to the system, as we will see later. Every Chinese citizen must be registered at the *hùkǒu* police from birth, and receive their *hùkǒu* booklet; a person's permanent record contains his or her non-agricultural or agricultural categorization, legal address, location, unit affiliation, religious belief and physical features. The unit of registration

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<sup>67</sup> Cheng & Selden, 1994.

<sup>68</sup> Chan, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Temporary *hùkǒu* is required for people living outside their permanent zone for more than three days, all temporary residents in city or township for more than three days, including tourists and foreigners must registered with local *hùkǒu* authorities.

is the household, which usually is a family, but can also be a single resident, a work unit, military unit, a dormitory or a temple.<sup>70</sup>

**Table 1.** Major Constituent Groupings of Agricultural and Non-agricultural Populations by *Hukou* Status and Location

| <i>Hukou</i> location | Agricultural <i>hukou</i>  | Non-agricultural <i>hukou</i>  |
|-----------------------|--|--|
|                       | A  | C  |
| Urban areas           | Rural migrant workers<br>Farm workers<br>Dependents              | Urban workers<br>State cadres and professionals<br>Dependents                            |
|                       | B  | D  |
| Rural areas           | Rural (industrial) workers <sup>a</sup><br>Farmers<br>Dependents | State farm workers <sup>b</sup><br>State cadres and professionals<br>Dependents of above |

<sup>a</sup>In township and village enterprises.

<sup>b</sup>In state-run agricultural enterprises.

Sources: Modified from Chan and Tsui, 1992 and Chan, 1994.

Figure 5. Young, J. (2013). *China's Hukou System: Markets, Migrants and Institutional Change*.

According to researcher Kam Wing Chan, each person's *hùkǒu* is the result of two classifications: the *hùkǒu* type and the residential location.<sup>71</sup>

- The *hùkǒu* “type” (*leìbié*) or “nature” (*xìngzhì*) is divided into “agricultural” (*nóngyè*) and “non-agricultural” (*fēi nóngyè*) *hùkǒu*. This does not have a necessary relationship with the occupation of the holders, but it defines whether or not they can get access to a series of welfare provided by the State. The *hùkǒu* type does not change depending on the place of registration; the reason why non-agricultural status has always been desirable is that a non-agricultural holder will always be entitled to the basic benefits because they are founded by the State, despite he or she lives in a city, a town or the countryside.
- The residential location (*suǒzàidì*) gives citizens an official and permanent residence. As a logic consequence, each person can have or lack a local *hùkǒu* when in a city, town or village. For example, when the “era of migration” started, most of workers living and working in the city did not have a local *hùkǒu*.

<sup>70</sup> *Hùkǒu* location and categorization were first determined by his or her mother's hukou location and categorization and not by the birthplace until 1998; now a child can inherit either the father's or mother's location and categorization.

<sup>71</sup> Chan, 2009.

In spite of the rigidity of the system, it is possible for citizens to apply for a change in their *hùkǒu* status through the procedure of *nóngzhuǎnfēi*, which literally means “changing from agricultural to non-agricultural *hùkǒu*”. The practice of *nóngzhuǎnfēi* is long and complex as requires the approval of the State authorities; it implies two compulsory steps: the conversion of the *hùkǒu* type and only after that, the conversion of the residential location. For example, if a rural migrant worker with an agricultural *hùkǒu* wants to change his or her status into non-agricultural after moving to a new place, they should first apply for the conversion of *hùkǒu* type into non-agricultural, and only after the approval of the State apply for the residential reclassification. However, as the criteria for obtaining the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* were issued by the government itself and were conceived to satisfy the State demands, the number of people who have succeeded in changing their *hùkǒu* during the years is scarce compared to the number of applicants. A representative example of how the transfer of *hùkǒu* was and is a weapon against the free movement of citizens can be dated back to the Maoist Era. At that time, the categories allowed to ask for regulated mobility were: permanent employees of state-owned enterprises (*zhāogōng*), people displaced due to state initiatives and expropriation (*zhēngdì*), people enrolled in higher education institutions (*zhǎoshēng*), people promoted to administrative positions (*zhāogàn*) and relocated following family crises, cadets, state heroes and criminals.<sup>72</sup> Looking at the categorisation of migration flows in the pre-reform era outlines in the second paragraph of this chapter, the connection between the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* and the official plan is evident. It is clear that the construction of the socialist state, would not have been possible without the implementation of the *hùkǒu* system, used by the government to steer the migration flow and redirect people to the countryside or to the cities whenever was needed. Even if the criteria granting the transfer of *hùkǒu* changed over time, the leadership is still limiting the number of urban *hùkǒu* holders in the country. Today, obtaining urban residential *hùkǒu* is costly, complex, limited by quotas and is consequently far beyond the reach of most *nóngmíngōng*.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Chan, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> In the Maoist Era quota were evaluated on the amount of cereals produced in one area, so that higher production meant higher percentage of people moving out of the area; with the end of planned migration, the percentage of applicants obtaining *nóngzhuǎnfēi* is proportional to employment opportunities offered by the market.

Focussing our attention on its functions, it is possible to say that the omnipresent system of the *hùjǐ* serves the sociopolitical and economical order of the State in four ways. The first function is the registration of residents and collection of population data, a procedure common to many other countries. The second function is the construction of a scheme for allocation of resources and subsidies for the lucky part of the population, the non-agricultural *hùkǒu* holders; this scheme, which has been further alimented by the unstopped migration of the rural holders to the privileged areas, gave a big contribution in defining the movement of capital, goods and migrants themselves. The third function is the management of targeted people, *zhōngdiǎn rénkǒu*, usually ex-convicts and political dissidents who are considered a potential threat to the stability of the state. What is important for my research is the fourth function of the *hùkǒu* system, meaning the regulation of internal migration, especially rural-urban and urban-rural flow of human capital. One of the basic principles of the PRC have been and still is the restriction of migration from small cities to larger urban areas and, at the same time, the encouragement of a possible reverse of tendency.<sup>74</sup>

### 1.3.2 Consequences of *hùkǒu* on migration

Migration and *hùkǒu* are two interrelated phenomenon and evidence of their relationship is clear now more than ever. The control over population movements in the last decades shaped the new economy, which today is highly industrialised, but widened the gap between rural and urban China.

#### 1.3.2.1 How *hùkǒu* defined industrialisation and urbanisation in China

Usually, when a country's economy industrialises, many people leave the fields and go to the cities to find a job and to earn a living. Industrial revolution in the Western world saw the city as the core of industrialisation, where factories were ready to receive the new working force coming from the fields. History taught us that the gradual absorption of the low-productivity rural sector into the high-wage urban sector comes always together with the shift from rural to urban population. In this way, former peasants who live now in the city may have the opportunity to see their life

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<sup>74</sup> Wang, 2010.

conditions improving. Urbanisation is “the process by which large numbers of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming cities”.<sup>75</sup> It goes without saying that industrialisation and urbanisation are the two sides of the same coin. Anyway, there are some exceptions, and China is one of those; even though from the beginning of their rule, Communists promoted the industrialisation of the economy at any cost, they did not allowed the subsequent and natural development of urbanization. When talking about the Chinese case, Fei-Ling Wang states that rapid industrialization was followed by a slow urbanisation, giving birth to an “incomplete urbanisation”.<sup>76</sup> The reason of this peculiarity lies in the fact that the government always favoured a speedy industrialisation over the urbanisation of peasants before, and migrant workers now, who are denied of benefits and welfare in the name of the economic growth. All this was and is still made possible by the implementation of the household registration system. In this paragraph, I will analyse the impact of *hùkǒu* on industrialisation and urbanisation processes from 1949 up to the present day.

The *hùkǒu* system is defined by Wang as the “door guard of the command economy”.<sup>77</sup> By monitoring the population and labour flow, the *hùkǒu* system guaranteed, even if results were not always positive, the implementation of a command economy in the Maoist era. In the early years, Beijing launched various regulations and directives to prevent rural-urban migration and the importance of dissuading peasants from migrating into the cities was often encouraged by the CCP.<sup>78</sup> Even if the duality of *hùkǒu* had not already been put on paper, many regulations were coming first. In March 1954, the “Joint Directive to control blind influx of peasants into the cities” was enacted. In this occasion, the authorities coined a new term “blind flows” *mángliú*, referring to those fleeing to the cities without a definite prospect, in the case, the moving-in certificate from the unit of destination. The directive established that no peasant was allowed to freely enter and work in the city, and that from that moment on, rural labour would have been recruited in a planned manner and for a limited period of time only on the direct initiative of the State.<sup>79</sup> This is what happened at the dawn

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<sup>75</sup> Britannica, 1993.

<sup>76</sup> Cit. in Chan, 2009. pp. 209.

<sup>77</sup> Ibidim.

<sup>78</sup> Wang, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Cheng & Selden, 1994.

of the Great Leap Forward, when 38 million people left the village and joined the campaigns for iron and steel production to accelerate the capital output.<sup>80</sup> *Hùkǒu* reinforcement policies resulted in the strengthening of the rural-urban dual system. Since the beginning of the 1960s, Communists restricted migration from the countryside to the cities by hardening the *nóngzhuǎnfēi*. Besides its political role, the *hùkǒu* system had mainly an economic role: keeping the majority of Chinese population out of the industrialised areas was the only way to pursue the socialist plan. That would explain why almost the entire crop production was used to feed the urban dwellers. The *hùkǒu* system was “an almost perfect way to extract resources from the countryside, while preventing peasants from sharing the fruits of urban development”.<sup>81</sup> As a consequence, cities did not get the chance to fully develop and urbanisation was not reached. In this connection Chan refers to the phenomenon as “underurbanisation”, as the result of population immobility together with the suppression of urban services employment.<sup>82</sup> After Mao’s death, industrialisation patterns saw a dramatic change; started with experiments transferring workers under temporary contracts with no urban *hùkǒu* to the cities, migration trend were gradually reversed. Suffice to say that between 1979 and 2009, urban population rose by 440 million, and 340 million of them were linked to rural migration. However, those workers were keeping their agricultural status and consequently excluded by the services offered to those living in the cities who, unlike them, had a non-agricultural status. Even if holding a temporary *hùkǒu*, those people did not get access to subsidised housing, opportunity to get a government job, unemployment insurance, education and other benefits, which were still exclusively urban. When the leadership realized that peasants would have moved to the cities, even with no access to urban rights, they started to encourage migration by relaxing controls on *hùkǒu*. Chan says that “by the mid-1990s, rural- *hùkǒu* labour had become the backbone of the export industry and more generally, the manufacturing sector”.<sup>83</sup> The author openly states that the new

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<sup>80</sup> However, the uncontrolled growth of urban population from 99 million to 130 million in only two years contributed to the collapse of the economy, together with the loss of crops in the fields, which had been abandoned.

<sup>81</sup> Cit. in Wang, 2005. pp. 88.

<sup>82</sup> Cit. in Chan, 2009. pp. 209.

<sup>83</sup> Chan, 2009. pp. 207.

approach of “freeing” migrant labour has served the economic strategy implemented by China in the last years, allowing the country to become the largest low-cost producer in the world. This achievement was made possible also by the fact that wages received by rural migrant workers have not experienced any substantial increase, despite the industrial growth. The city of Shenzhen is often used by scholars as a representative example and result of industrialisation with no urbanisation: in the first 2000s, 7 out of 8 million workers living in the city did not have local *hùkǒu* and therefore were institutionally excluded. Places like Shenzhen, and the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong are the models that best represent China’s reforms; the fact that they are the largest migrant provinces and the center of the “world’s factory” makes the close relation between migrant labour, *hùkǒu* system and industrialization pretty obvious.

In the last few years, the Governments has been trying to relax *hùjǐ* restrictions by fixing lower requirements to get local *hùkǒu* in small and medium sized cities; these policies seem to many to be a way to solve migrants’ residency challenges, boost urbanization and encourage domestic consumption at the same time.

#### 1.3.2.2 Reasons to leave: gap between rural and urban areas

Logical consequence of the race to the city was the widening of the economic discrepancy between industrialized urban centers and under-developed rural areas. The aim of this section is to give an overview about the rural-urban situation in contemporary China, and its role in migration decisions.

When questioning the origin of China’s urban-rural income gap, many scholars identify in its dualistic economy the main answer; more particularly, the nature of the discrepancy is defined by the *hùkǒu* itself. A study about the Chinese economic situation offers an analysis of the income discrepancy from the reform era till nowadays, using the Gini index.<sup>84</sup> In economics, the Gini index is the most commonly used measurement of inequality on the income or the wealth distribution inside a nation; higher is the index, wider is the income gap. After a first period of reduction of the urban-rural flow of income, from 1984 to 1994, the Gini index increased. Data

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<sup>84</sup> Ma et al., 2018.

shows that in 1994 the disposable income of urban residents was equal to 3,496 yuan, almost three times the net income of rural residents, which was only 1,221 yuan, with a Gini index equal to 0.24.<sup>85</sup> The authors address the increase of the gap to the investments in the eastern coastal areas strongly supported by the government. After a brief fall in the late 1990s, the ratio between rural and urban areas started to raise and peaked in 2009 at 3.33:1. The study also shows how rural-urban inequality decreases as urbanisation rate increases. In the end of the paper, the writers suggest to adopt a people-oriented urbanisation strategy, in order to narrow the flow income inequality. The urbanisation proposed should “enable rural residence who relocate to urban areas to enjoy equal education and employment opportunities as well as equitable healthcare and other public services”.<sup>86</sup> In order to promote the people-oriented urbanisation, the government should readapt the *hukōu* and take care of the employment system by, for example, eliminating discrimination based on gender or origin and increasing training and educational programs for rural surplus labour. To prevent the further widening of rural-urban gap, authorities should invest more in the countryside, by optimising agricultural structures, implementing the development of infrastructure and improving basic education. All these improvements would contribute to the growth of rural income and would be a hope for the narrowing of the discrepancy between the city and the countryside. Actually, data released by the National Bureau of Statistics last year show a positive tendency: the Chinese income gap is slowly narrowing, with urban income equal to 39.251 yuan and rural income equal to 14.617. The new tendency is given by the fact that the per capita disposable income in rural areas is growing faster than in urban areas. Moreover, the Chinese government is working to guarantee the raise of both urban and rural income by 2020, with the aim of building a moderate prosperous society.<sup>87</sup>

Besides the dual economic structure, education and geography aggravate the situation: rural students have a higher probability to attend low quality schools than their urban

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<sup>85</sup> The circular flow of income is a neoclassic economic model depicting how money flows through the economy; according to this model, money flow to workers in the form of wages and come back to firms in exchange for products. In this case, it is the ration of urban per capita disposable income to rural per capital net income.

<sup>86</sup> Cit. in Ma et al., 2018. pp. 1127.

<sup>87</sup> *Xinhua*, 2019.

peers, and this can have a weight on their future income and career prospects. This is due to the fact that a county school does not receive the same State funding as a school in Beijing or Shanghai. In this regard, Chan talks about a spatial or horizontal stratification, generated by the *hùkǒu* system, with a hierarchy made of five levels of government: central, provincial, prefectures, counties and towns and townships.<sup>88</sup> The hierarchical rank defines the quantity and the quality of education, healthcare, infrastructures and other public services provided by the government. The special differentiation, represented in the figure by a pyramid, defines the opportunity structure of people depending on the place where they leave or where they have their local *hùkǒu*.

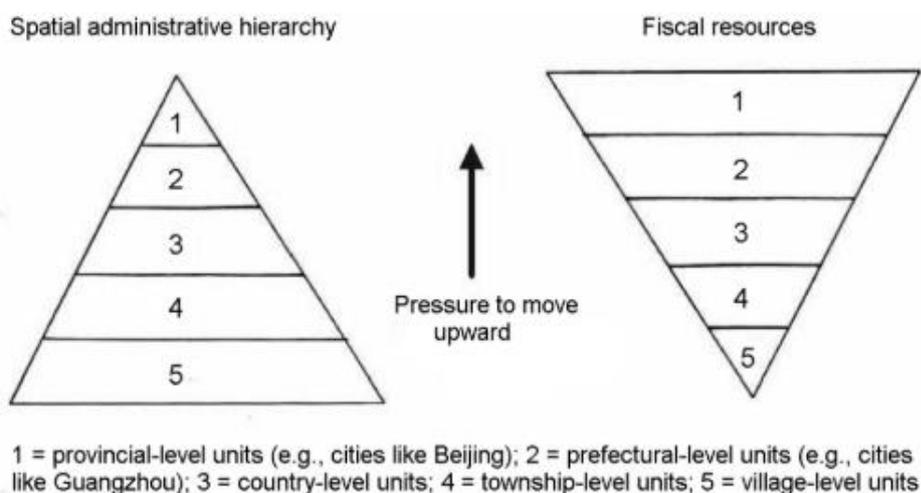


Figure 4. Chan, K. W. (2009). *The Chinese hukou system at 50. Eurasian geography and economics*, 50(2), 197-221.

The allocation of resources, represented by the pyramid on the right, is not proportional to the spatial distribution of people in the country. This means that Beijing receives higher funds in proportion to funds received by a township in Gansu, for example. Therefore, it is clear that the Chinese public sector continues to redistribute benefits towards locations and sectors of the population that already are in an advantaged position. Of course, the legitimization of the hierarchy would not be possible without the *hùjǐ*, a system that entitles a restricted number of people to decide whether or not allow mobility from one level of the pyramid to the other one.

<sup>88</sup> Chan, 2009.

In conclusion, the discrepancy between urban and rural, city and village, is the direct result of decades of policies aimed at concentrating the country's wealth inside restricted perimeters, thereby favoring the privileged over those who have been left behind. What can be measured today by comparing the income of agricultural and non-agricultural *hùkǒu* holders, rural and urban dwellers, is only the surface of the deep discrepancy between the rich and the poor of contemporary China.

#### 1.4 Conclusions

Some of the most important migration issues do not involve crossing a border, but rather they are internal to a country. Since the establishing of the PRC, China has been experiencing internal flows from the city to the countryside, in the Maoist era, and from the countryside to the city in the reform era. In all these years, the government has managed to steer the flow of people in accordance to the State objectives. Through *hùkǒu*, economic and population policies, China achieved its political and economic goals. The strict regulations imposed on population movements gave rise to the creation of an unbalanced society, with first-class and second-class citizens. Despite its thriving economy on the east coast and in the biggest cities, the Chinese hinterland is still underdeveloped and individuals who are born in the countryside are less advantaged than those born in the cities. Thanks to a system that ties citizenship with the place of birth, Chinese migrants do not share the same rights and privileges with their new neighbours. This has consequences not only on the life and job possibilities precluded to the majority of *nóngmíngōng*, but also on the internal configuration of the country. The controlled migration had led in China to a process of industrialisation without urbanisation, as new citizens and new workers do not have a full citizen status.

The story of Chinese internal migration continues and will continue. In the recent years, the government is trying to steer the flow of urban migrant workers away from the overcrowded cities towards second and third tier cities, in the attempt of both reducing underemployment in urban centers and creating new spots of consumption and employment.

## 2 Rural migrant workers: a bridge between the city and the countryside

### 2.1 Rural migrant workers in contemporary China

In the last 30 years, *nóngmíngōng* have been the backbone of the economic boom that made China the second largest global player, but that does not mean their efforts are recognised by the community they live in. At the present day, migrant workers account for almost one third of the total urban population and are considered second-class citizens in the cities they themselves built by the strength of their back and the sweat of their brows. Every day, migrant workers give a significant contribution to Chinese economy, as they build cities and work in factories. Still, they cannot enjoy the same rights as urban citizens do, they do not have the same healthcare or social security of their neighbours and their children do not have the same education and opportunities as urban children. Legal, market and social exclusion have been and still are barriers preventing migrants from building the life they deserve in the city. Dealing with the problem of migrant labour is a critical issue for the development of China and fortunately, everyone is starting to recognise it. As a unique Chinese characteristic, *nóngmíngōng* must be integrated fully into the city life and appreciated by urban citizens.

The objective of this chapter is to describe the condition of migrant rural workers in contemporary Chinese cities. This section will open with a brief introduction about the role of *nóngmíngōng* in today's economy and society, followed by a digression concerning the second generation of migrants. In the second paragraph, I will try to provide a detailed analysis of the barriers migrants have to face when they settle in their city of destination, with a particular focus on institutional exclusion. Finally, in the third paragraph, I will talk about the relationship between migrant workers and their land of origin and their families. In order to understand the connection between migrants and their land, a short explanation of China's land system will be provided.

### 2.1.1 The role of *nóngmíngōng* in the Chinese miracle

“Without migrant workers, China could never have developed so rapidly. The migrants do the dirty, heavy work that the public does not see. The house you live in was built by migrant workers. The food you eat was grown by them. The clothes you wear were made by them.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Wang Hao, an eighteen-year-old migrant worker who left his village in Henan province to join the ranks of million rural migrants in Beijing. His parents own a small land plot, but their efforts are not enough for the sustenance of all family members. The money obtained from the annual harvest are not even sufficient to cover their daily expenses, he says. After dropping out of school at 16, Wang Hao found a job in Beijing as a cook, but after two years, he still does not feel like he is part of the city. Just like the young Wang Hao, millions of men and women leave their land every year with a hope for a better future for themselves and their children. They go to the city to work as waiters, cleaners, security guards or factory workers, and they serve the industrial and economic construction of the State with their devotion and sacrifice every day. This paragraph will be focused on the role of rural migrants in the economic development that interested the country in the last 30 years, which saw China transforming itself from “the worst performing major economy in the world to a middle-income economy and global economic player.”<sup>2</sup> By analysing the existent relation between the migration flows occurred in the last 30 years, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country and the value of exports, I will try to highlight the significance of the presence of *nóngmíngōng* in Chinese economy.

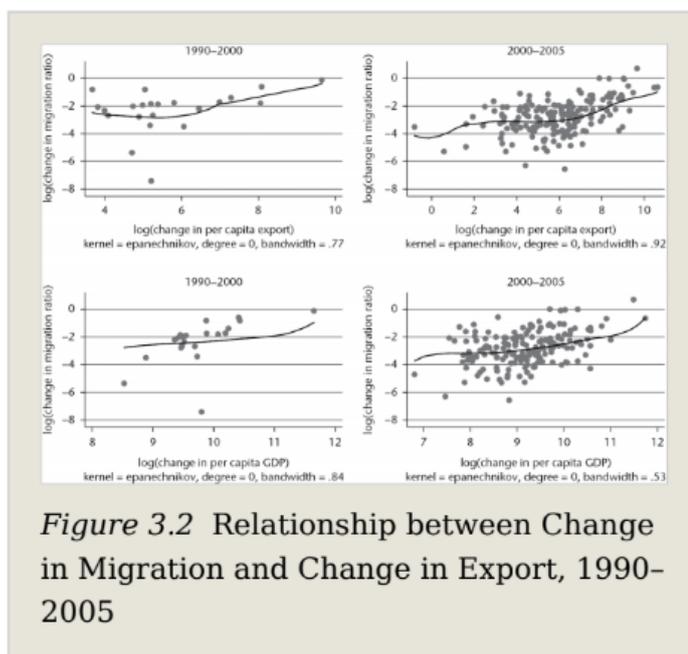
Chinese history for the past three decades has been a story of economic growth. The most populous country in the world, China has enjoyed the most rapid economic growth that the world has ever witnessed, and its industrial development has been a way faster than those experienced by Britain or the United States. China has been able to do in 30 years what European countries did in 150 years. In this period, the country have seen so many people coming out from poverty and so many peasants transferring to the cities. According to official data, the size of the Chinese population living in

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<sup>1</sup> Aeon Video (2017). *Chinese Dreamer: Each of China's 260 million migrant workers has a story*, [Online video]

<sup>2</sup> Gardner, 2017. pp. 5.

absolute poverty declined by 753 million people from 1981 to 2011.<sup>3</sup> The rise in living conditions has gradually led to the creation of a middle class that transformed China into the world's largest consumer market for cars, luxury goods and smartphones. Whoever looks at the country now must acknowledge that China has gone from an agricultural society with almost no growth to a modern economy that has been growing with an average of 10% per year since the reforms.<sup>4</sup> The transition from a brutally enforced communist system to a market-based economy was followed by the development of a growth model based on manufacturing export industries and high investment rates. The huge progress made by the country in the last 30 years is now well known to everybody, and by looking at the numbers, it is easy to understand why. Taking GDP as an example, in 1980, China's GDP was less than 300 billion dollars; by 2015, the country had already taken second place as the world's largest economy, with a GDP of 11 trillion dollars. Today, China's share in global gross domestic product is more than 18%.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 3.2** Relationship between Change in Migration and Change in Export, 1990-2005

Figura 2 Frijters, P., Gregory, R. G., & Meng, X. (2015). *The role of rural migrants in the Chinese urban economy*. Migration: Economic Change, Social Challenge, 33-67.

As I already mentioned in the first chapter, internal population flows have played a changing and increasingly important role in China's economic metamorphosis. With reference to the period going from the mid-1990s up to the present day, it is possible to notice how the connection between high economic growth rate and high rates of migration to the cities became more and more evident. Frijters et al. identify

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Frijters et al., 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

in rural-urban migration the most important driver for the unprecedented economic growth experienced by China in the last 20 years.<sup>6</sup> The large-scale population flow of the twenty-first century transferred hundreds of millions of workers from the low-productivity rural sector to the high productivity urban sector, and what is more important, was the main provider of work-force for both construction and export manufacturing industries. In one of their latest studies, Frijters et al. demonstrate that migrants play a fundamental role in China's export-driven economic growth, by analysing the relationship between the changes in migration ratio and the changes in the value of exports and GDP in Chinese cities in the period going from 1990 to 2005.<sup>7</sup>

The picture on the left shows the change in the relationship between GDP and value of exports, represented by the black dots, and the migration rate, represented by the line that goes up on the graphs, before and after 2000. The relationship between the two variables is clearly positive, as both graphs on the right show a slightly increase of dots as the migration curve goes up. The study results were confirmed by data reporting that the early 2000s have been the starting point for the extraordinary rise of exports and GDP.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, those years have been defined by scholars as “the age of migration”, for obvious reasons that I explained in chapter I. In conclusion, it is fair to say that the increasing rural-urban migratory flows has influenced and has been influenced by the export industry and economic growth across the cities in a positive way.

With regard to the amazing growth registered at the beginning of the new millennium, Dr. Alexis Crow believes that it was an event that will not repeat in the future. “The double digit GDP growth that we saw in the 1990s and in the early 2000s was an exceptional era (...) because there was an extraordinary export economy matched by a demographic dividend of very young age moving up to middle age working population.”<sup>9</sup> Anyway, up to 2010, labour reallocation from agriculture to industry accounted for more than 20% of Chinese GDP growth; in other words, by opening up job opportunities for peasants in construction sites and factories, the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Trading Economics*, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Policy Association (2018). China's Race to the Top: A History of Economic Growth, [Online video].

government managed to add a value of USD 1.1 trillion to the country economy over 20 years.<sup>10</sup>

Labour reallocation from agriculture to the industrial sector has had visible consequences also for the urban labour market configuration. The arrival of millions of unskilled workers in the cities has brought a dramatic change in the distribution of internal urban labour. As the majority of them had no previous experience but agricultural work, migrants replaced urban workers in heavy and manual jobs. Therefore, city workers have faced a shift from production work towards less arduous and better-paid jobs: the percentage of city dwellers employed in production work dropped from 60% in 1990 to 16% in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Together with blind flows coming from the poor areas of the country, changes in the education level of the urban population contributed to the increase in employment in skilled occupations; in this way, more and more urban workers had the chance to move from blue-collar jobs to white-collar jobs. Unfortunately, because of the innumerable barriers imposed to rural migrant workers, work mobility is rare to achieve for them and, as migrants' education levels have remained relatively low, they still are the majority in low-skilled and low-paid occupations.

### 2.1.2 Labour market inequalities and poverty in urban China

Migrant workers who have fueled China's industrialisation are still recognised as a vulnerable and marginalised group. Although they left the fields and traveled to other cities and regions to join the production work, they have never been fully accepted as urban residents. However, it was not always like this; the inequalities between social groups and sectors inside the city started becoming evident in the last years of the 1990s, when a huge number of migrants were moving from both rural and urban areas towards large industrial centers.<sup>12</sup> The gradual diversification of the labour

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<sup>10</sup> Huang, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Huang, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Social disparity and differentiation have emerged as relatively new socio-economic matters in China, which was an extremely egalitarian, even if poor, society under the Maoist regime. The dismantlement of the iron rice bowl in the 1990s, together with the rapid development of the market-oriented economy, brought about the end of the equal society, where living in the city was a guarantee of survival, despite an individual's occupation or work performance.

market and the restructuring of the urban economy inevitably led to the emergence of poverty and inequality among different social groups in the cities, at the expense of newcomers. The famous saying pronounced by the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping “let some people get rich first” justified the idea that development cannot be egalitarian, as it cannot start in every part of the economy at the same time.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the higher the urban income, the more evident inequalities and urban poverty became. Against this background, it is easy to say who got the chance of getting rich first and who did not. Researchers Fei Guo and Zhiming Cheng identified in the rural-urban migrant class one of the major source of new urban poor.<sup>14</sup> Although migrants have been playing a fundamental role in the urban labour market, local authorities have not granted them full urban citizenship. *Nóngmíngōng* live in a long-standing dual system that has imposed institutional bias on them through the *hùkǒu*. Because of the institutional, market and social barriers, rural migrant workers suffer discrimination in the urban labour market and, therefore, are perceived as second-class citizens in urban society.<sup>15</sup> This is why the writers identify in rural-urban migrants without local *hùkǒu* one of the main group of urban poor in large Chinese cities.

By looking at the contemporary Chinese urban labour market, it is possible to identify three groups of workers: local urban workers, urban workers without local *hùkǒu* and rural migrant workers, in other words, insiders and outsiders. While urban *hùkǒu* holders are in ‘good’ jobs and enjoy well-paid jobs, urban and rural migrants with no local *hùkǒu* are in ‘bad’ jobs with longer working hours and a low wage. Urban migrants with no local *hùkǒu* usually include university students who have not been able to transfer their *hùkǒu* to their new residence and those whose hometown did not have any job opportunities for them. Compared to the other two, the group of rural-urban workers presents common traits and a homogeneous appearance: they are young, junior or high school educated and engaged in low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs.<sup>16</sup> Rural migrants tend to change more than one job in their migratory experience, showing a much higher mobility than their urban counterpart does; they work longer than the legal working time and take jobs that are turned down by the insiders. However, the

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<sup>13</sup> Cit. in Guo & Cheng, 2010. pp. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Guo & Cheng, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Shi, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Guo & Cheng, 2010.

low level of inequality typical of this class of citizens does not imply a positive result: rural migrants as a group are “relatively equal at the bottom of the income spectrum.”<sup>17</sup>

Many scholars agree that income poverty is a peculiarity of the majority of *nóngmíngōng*, and identify in this common trait the source of limitation in migrants’ social mobility and economic power. As I will explain in the second paragraph of this chapter, the lack of competitive human capital, like educational attainment and vocational training, contributes to the lack of competitiveness in the urban labour market, which allows keeping the wage level quite low. However, in most cases, income poverty is nothing but that the inevitable result of a series of obstacles created by the household registration system. In conclusion, one can assume that the major disparity between local workers and migrant workers is not only the wage difference. The access to welfare and social security benefits are the main causes of inequality between workers in the same labour market. The *hùkǒu* system still makes it very difficult for rural migrants to gain a good position in the labour market and a significant part of China’s population is aware of the impossibility of joining the same treatment as their fellow citizens.

### 2.1.3 Second-generation migrant workers: differences and expectation

The term ‘new generation of migrant workers’ was first coined by the scholar Wang Chunguang in 2001, and refers to 125 million migrant workers born in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Anyway, only later in 2010, the expression appeared in an official policy directive, where the Chinese government stressed the urgency of addressing the problem of the new generation of migrant workers.<sup>19</sup> In this paragraph, I will describe the new emerging class of young migrants, their market position, aspirations, relationship with the city and their dreams. Even though, in most of the cases, their cultural background is different from that of their parents, they still experience marginalisation due to institutional and market exclusion, cultural discrimination and social isolation in the cities.

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<sup>17</sup> Cit. in Guo & Cheng, 2010. pp. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Wang, 2001, in Franceschini et al., 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Franceschini et al., 2016.

“I came to Beijing because I had a dream. I am like so many young migrants: we are all seeking to make it here in Beijing (...) I have been in Beijing for a while now; I want to join a theater troupe. I will be happy with just 2,000 or 3,000 yuan as a monthly salary (...) for now, this is one of my dreams.”<sup>20</sup>

Zhang Xi comes from Hohhot and at the time of the interview was twenty-one years old. In 2011, he left Inner Mongolia and moved to the capital because of his dream of becoming an actor. He works every day as street peddler to earn a living, and he does salutory acting jobs whenever there is an opportunity. Despite the concerns of his parents for his future and the poor housing conditions he is experiencing (Zhang lives in a basement), he still wants to stay in the city and fight for his dream.<sup>21</sup> Like Zhang, many young man and women are joining the migrant community inhabiting the big city, but the motives behind their migration choices are sometimes very distant from those of the previous generation. In most of the cases, the purpose of their migration is to gain a life experience and follow one’s dreams, and the reason for this can be found in the fact that this new cohort of people has a relatively higher level of attainment, higher occupational expectations and, first of all, higher demands for material and spiritual enjoyment.<sup>22</sup> Compared to those who were born before 1980, this new generation of migrant workers, which now accounts for more than 60% of the total migrant population has lower wages. Scholars justify the change in income with the fact that for migrants, market remuneration depends on working hours rather than the years of school; however, due to a higher education lever, the percentage of young migrants working in foreign enterprises or as freelancer is much higher than their older counter part. Moreover, young migrant workers enjoy slightly fewer working days per month and spend their free time in leisure activities. They are also criticized by the previous generation for their low tolerance for arduous work and their urban lifestyle. A young rural migrant reported in an interview with China-Files:

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<sup>20</sup> Sim Chi Yin (2014). The Rat Tribe: Meet the Million Migrant Workers Living beneath Beijing’s Streets, [Online video]

<sup>21</sup> It is estimated that more than a million migrant workers all over China, especially young migrants, are living in basement rooms, which once were air-raid shelters. However, in 2010 Beijing’s housing authorities tightened safety and hygiene regulations and began to evict migrant workers from their underground homes.

<sup>22</sup> Wang & He, 2016.

“We, the new generation of migrant workers, do not want to work in construction sites. I could actually work there, I just do not want to work there, and I do not like it. I prefer to find something else (...) I worked in an American factory, in the assembly and production line. We had three days off per month, and sometimes I worked eleven hours per day (...) and in the end I told myself, this is not the life I want.”<sup>23</sup>

Even though the monthly income of the new generation of migrant workers is much lower than that of their parents, they have much higher expenditures on telecommunication, presents, entertainment and other non-subsistence expenses. This change in the consumption structure, together with fact that most of them remain single, has consequences on the remittance, which is lower than in the previous generation.

According to researches Wang and He, one of the most relevant differences between the two generations is the way they perceive their urban life. It is well known in the literature that older migrants have negative feelings towards their life in the city; almost the entire old migrant population perceive the urban society as highly unequal. Since they first moved to the city, their position in the social and economic ladder has always been low, with almost no possibility of change. They have suffered from social exclusion by the local people, and they are aware that a local *hùkǒu* would have made a difference in their life. Unlike them, young migrants show a higher sense of happiness and optimism towards their future life, and this can be attributed again to their higher level of education, lower responsibility towards their family and lower attachment to land. What is even more interesting is the difference in the perception of the individual identity between the two groups: while first-generation migrants consider themselves as farmers, young migrants see themselves as “workers” and not “farmers”, and they want to become permanent urban residents.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, data show that new migrants have a very low dependency on farmland: 87% of them have never engaged in any agricultural activity, as they attend school in their town before leaving for the city.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> China-Files (2013). *I lavoratori migranti e I nuovi operai*, [Online video].

<sup>24</sup> Franceschini et al., 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Suvey of National Bureau of Statistic, 2013 in Wang & He, 2016.

The second generation of migrants perceive the city as a chance to explore the outside world, expand their horizon, learn better skills and, in a way, become better persons too. However, the rural-urban dichotomy arising from the household registration system affects the social and economic position of this new cohort. Starting a business or being hired in the city still remains a big challenge for the young migrants, who find themselves in a disadvantaged position compared to their urban peers.

## 2.2 Exclusion and discrimination in the city

Even though migrant workers are recognised by international scholars and media to be the engine of Chinese spectacular economic growth, they still suffer from marginalisation and exclusion and are considered second class citizens in the cities they themselves built by the strength of their back and the sweat of their brows. In this regard, Wong et al. explained marginalisation faced by migrants through two different but complementary concepts.<sup>26</sup> First, marginalisation can be the result of involuntary exclusion of the individual from taking part in some areas of life that are perceived as essential in a given society. Second, it can refer to a situation of deprivation, which is characterised by “poor housing conditions, lack of opportunity for education, poor health conditions and limited chances to improve income and employment opportunities.”<sup>27</sup> Both the definitions of marginalisation perfectly suit the current Chinese situation.

The issue of marginalisation faced by rural migrants has been a current topic of discussion in the last years. Researcher Éric Florence notices how the presence of migrant workers in towns is usually associated with pressure on urban infrastructure and even considered a threat to social order. In her study, Florence lists a series of articles published on the Chinese media, which depicted rural migrants as a “violent flood of *mángliú*” breaking into the city, destroying urban facilities and causing chaos.<sup>28</sup> It seems that the main reason why migrants are socially excluded from urban dwellers is the fact that they ruin the urban landscape with their barracks and make the

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<sup>26</sup> Wong et al., 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Cit. in Wong et al., 2007. pp. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Cit. in Florence, 2006. pp. 6.

life in the city uncomfortable for them; the pressure on city infrastructure negatively influences urban planning, transportation, housing, hygiene and social security. In some cases, they are discriminated because they “do not possess the necessary attributes for living in a modern town” as they lack of public morality and civic qualities, which city dwellers claim to have.<sup>29</sup> Because of these behaviours and beliefs, the figure of migrant has been stigmatised, contributing to their marginalisation in urban society. In an interview with He & Wang, a garment factory worker reported: “It seems that urban citizens are always superior to peasants. Take myself; I always wanted to be an urban person. But I don’t have the capability. I always feel that I belong to a lower class. Indeed, I’m so poor, I don’t have the confidence.”<sup>30</sup>

In this paragraph, I will talk about the marginalisation and exclusion migrant workers have to face in the cities, with particular focus on legal exclusion. I will briefly analyse market and social exclusion and the crescent role of the two variables in determining marginalisation in the city.

### 2.2.1 Institutional exclusion

In a time of rapid economic growth and social and cultural upheaval, institutional exclusion can be a way to provide stability and continuity to large countries, and to create solid groups and associations that go beyond family and employment relations. However, at the same time, it generates injustice and inequality among citizens of the same nation. According to Fei-Ling Wang, the *hùkǒu* based institutional exclusion has deep, extensive and lasting social consequences on the life of Chinese people, especially those who live to the margins of society.<sup>31</sup> The division between rural and urban underlying the *hùkǒu* system has deeply influenced employment, welfare, education and other public services. In this chapter, I will talk about three macro-areas of institutional exclusion: living and working conditions, medical benefits and education.

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<sup>29</sup> Cit. in Florence, 2006. pp. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Cit. in He & Wang, 2016. pp. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Wang, 2005.

### 2.2.1.1 Living and working conditions

In urban China, the number of commercial apartments on the market is really small and those available are unaffordable for the majority of city inhabitants. Among these, migrant workers have the greatest difficulty in renting an apartment, and buying one would be unimaginable for most of them. The main reason why migrant workers are faced with housing problems in the cities relies once again in the household registration system. Assuming a migrant worker with an agricultural *hùkǒu* wants to purchase a property in the city where they work, they cannot ask for subsidized prices to the State, as in order to do that, they should hold a non-agricultural *hùkǒu*. Since the *hùkǒu* system binds social welfare and employment to the registration status of each Chinese citizen, buying a house in the city is an arduous task for migrant workers. Moreover, housing prices are constantly growing, and now buying an apartment in Beijing, for example, costs about 100,000 yuan per square meter. According to the China Labour Bulletin, a labour NGO based in Hong Kong, in 2018 only 19% of migrant population purchased its own house, while more than 61% lives in a rented accommodation.<sup>32</sup> In most cases, workers can only rent small rooms in poor constructed buildings in the outskirts of the city. Together with the high renting prices, policies set by local governments make it difficult for citizens to improve their living conditions.<sup>33</sup> Taking Beijing as an example, before renting a house, all non-Beijing residents must have a house-leasing certificate from the local government and renew it every year. On the other hand, property owners must guarantee for the prevention of crime in the house and pay a sum equal to 2% of annual rent. Therefore, rental costs have risen and the number of apartments for rent has decreased.<sup>34</sup> Besides those living in the city, almost 13% of migrants lives in factory dormitories provided by their employers.<sup>35</sup> Dormitories are usually “crowded and lack of basic furniture, sanitation facilities, heating and air conditioning.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> According to a survey in 2018, migrant workers in Shanghai can rent an apartment with a private kitchen and bathroom for a few thousand yuan per month; considering that the salary of a worker in the tertiary sector is between 2,600 and 5,000 yuan per month, it follows that the high cost of renting a house influences the living decisions of many migrants.

<sup>34</sup> Wong et al., 2007.

<sup>35</sup> *China labour bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Cit. in Shi, 2008. pp. 15.

Migrant workers' labour conditions have been topic of debate in the last years, especially with reference to those who work and live in factories, which in most of the cases are owned by foreign enterprises that decided to move their manufacturing plants in China, attracted by the cheap cost of labour. Besides the low pay, migrants have long shifts, and they are willing to accept overtime to make more money. Moreover, they have almost no job security and employers do not respect safety measures at work places.<sup>37</sup> Although China promulgated health and safety laws in 1995, there is still little enforcement by both central and local governments; as a result, China is considered to be one of the most dangerous places to work in the world. Working environment is usually one of the main causes of discontent among migrants and the highest risk industries include building materials, chemicals, machinery manufacture, metallurgy, plastics and textiles. According to statistics, construction workers definitely face the greatest risk: exhausting working hours (76% of construction workers works above nine hours per day), salary delay and partial payment often lead to oppositions and conflicts.<sup>38</sup> The main reason why migrant workers bear injustice on the workplace comes from the nature of migrant labour itself, which is in most of the cases casual and informal. The statistics speak for themselves: a National Bureau Statistics survey reported that only 35% of migrant workers had a regular contract in 2016.<sup>39</sup> In the last years, precarious work has become the norm not only in the construction industry, but also in manufacturing and the tertiary sector, where workers are hired through agencies and short-term contracts.

#### 2.2.1.2 Healthcare system and medical benefits

There is no national-level health insurance system in China and social welfare benefits are linked to a person's residence status. Therefore, migrants are excluded from social security and medical care in their working city, because they are not considered permanent residents by the State. Once again, the *hùkǒu* system acts as an institutional barrier and for Chinese citizens to be equal and, in the specific case, for migrant workers to get access to public medical care.

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<sup>37</sup> *China labour bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Huang et al., 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Guojia tongjiju 国家统计局, 2017.

In the attempt to understand the reasons for inequality in distribution of medical care in contemporary China, researcher Carine Milcent identifies in the economic reforms the main source of unbalance.<sup>40</sup> Although reforms have had a positive effects on GDP and nutrition level, they have led to the collapse of public healthcare network, which used to guarantee access to basic healthcare to almost each Chinese citizen.<sup>41</sup> At a geographical level, the government introduced a social insurance with a lower coverage than before, at the expense of farmers: the healthcare-insurance system almost disappeared in rural areas. Nowadays, the urban-rural gap in the Chinese healthcare is also reflected in the unbalanced distribution of high quality facilities around the country. Simply put, the quality of hospitals varies with the degree of urbanisation, with larger cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing offering better quality healthcare, even if at higher prices. Since the State resources are all concentrated in big cities, getting treatment for serious diseases in villages and small towns has become difficult and people have to go to major developed areas to receive appropriate medical care.<sup>42</sup>

Beside geographical divide, institutional divide is a strong determinant of healthcare inequality inside the city itself. Since citizens are supposed to ask for medical care benefits only in their official place of residence, agricultural *hùkǒu* holders do not have easy access to medical facilities during their stay in the city. When a migrant worker is injured or sick, they have two choices: to pay a doctor to visit them in the city or to go back to their town where they have the residential status. If an individual decides to stay in the city where they work and receive a higher quality treatment, they must deal with extremely high fees. According to National Bureau of Statistics, the national average fee for outpatient services in general hospital of the late 2000s was around 250 yuan per visit, while the average fee for inpatient service varied between 8,000 and 9,000 yuan per day.<sup>43</sup> Data show that in the same year the average monthly income for migrants was around 3,300 yuan; in front of these numbers, it is

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<sup>40</sup> Milcent, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to specify that the healthcare-insurance system was not homogeneous in the Maoist era: access to medical care depended on large SOEs in the cities and on rural communes in the countryside. After the dismantlement of SOEs, healthcare was managed by smaller self-financing units.

<sup>42</sup> Milcent, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> *China labour bulletin*, 2019.

obvious that the cost of medical care in the country commercialised healthcare system is prohibitively expensive for migrant families and prevents them from being cured. It is interesting to notice that besides legal exclusion, migrants' low disposable income contributes to the increase in inequality in the healthcare sector. Going back to their hometown and receiving medical assistance as *hùkǒu*-holders can be a valid option for migrants, especially in cases of serious illness and poor economic resources. In her study, Milcent underlines the importance of family members during a possible treatment and recovery, as hospitals usually furnish only minimal accommodation, without considering that the presence of relatives has an impact on the way in which the patient is treated by the hospital staff.<sup>44</sup> In front of *hùkǒu*-based discrimination and the need for family support, many are the cases that see migrants returning to their hometown. However, as I explained before, community and village clinics offer lower quality services and serious illness are usually difficult to cure in absence of the right equipment and qualified nurses and doctors.

Although in most of the cases migrants are excluded from the medical programs set up for urban citizens and there is not a national-level health insurance system covering migrant workers, some provinces and cities have developed their own health insurance policies for non-*hukou* holders.<sup>45</sup> At a national level, the central government has found some temporary solutions in the last twenty years, in the attempt of facilitating the access to healthcare for migrant workers and rural inhabitants as well. Today, there are three main types of medical coverage in China.<sup>46</sup> The first type is a basic medical insurance scheme for urban workers, including migrants; however, it seems that only a small percentage of migrants has it, as it is hard to obtain. The second type is an urban basic medical insurance scheme for all those living in the city, migrant workers excluded, while the third type of medical care scheme is dedicated to rural citizens. In the majority of cases, this is the only option for rural migrant families, especially if they need medical aid for their children, who are completely uncovered

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<sup>44</sup> Milcent, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> The survey used for this paper covers five cities: Chongqing, Shanghai, Dalian, Shenzhen and Wuhan; however, many other Chinese cities have been reported to experiment in this sector.

<sup>46</sup> China Labour Bulletin, 2019.

in most Chinese cities.<sup>47</sup> It is clear that although some insurance programs have been launched throughout the country, migrants still face many barriers in the healthcare because of the duality of a system that binds them to their place of birth.<sup>48</sup> With more than one person in five being a migrant, China's ongoing healthcare system should keep pace with the growing challenges brought by migration and establish a comprehensive system that will finally guarantee every migrant worker their fundamental right to health.

### 2.2.1.3 Education for migrant children

The first large migratory wave of workers from the countryside until the late 1980s and early 1990s consisted mainly of single adults; in those years, men and women usually left their spouse in their village to take care of the children. A second wave of migrant workers occurred in the mid-1990s and saw entire families moving out from the countryside and trying to settle in the village. In fact, the phenomenon of large numbers of non-*hùkǒu* holder children living in the city with their family is relatively new. According to figures, there were 35.81 million migrant children living in the working city of their parents in 2018, while 70 million children were left home together with their grandparents.<sup>49</sup> Like their parents, migrant children lack of any access to social services, and because of their rural *hùkǒu*, they can find easier educational and healthcare support in their hometown.

When children are old enough to go to school, migrant parents have two options: to send them back to the countryside, where they can go to school for free as they have the place of residence there or to pay for their education in the city. In the first case, children live with their grandparents and attend rural schools. Like for the healthcare system, the situation of the Chinese education system currently reflects the wide discrepancies between the city and the countryside. Rural schools receive limited funds and the teaching staff is most of the times unqualified and underpaid; suffice to say that many rural teachers earn around one third of the salary of their urban colleagues

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<sup>47</sup> It is worth mentioning that some local governments, like Shenzhen and Hangzhou, have launched insurance schemes for children of migrant workers, so they can get access to the same level of insurance as their local peers. However, it is still far from becoming the norm in China.

<sup>49</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2019.

and receive no pension. The result of the poor conditions of rural school is reflected in the low rate of higher education attendance of rural children: the Rural Education Action Program survey reported that in 2014 only 37% of rural students entered high school, also because of the expensive entrance fees.<sup>50</sup> Because of structural barriers and the higher cost of living in the city, many migrant parents are forced to return their kids to the villages where they receive second-rate education, but it will still give them the opportunity for social mobility in the future.<sup>51</sup>

As I said before, another valid alternative for migrant parents is to send their children to public schools in the city, with the hope that they would enjoy the same high-quality education of their urban peers. Although the access to public schools should be in theory guaranteed to all migrant children, in practice parents have to overcome numerous obstacles before enrolling them in school.<sup>52</sup> A study on education in Beijing documented that before enrolling in a government school, children are required to pay two kinds of fee, one to the city of Beijing and the other one to the school.<sup>53</sup> These extra-fees vary among different institutes and cities, but they are usually prohibitively high for migrants. Moreover, enrollment procedures are usually long and require a series of documents hard to obtain, such as temporary residence permit, work permit, documents certifying the new place of residence, household registration booklets and so on. All these reasons, together with the fact that migrant families frequently move for work, discourage parents from sending their children to public schools. However, a valid alternative are migrant schools.

Born in the mid-1990s, migrant schools are private schools for migrant children, which usually offer primary and secondary education at a lower price, and are supported by social agencies, foundations and volunteers.<sup>54</sup> One of the advantages of private schools is obviously the fact that children can finally live together with their parents and have the opportunity to learn more than they would do in their village. On

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Woronov, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> At first, migrant children were not admitted to public school because they need to have local *hùkǒu* to access public services. In 1996, the Ministry of Education stated that public schools had to accept children with a local temporary residence permit. However, many obstacles still keep a big part of migrant parents from sending their children to school.

<sup>53</sup> Woronov, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Zhou & Cheung, 2017.

the other hand, in the majority of the cases, school facilities are old and overcrowded, and some of them do not even have drinking water and restrooms. Staff in migrant school are usually first-time teachers with poor experience in education who work there only temporary, and this has a bad influence on the students' learning.<sup>55</sup> The most serious problem faced by migrant students is structural, first because each migrant school has a different curriculum and it is hard for kids to adjust in case of relocation, and second because these kind of private schools are not registered with the local education authorities. Consequently, without a valid middle-school graduation certificate, migrant students do not have access to higher education in the city.<sup>56</sup> Although it is legal to operate privately owned schools outside the State sector, the process of registration with local authorities is arduous and expensive, so that many schools are not even officially registered. Over the last decade, the government has launched numerous campaigns to close unregistered migrant schools because considered unsafe for students. A case point was the relocation of one of Beijing's largest migrant schools from the Shijingshan district to the outskirt area of the city in 2017.<sup>57</sup>

Even though official policies have been trying to remove obstacles to migrant children integration and education in urban areas, these children still face serious institutional and social barriers that undermine their integration in the city life. Talking about the institutional aspect, the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 actually states that “the State, community, schools and families shall (...) safeguard the right of compulsory education of school-age children and adolescents”<sup>58</sup> and guarantees compulsory education regardless of ones kid *hukou* status. However, the reality is that migrant children are rejected from both national institutions and urban parents, who do not want them in the same class of their kids. The Ministry of Education of the PRC declared that in 2016 about 2.25 million and half a million migrant children were excluded from primary and middle public-school system.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Woronov, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> *China Labour Bulletin*, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyubu* 国家人民共和国教育部, 2017.

### 2.2.2 Social and market exclusion

In his works, economist and sociologist Max Weber defined exclusion as a mechanism used by social groups to monopolise goods and opportunities and consequently exclude outsiders from access.<sup>60</sup> By establishing boundaries between themselves and others, members of a social group manage to exclude outsiders; Weber argued that these boundaries have a double nature: legal and social. While legal boundaries are the result of State laws and regulations, social boundaries arise from the group peculiarities like language, religion, geographical location and ethnicity. It follows that social groups can discriminate outsiders even without the presence of legal boundaries and therefore limit the nature of social and economic relationships across boundaries and “exclude outsiders from access to resources and opportunities within their social network.”<sup>61</sup> Scholars like Shaohua Zhan find in market, legal and social exclusion the three mechanisms behind social differentiation and inequalities. This paragraph will be focused on the influence of social and market exclusion on the life of migrant workers in Chinese cities.

It has become clear that exclusion and discrimination against migrant workers and their children has taken a number of different forms; urban people can discriminate against them based on local and non-local dichotomy (in this case, migrants are called non-local residents, in Chinese *wàidìrén*) and rural-urban dichotomy (here migrants are defined rural persons, in Chinese *xiāngxiàrén*). While the opposition between rural and urban citizenship, the city and the countryside, is the final product of the *hùkǒu* system, the sense of belonging to the local community is strictly connected with the identity and the origin of Chinese individuals.<sup>62</sup> In his work, Zhan argued that geographical origin has a major part to play in building people’s identity; sharing the same geographical origin, hence a dialect, customs and lifestyle, creates and consolidates relationships among members of a group. At the same time, it can be a double-edged sword as those who do not share the same characteristics are automatically cut off. Besides their rural origin, the majority of migrant workers are

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<sup>60</sup> Zhan, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Cit. in Zhan, 2011. pp. 247.

<sup>62</sup> It should be remembered that hukou status had a central role in the exclusion of rural people from constructing an identity in the socialist era.

socially excluded for not being local residents, and not sharing the same status of the native people. Clear manifestations of identity-based exclusion in contemporary China are the different treatment of migrant workers by their employers, local government officials and urban residents, who often look down on *wàidìrén*. A practical example of identity-based exclusion is the afore mentioned case of some public schools which are still asking migrant parents additional fees to accept their children, even though there is a law against that. In general, if government officials or local people have the chance to decide, they would rather help a local family instead of a migrant family or person. In this context, an official of Beijing community resident interviewed by Shaohua Zhan said that:

“I am more likely to help urban residents such as laid-off workers. Why? (...) There is one couple who is living on the first floor of my apartment building (...) One day a work unit phoned me wanting to hire someone. I immediately thought of the couple (...) I dare not give these job opportunities to people from other places. I can't take responsibility for them.”<sup>63</sup>

On the other side, it is hard for migrants to ignore the way in which locals look down upon them, not to mention that they see them as rude and impolite people; even relatively high-income migrants face discrimination because of their accent, or the colour of their skin. In this regard, it is worth to mention the concept of *sùzhì*, which can be translated in English with the word “quality”, and refers to those attributes that are believed to distinguish urban residents. According to Zhuo Ban, *sùzhì* includes norms and values such as literacy, personal hygiene, cultural knowledge, personal decorum, and so on and so forth.<sup>64</sup> The lack of these right values and the identification of rural citizens as illiterate people without any respect for the common social norms is breeding ground for discrimination from urban dwellers and ghettoization in contemporary cities. The awareness of not being part of the group of locals and being enclosed as outsiders prevents migrant workers from making friends with people in the city and working their social network. The development of separated social networks is a fundamental component of social exclusion. Because of the prejudices

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<sup>63</sup> Cit. in Zhan, 2011. pp. 263.

<sup>64</sup> Zhuo, 2018.

locals have against *wàidìrén* and the pressures to which migrants are subjected to in their everyday life, it is hard to register personal contact between the two groups. Moreover, as the two groups spend their leisure time in different ways, the chances to get in touch outside the working context are very few.

Identity-based exclusion and the creation of separate social networks prevent *wàidìrén* from sharing goods and opportunities with their urban counterpart and therefore having a career, moving up in the social ladder and becoming fully-fledged citizens.<sup>65</sup> In the first paragraph of this chapter, I explained how institutional exclusion influences the configuration of Chinese urban labour market, where migrant workers are in a disadvantaged position compared to their urban colleagues. In this case, I will demonstrate how factors relevant for market competition, like social network, educational attainment and technical skills are source of inequality and exclusion in the labour market.<sup>66</sup> Having the “right” connections can make the difference in one’s career and this is even truer when an individual first arrives in a strange city or is looking for their first job. Social networks play a fundamental role for both employers and employees in the recruiting phase and if an individual wants to change occupation. The split between local and non-local social networks makes it difficult for migrant workers to obtain better-paid jobs, which are for the sole use of urban workers. On the other hand, locals are in an advantaged situation since they have fruitful and wider network resources helping them finding better employment opportunities.<sup>67</sup> Besides narrow social networks, scholars have identified in the lack of human and economic capital another source of market exclusion.<sup>68</sup> The term “human capital” usually includes level of education and technical skills, and is a concept that appeared on the Chinese labour scenario only in the last decades. When the first villagers went to the cities and the factories to sell their cheap labour, educational attainment and technical skills were not recruitment criteria. Since the phenomenon of social exclusion of migrants now depends also on market competition, receiving further education and special training could be a way to overcome market discrimination and the lack of marketable resources. In this regard, existing research shows that many are the migrant

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<sup>65</sup> Zhan, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Huang et al., 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Huang et al., 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Zhan, 2011.

workers who would take part in training programs to acquire better knowledge in a specific area, if they had the chance.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, most of the times migrants have to put aside their aspirations because of insufficient economic resources or because they do not have any time left from their current job. The lack of economic and human capital leads to discrimination against in the urban market such as in socioeconomic activities.<sup>70</sup>

Against the current backdrop of marginalisation described above, the expression “life chances” refers to opportunities for migrants to obtain better jobs, move up in the social ladder and build a new life in their working city. In order to pursue social mobility, migrant workers need to learn marketable skills, improve their level of education and develop contacts with local people. Scholars argue that the role of *hùkǒu* in generating exclusion and marginalisation has declined in recent years, giving way to market and social factors, which are now perceived by migrants as the highest barriers to their final settlement and acceptance in the cities.<sup>71</sup>

### 2.3 Migration from the countryside: rural migrant workers and their land

One of the peculiarities of Chinese internal migration is its cyclical nature: migrant workers tend to go back to their hometown once they have reached retirement age and when they have the opportunity. The reasons behind the cyclicity of China’s migratory phenomena have been explained in part in the previous paragraph of this chapter; another force that prevents migrant workers from settling permanently in the city of destination is their bound with their land.

Every year, in occasion of the Lunar New Year, millions of people in China travel long distance by train and bus, giving rise to what is known as “the world’s greatest annual human migration<sup>72</sup>”. Last year, around 385 million people returned to their hometown in occasion of the Spring Festival.<sup>73</sup> In a culture where the connection with family, land and hometown has always been touted as a virtue and an essential

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> In literature, economic capital also refers to income and property, but these two area have already been covered in the previous paragraphs of this paper.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Chan, 2009. pp. 197.

<sup>73</sup> Li, 2018.

value, coming back home has a profound significance for those who leave and those who stay. The desire of going back to one's home can be defined by the word "topophilia". The word topophilia, which literally means "love for a place", has been coined by the Chinese American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan with the intent of describing the feeling of attachment to a certain place. People's love for their hometown and their desire to return to the place they belong are manifestations of topophilia.<sup>74</sup> In the Chinese case, the sense of belonging to a place plays a big part in the migratory experience of each migrant worker. Migrants spend most of their life in cities that do not accept them because of their origins and that they will never consider their home. Facing exclusion and discrimination, migrants have almost no emotional attachment to a city that makes them feel unsettled and isolated. Besides the difficulties in settling down into a big and strange city, what are the reasons behind the desire to return home?

The final paragraph of this chapter will illustrate the relationship between rural migrant workers and their home, by discussing the impact of the migratory experience on their families, hometown and their land. I will start by analysing the value of remittances in migrants' rural households and the phenomenon of left-behind children; in order to understand the bond between migration and the rural land, an explanation of Chinese land ownership rights is needed.

### 2.3.1 The importance of remittances in rural household

Remittances are the money and goods that migrants send back to their relatives in their hometown and they are the easiest and most direct linkages between migration and development. Although in this paper I will consider only the transfer of money from the place of work to the place where the family lives, the term remittances also refers to ideas, behaviours, knowledge and any kind of social capital that migrants acquire during their migratory experience and then sell back to their communities of origin.<sup>75</sup> The huge flow of remittances from the coastal regions to the inlands and from the city to the countryside is undoubtedly one of the most beneficial effects of Chinese internal migration. Just think that in the early 2000s, the amount of money a single migrant worker may have remitted on average went between 3,000 and 4,000 yuan per

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Huang & Zhan, 2008.

year.<sup>76</sup> An official report issued in 2003 stated that total remittances amounted to 340 billion yuan, which made about 18% of total rural income.

It is clear to everyone that remittances are a fundamental component of Chinese rural economy and stability, even today in 2019. Without the contribution of migrant labour, rural income and the annual crop alone are not enough for the rural family livelihood. In this regard, a young migrant worker reported in an interview for Aeon in 2017:

“The money my family earns in a year from two acres of land is less than what I earn in two months in the city (...) we invest labour and money but we don’t see anything from it. The prices are too low and the family plots are too small. You cannot make anything from a couple of acres of land. My father estimates that the most we can earn from our land each year is \$650, it is not even enough to cover our daily expenses.”<sup>77</sup>

Many scholars acknowledged that the huge monetary flow coming from migration contributed to the development of rural areas in different ways. In particular, researchers Huang and Zhan identified in remittances a valid tool in narrowing the income gap between rural and urban areas and among different regions. As I already discussed in the first chapter of this paper, the discrepancy between the city and the countryside has been constantly widening after the reforms, and its clearest evidence has been the rise in income ratio, which reached its peak in the late 2000s. Although the rural-urban income gap is still an issue in contemporary China, the inflow of remittances has been a great help to rural families and has prevented a further widening of the income divide. Another aspect to take into consideration when talking about remittances is their impact in reducing rural poverty. Suffice is to say that if a migrant worker remits about a half of their urban salary every month, it would be probably enough to cover all the household expenses back home, where living costs are way lower than in the city; in this way, the migrant parent will be able to move at least their

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Aeon Video (2017). *Chinese Dreamer: Each of China’s 260 million migrant workers has a story*, [Online video].

family out of poverty.<sup>78</sup> Household expenses usually include essentials, medical care and education fees for children. Even though tuition fees in village schools cannot be compared to those in city public schools, migrant parents must pay for their children's tuition fees and textbooks. Since family income from farming and working in the village is barely enough to buy food for everyone, bearing all these costs would be unimaginable without the flow of money coming from the migrant labour. Moreover, since migrant parents hope that higher educational attainment would offer to their kids the possibility to have a better job and a better life one day, part of remittance is usually dedicated to their studies. It is important to notice that education is a fundamental source of rural development and it gives a positive contribution to the future of rural communities.<sup>79</sup>

In the last decades, migrant remittances have acted as promoters of consumptions and investments in the rural areas. Several studies on this field show that the money coming from migrant labour are mainly invested in agricultural rather than non-agricultural activities, making it possible to develop the local economy.<sup>80</sup> For example, in one of their studies, researchers Huang and Zhan found a relation between remittances and the acquisition of cultivable land; they notices how some rural families use the money received by their relatives working in the city to invest in farmland and rent more plots.<sup>81</sup> Besides agriculture, families can invest remittances also in fishery and forestry.

In conclusion, remittances definitely have a strong impact on rural economy and the development of the Chinese countryside. They are the most visible contribution and a tangible evidence of the hard work and the efforts of millions of people who every year leave their land of origin in the hope of lifting their families out of poverty.

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<sup>78</sup> For this reason, from the first 1990s, local authorities started to see in rural-urban migration a tool of reduction of poverty and therefore facilitated the migration process in different ways.

<sup>79</sup> Huang & Zhan, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3.2 China's lost generation: left-behind children

*Nóngmíngōng* play a fundamental role in the development of both urban and rural areas. Thanks to their work in the city, rural migrants manage to increase their family income, promote economic and social development of rural areas and contribute to the prosperity of the country as a whole. However, institutional segregation between urban and rural realities and higher living costs prevent the majority of migrant workers to move their families to the cities. The absence of citizenship, which have been widely discussed in the previous chapters, is the main driver of the phenomenon of 'left-behind households', in Chinese *liúshǒu jiātíng*. When leaving their hometown, migrants usually have no choice but to leave their spouse, children and elderly parents back home, and this has an inevitable impact on the equilibrium of individuals, families and society.<sup>82</sup>

Among the 'left-behind population', there is no doubt that children are those who pay the highest price. The phenomenon of 'left-behind children', in Chinese *liúshǒu értóng*, has attracted attention from scholars worldwide, and is definitely one of the major issues of contemporary rural China. The scale of this phenomenon is huge and it can be observed by looking at the latest data. According to government statistics, in 2017, there were 9.02 million rural children below the age of eighteen, whose both parents were working away from home.<sup>83</sup> Considering children with at least one parent working in a distant place from home, the figure reached 61 million in the same year. In cases where both parents migrate to the city, grandparents are usually those who take care of the household. Therefore, families formed by grandparents and grandchildren are now the most common type of family unit in Chinese rural areas. However, the majority of them perceives care-giving as providing food and clothing and they eventually do not properly check on their grandkids as their parents would do. In the worst cases, children are left alone without caregivers. In this regard, an old man who is looking after his two grandsons in the province of Anhui said in an interview: "I am sort of like their dad, but their father is stricter. I don't discipline then

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<sup>82</sup> Ye & Pan, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Zhang, 2018.

that much. They are good kids (...) They miss their parents, but there is no choice. They have to work to earn money.”<sup>84</sup>

As their grandparents are old, migrant children help them in both housework and farm work, when necessary. Most of the time, children help their family in weeding, planting and harvesting, so that they become a new labour force in migrant household after their parents’ departure. In their study about the impact of migration of left-behind children, researchers Jingzhong Ye and Lu Pan registered a visible increase in kids’ contribution to both household and fieldwork after their parents have left the village. Children participation in everyday work is a great help in reducing the elders’ workload and improving local economy, but at the same time, it takes up time from playing, socialising with their friends and studying.<sup>85</sup> Researchers Ye and Lu showed that left-behind children school performance usually declines after their parents’ migration. Main causes are the low concentration of students, who miss their parents, and their new role in the household, which inevitably limits their efforts and time they should dedicate to study.

Being a left-behind child in China means to have a higher family burden, be responsible for siblings and grandparents, and most important of all, be independent from an early age. Since they have a real understanding of their family economic situation, left-behind children understand and support their parents’ choice of becoming migrants and leaving home for a long time. Children actually benefit from their new economic condition, as their family can finally afford to buy them books, new clothes, food and in some cases, to buy a new house. However, it would be wrong to say that having new things can compensate for the loss of parental love and family separation, which is hard to accept for both the kids and the parents. A nine-years-old boy living in the rural China with his granddad said in a documentary:

“I wish my parents work nearby. I would prefer them to stay home and not leave for work. I don’t even know why they can’t work nearby (...) I am really happy my parents are coming home for the New Year. They buy a lot of stuff to eat. But it’s

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<sup>84</sup> Foreign Policy Association (2018). China’s Race to the Top: A History of Economic Growth, [Online video].

<sup>85</sup> Ye & Lu, 2011.

not because they buy things that I'm happy. I'm happy because it's a lot of fun when they are back.”<sup>86</sup>

In the last decades, China has experienced industrial development and fast-paced urbanisation, but at a heavy social cost, and rural communities and rural population are those who pay the higher price. Migration from the countryside to the city has caused the separation of many men and women from their families and the presence of millions of left-behind children undermines the future and the stability of Chinese countryside.

### 2.3.3 The right to the land

The “age of migration” saw millions of peasants leaving their fields, their families and their homes and moving to inhospitable cities, which are unlikely to become their home. Even after many years of absence, they are keeping their bond with the land, hopeful of being reunited with their family one day and finally enjoy the fruits of their own labour. Since Chinese migrant workers cannot and do not want to settle in their working city, rural land has a fundamental role in internal migration. At this regard, researchers Andreas and Zhan noticed that the Chinese migratory phenomenon has a circular structure, where individuals migrate to the city with the prospect of coming back to rural areas when old.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, migration with “Chinese characteristics” is distinguished by its temporality: the majority of rural migrants, with particular reference to older generations, return to their hometown after years spent working in the labour market. This is why migration to the city can be considered a phase in the life-cycle of rural households and it usually coincides with the first stage of rural individual's working life. The temporary nature of the phenomenon is further proven by the fact that migrants move back and forth between their hometown and their working city during their migratory experience.<sup>88</sup> The idea of returning to the land is at the basis of the cyclical nature of Chinese migration, where the land symbolizes the center of social reproduction and family life. Migrant labour and farm

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<sup>86</sup> Foreign Policy Association (2018). China's Race to the Top: A History of Economic Growth, [Online video].

<sup>87</sup> Andreas & Zhan, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Rupelle et al., 2008.

work are interdependent, as families in the rural areas rely on both remittances and their village land, which are cultivated by left-behind parents and children. Although remittances are a substantial component of rural household income, one should not forget that land provides food, an inexpensive place to live and even if low, a steady income. It is possible to say that rural households perceive land as a necessity mainly because migrant labour in the city is precarious.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, together with the hope for higher revenue and better future, migration has been defined in Rupelle et al. as an insurance device used by rural household to cope with volatile agricultural income.<sup>90</sup>

In order to offer a better understanding of the relationship between rural migrant workers and their land, the last pages of this paragraph will offer an overview about land rights and land allocation in contemporary China. First, it is important to make a distinction between rural and urban land: while in urban areas land is owned by the State, rural land has been historically considered a mean of production and hence its ownership is collective.<sup>91</sup> At this point, it is necessary to specify the difference existing between ownership rights and user rights in China. The Chinese Constitution stipulates that whereas the land is owned by the State or by the collective, nobody can claim the ownership of the land. Even though private ownership of land is not allowed, a system of land use rights has been established; it follows that peasants have the right to use their land, but do not possess it. Land use rights were introduced in the Chinese countryside after the decollectivization, and they were allocated through the Household Responsibility System (HRS).<sup>92</sup> Each rural household was given the right to use a plot for fifteen years, and hence land became a safety net for people in the countryside<sup>93</sup>. Since then, the central government has enacted a series of land management laws aimed at securing and further extending peasants' rights over their land. However, collective authorities do not always respect land contracts and

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<sup>89</sup> Andreas & Zhan, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Rupelle et al., 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Vendryes, 2010.

<sup>92</sup> The HRS allocated use and management land rights to rural households for fifteen years in exchange of State quota; the contractual duration was extended to thirty years in 1993 and granted as perpetual with the 2007 Property Law . For more information on the HRS, see paragraph II of chapter I.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

periodically allocate collective land among villagers. In fact, researcher Thomas Vendryes reported that in 2008 more than 40% of peasant population did not have official documentation that ensured their rights.<sup>94</sup> Arbitrariness in the implementation of HRS at the local level is a big source of uncertainty for rural families, who could see their land rights unexpectedly compromised by village leaders. Rupelle et al. identify three main sources of land insecurity: land management by collective authorities, status of plot and characteristics of the plot owner.<sup>95</sup> Concerning the characteristics of the owner, local officials are more likely to reallocate land to those engaged in agriculture rather than those who dedicate more of their time to off-farm activities. There have been many cases where the latter have seen their land partially sized or even confiscated and reallocated to villager who were actively involved in agriculture. This inevitably means that since rural-urban migrant workers work away from home and do not dedicate much time to agriculture as non-migrant peasants do, they constantly face the risk of dispossession of their land use rights, and this mechanism constitutes a hindrance to their decision and duration of migration.<sup>96</sup> Another threat to the stability of rural households is the government's objective of developing the agricultural sector and urbanising rural areas. From the late 1990s, the Chinese authorities have been encouraging land transfers from rural dwellers to big operators, mainly involved in intensive agriculture, infrastructure and real estate industries. Local authorities are acquiring rural land from farmers in exchange for tiny amounts of money or urban *hùkǒu* in small and middle-tier cities. Unlike land reallocation through the HRS, market transfer has been introduced with the aim of facilitating the concentration of rural plots in the hands of few.<sup>97</sup> The phenomenon of land expropriation now constitutes the main threat to farmers and rural migrant workers, and it will be dealt with in chapter three.

In conclusion, many are the reasons that tie rural migrant workers to their place of origin. Love for family, land and community are both push and pull factors of migration and together define the circular path of Chinese migratory experience.

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<sup>94</sup> Vendryes, 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Rupelle et al., 2008.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Vendryes, 2010.

Although farm income is not sufficient to support households' living and many families chose migration as an "insurance device" against the volatility of land income, the land remains a form of protection when the future is uncertain.

## 2.4 Conclusions

Rural migrant workers are the undisputed protagonists in the Chinese economic miracle. In the last 30 years, they have given a huge contribution to the economic growth, urbanisation and modernisation of the country. Despite their efforts and devotion towards their country, rural workers are still treated like illegal migrants in the same cities they built by the strength of their back and the sweat of their brows. Their residential status and their rural identity are cause for discrimination by the State and urban citizens, who see migrants as people with no culture, no consideration for urban spaces and a threat to social stability. Institutional and social exclusion inevitably lead to market segregation, which makes impossible for migrants and their families to move up in the social ladder and settle in the city. Although they spend most of their life living away from their own land and their loved ones, their first thought is about their home. Remittances are the most tangible evidence of the connection between internal migration and rural development: labour wages are used to compensate low rural income and have had a fundamental role in narrowing the rural-urban income gap and lifting many rural households out of poverty. Thanks to the money coming from the cities, rural families can finally afford to buy books and clothes for their children, make agricultural investments and, in the best cases, buy a new house. However, land ownership is collective and rural households' rights are limited to the use of their land. In recent years, local governments have been reallocating land plots to farmers who are actively engaged in agricultural activity, and this is posing a threat to migrant families who can see all their efforts vanish from one moment to another.

### 3 China's National-New urbanisation Plan and the future of *hùkǒu* system

#### 3.1 The role of *hùkǒu* reforms in time: an introduction

Sociologist Fei-Ling Wang defines the PRC household registration system as the “major source of sociopolitical control and governance in the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>1</sup> In all his works, Wang has identified in the *hùkǒu* system the main tool implemented by the government to monitor and limit Chinese population movements inside the country’s borders. As I have explained in the previous chapters of this dissertation, China’s *hùkǒu* system is the primary source of institutional exclusion and discrimination against rural residents and the origin of inequality in the mechanism of allocation of State resources. Since the *hùkǒu* has been and is still an instrument in the hands of the Party-state, it has been designed to accommodate the interests and the goals of the Chinese authorities, and therefore, it has taken a number of different forms from the birth of PRC to nowadays.

Although the Constitution adopted in 1954 guaranteed freedom of movement and residency to every Chinese, the Maoist leadership that was ruling China at that time issued a series of regulations aimed at preventing excessive flow of people from the countryside to the cities. In order to protect cities from overurbanisation and unemployment, in 1958 the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress promulgated the “Regulations on Household registration of the People’s Republic of China” and the “Regulation on Residents’ Personal identification Cards in the People’s Republic of China”.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars tend to agree on the fact that these two regulations represent the legal foundation of the *hùkǒu* system as we know it now and the starting point of the historical rural-urban gap in contemporary China.<sup>3</sup> From that moment on, Chinese citizens have been classified based on their place of origin and people have been labeled as rural or urban. At that time, the Chinese leadership resorted to the *hùkǒu* to restrict and even forbid migration from rural to urban areas and concentrate

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<sup>1</sup> Cit. in Wang, 2010. Pp. 80.

<sup>2</sup> The content and the effects of the two aforementioned regulations can be found in the third paragraph of the first chapter of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Cheng & Selden, 1994.

the wealth of the country in few developed cities. From a broader perspective, *hùkǒu* regulations and the tightening of controls on population movements seemed to be the only option to guarantee the pursuit of the socialist plan in a country with limited resources. The codification of the *hùkǒu* system in the 1950s was the result of the institution of a system of planned economy oriented towards industrialisation that required social control and meticulous organisation, coupled with a strategy premised on the unequal exchange of agriculture and industrial development. In light of these considerations, it is possible to assume that the household registration system had a strong political as well as economic significance in the implementation of State objectives and Party politics. However, as China has gradually moved away from a planned economy and embraced a market economy, State goals have changed too. After decades when workers were tied to their *dānwèi* and communes, respectively in the cities and in the countryside, people were finally free to move inside their own country, but without forgetting the civil and political limitations of their choice. Even though controls on internal migration have been relaxed from the mid-1980s, *hùkǒu* is still a fundamental institution in the life of Chinese citizens and migrants have not seen their socio-economic, civil and political rights recognised so far. In the reform period, China's *hùkǒu* system has been a crucial asset for the new market economy based on rapid industrialisation in the cities and extraction of agricultural surplus from the countryside. The construction of an economic model based on cheap rural labour would have never been so successful without the rigid categorisation underlying the household registration system; besides the considerable difference in quantity and quality of the resources allocated by the State, institutional exclusion has prevented rural migrants to permanently settle in the city where they work, and therefore, has guaranteed that the fruits of migrants' work would have contribute to urban economic growth first. In order to pursuit economic development and political stability, the Chinese government did not abandon the Maoist household registration system and, once again, they resorted to the *hùkǒu* to achieve their own objectives. However, market-oriented economic growth, political decentralisation, experimental reforms and pressures from both migrant workers and rural population have inevitably led to changes in the registration system.<sup>4</sup> In front of China's spectacular economic growth

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<sup>4</sup> Wang, 2005.

and the subsequent urbanisation process, *hùkǒu* reform was the only way for the government to keep pace with national progress without loosening control on internal population mobility. Although it has been deeply affected in the last 40 years, China's *hùkǒu* system survived the reform era, giving proof of its resilience. Among the main reasons for *hùkǒu* reforms, researcher Jason Young includes the promotion of local economic development, social stability and the restriction of migration and urbanisation, which have always been higher up the Chinese political agenda.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to give a detailed overview of the New Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020) released by the State Council in March 2014, and explain the relation between the Plan and internal migration flows in contemporary China. The ongoing plan is the latest *hùkǒu* reform implemented by the government, aiming at abolishing the division between rural and urban citizenship, ameliorating migrants and peasants living conditions and further developing urbanisation. In order to have a full understanding of the topic, in the first section of this chapter, I will describe the evolution of the *hùkǒu* system starting from the Deng Xiaoping era, focusing on the main events and regulations that have significantly shaped the system till nowadays. In the attempt of giving a clear picture of the topic, I decided to follow the chronological division proposed by researchers Rong Cui and Jeffrey H. Cohen.<sup>6</sup> According to these scholars, *hùkǒu* reforms can be divided into three periods: an initial period characterised by the loosening of migratory control in the name of economic growth (1979□ 1991), followed by a second period that have seen the opening and the decentralisation of the system (1992□ 2013). While in the loosening phase of *hùkǒu* the government has concentrated its efforts on revitalising medium and small size centers, the second round of reforms have seen big cities becoming the central target. Finally, the third period (2014□ 2020) includes *hùkǒu* contemporary reforms made in response of market liberalisation and shift in economic and political agenda in the last years. The following section will analyse the first two periods, while the third period will be object of discussion in the second paragraph of this chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> Young, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

### 3.1.1 1979 - 1991: Loosening of the *Hùkǒu* System

The unprecedented economic growth inaugurated by the reforms in 1978 had its success to the introduction of a new model based on foreign-investment, privatisation and supply side development. Together with economic growth, new socioeconomic forces were about to appear on the Chinese scene: attracted by new opportunities, millions of workers, especially rural workers, started moving to modern cities and industrialised centers. The increasing demand of labour in the cities led to an unprecedented wave of rural-urban migration, which urged the State to take action and regulate internal population flows.

In order to address the problem of uncontrolled migration, the State Council and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) introduced new laws and regulations amending the *hùkǒu* system.<sup>7</sup> The intent of the Chinese leadership was to adapt the old system to the contemporary needs of the State, mainly with the aim of accelerating economic development and maintaining social stability. According to researcher Jason Young, adjustments to the system have been introduced over the years to “address gaps that have emerged between *hùkǒu* policy and the enactment of the institution due to socioeconomic changes in the post-Mao era.”<sup>8</sup> With reference to the period from 1980s to the early 1990s, he identifies in the initial wave of labour migration the first gap between *hùkǒu* institution and reality in Deng’s China. Since the 1958 regulation had prohibited any form of unplanned migration and settlement, the government had no choice but to adapt old rules to the new socioeconomic environment, and they did it by issuing a series of regulations aimed at facilitating internal circulation and supporting citizens’ settlement outside their *hùkǒu* zone.

When the first migratory phenomena appeared in the early 1980s, there were actually no formal rules for non-urban residents with an agricultural *hùkǒu* living in urban areas and employed in the non-agricultural sector. For this reason, in the attempt to accommodate both the interests of urban employers and rural workers, in the autumn of 1984, the State Council issued a “Document on the Issue of Peasants settling Down in Cities”.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to this circular, peasants and their families engaged in non-

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<sup>7</sup> Young, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Cit. in Young, 2013. pp. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Wu, 2013.

agricultural activities finally had the possibility to move to towns and small cities, assuming they had sufficient money for business investment and family support.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Beijing encouraged local governments to welcome and sustain the integration of rural workers, and register them as part of non-agricultural population.<sup>11</sup> 1985 was a significant year in terms of the entity of proposed reforms aiming at facilitating peasants' access to the city. The "Provisional Regulations on the Management of Temporary Residents in the Urban Areas" authorised those who moved to the city with a legitimate business or for employment purposes to get a temporary urban resident permit (in Chinese *zànzhùzhèng*).<sup>12</sup> Unlike permanent *hùkǒu*, whose mechanism and functions has already been explained in the first chapter of this paper, the Chinese law required that people staying or living outside their *hùkǒu* area for more than three days, including tourists and foreigners, should all have applied for a temporary *hùkǒu*.<sup>13</sup> The provision called for the abolition of the rule that limited temporary residency to a maximum of three months; in fact, before 1985, after three months the resident permit would have automatically expired and temporary residents would have asked to return to their place of origin.<sup>14</sup> Today, once the three-month period has passed, one should apply for a temporary residential permit, which is indispensable to rent an apartment, work and even open a bank account. The temporary resident permit can be renovated every six or twelve months, but even after years, its owner has nothing but a temporary status, which can be compared to temporary visas for visitors in a foreign country. Moreover, it is important to underline that temporary *hùkǒu* cannot be changed into permanent *hùkǒu*, regardless how many years the worker has legally lived in the city of destination. Therefore, it is harder for temporary *hùkǒu* holders to find good jobs in the city since employees know that they will never

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to specify that the "*hùkǒu* with self-supplied food grain" category established by the 1984 regulation only applied to migrant workers moving to small towns and did not guarantee the *nóngzhūǎnfēi*. In fact, those who moved to towns under the regulation had not access to the welfare system of the place of destination, even if authorised by their own government.

<sup>11</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Permanent *hùkǒu* can be changed only by the competent authorities when permanent internal migration is about to occur. Chinese individuals can change their permanent *hùkǒu* after receiving a State-sector job assignment, in case of college enrollment, authorised recategorisation of rural residents as urban residents or to be reunited with their family members. The mechanisms at the basis of hukou transfer have been extensively explained in the third paragraph of chapter one.

<sup>14</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

obtain the local-residents status.<sup>15</sup> In September of the same year, the National People's Congress published the "Regulation on Resident Identity Card", which definitely guaranteed an higher degree of flexibility to the *hùkǒu* system: any citizen over the age of 16 could apply for an identity card, so that would have been easier for workers to find a job outside their county or region. In fact, rural-urban migration flows registered a sensible increased right after the regulation was promulgated and more than 6.5 million Chinese youth settled in the cities.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a little later, the MPS established that up to 0.02% of China's rural population would have obtained the transfer to a non-rural *hùkǒu* each year.<sup>17</sup>

The results of the first round of reforms, identified by Cui and Cohen as a period of "loosening" of the household registration system, spoke for themselves from the very beginning.<sup>18</sup> The authors reported that by the end of 1980s, around 30 million rural people had moved to large cities, where they established real "migrant workers zones" such as Zhejiang Village in Beijing. However, since its first steps, *hùkǒu* reform has been a breeding ground for corruption at the expense of rural citizens. In this regard, there were many examples of people selling false urban registration cards to peasants, giving rise to a real *hùkǒu* black market.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, it is important to note that the *hùkǒu* reforms discussed till now share the same rationale. According to Young, in the early years, the *hùkǒu* system went through a significant transformation without being abolished or replaced by an alternative system.<sup>20</sup> The reasons why the Chinese leadership decided to introduce new policies were mainly economic: even in a dually structured rural-urban society, population control techniques need to adapt to the new economic model and to provide space for labour market to develop. Another common feature of 1980s reforms is that they were centralised. The aforementioned regulations were directed to the entire Chinese population, and were supposed to be implemented throughout the country. In the following years, Beijing moved away from the centralised approach, in favour of

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<sup>15</sup> Wang, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Wu, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015

<sup>19</sup> By the end of 1993, 3 million peasants have been estimated to have bought a fake hukou, for a total amount of 25 billion yuan.

<sup>20</sup> Young, 2013.

a more localised one. As I will explain in the next paragraph, the Chinese government limited its actions to issuing general guidelines, leaving space to provincial and city governments to act locally.

### 3.1.2 1992 - 2014: Opening of the *hùkǒu* system

Before the 1990s, the State Council, together with central government entities had been in charge of issuing regulations and reforms of the *hùkǒu* system; rural migrant workers meeting the government criteria would have been allowed to permanently resettle in their city of destination. With reference to the role of the central government in amending the *hùkǒu* system, researchers like Ling Wu noticed that the Chinese registration system has undergone a process of decentralisation since the early 1990s.<sup>21</sup> From that time on, local governments have become increasingly responsible for the development of policies with respect to integration of migrants; they have been entitled to adapt the institutional guidelines provided from the central authorities to the local realities. Because of the greater freedom in managing *hùkǒu* policies, many regions and cities have seized the opportunity to do local experiments and some of them are worthy of mention. In this paragraph, I will talk about the most significant examples of *hùkǒu* experiments that interested several Chinese cities and municipalities up to 2010s.

#### 3.1.2.1 The end of *nóngzhuǎnfēi* and the opening of small towns

The definitive dismantlement of communes and the decentralisation of *hùkǒu* management have caused the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* to lose its symbolic and effective importance in *hùkǒu* migration. As I have already explained in chapter I, *nóngzhuǎnfēi* is the procedure that allows Chinese citizens to change their *hùkǒu* from agricultural to non-agricultural; historically, the practice of *hùkǒu* transfer required the approval of State authorities and was granted only to a lucky few. However, since the late 1990s, some local governments started to abolish the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* and to eliminate the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural status among local *hùkǒu* holders. According to a proposal drafted in 1993, the agricultural and non-agricultural duality

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<sup>21</sup> Wu, 2013.

would have been replaced by a single system based on permanent residence location. The new plan proposed the categorisation of *hùkǒu* into three directions: permanent *hùkǒu* (*chángzhù hùkǒu*), temporary *hùkǒu* (*zànzhù hùkǒu*) and visitor *hùkǒu* (*jìzhù hùkǒu*). Those holding the resident household registration, also known in Chinese as *jūmín hùkǒu*, in the same area are supposed to share the same rights and status. The point is that once eliminated the rural-urban distinction, the dividing line between local and non-local *hùkǒu* holders has become more obvious than before.<sup>22</sup> Local governments engaged in *nóngzhuǎnfēi* reforms had the power to stipulate their own entry conditions and annual quota which hence have become the regulatory mechanism at the basis of *hùkǒu* migration. First experiments have been registered in Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Hebei, Henan and Jiangsu, which abolished the old distinction within some of their towns and cities, and has extended to a total number of 11 provincial regions over 31.<sup>23</sup>

According to Chan and Buckingham, the abolition of *nóngzhuǎnfēi* has been characterised by two innovative aspects: the localization of *hùkǒu* management, which has excluded the central government by the formulation of a conversion quota, and more importantly, the removal of agricultural and non-agricultural classification.<sup>24</sup> What may seem like an effort towards citizens' equality and whose objectives have been to create a "nationally uniform *hùkǒu* system", has actually been defined as a mere cosmetic removal of the preexisting duality.<sup>25</sup> Fei-Ling Wang defined the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* abolition as a largely cosmetic and marginal reform, which did not bring any benefit to the majority of rural population. The reasons behind this assumption are many. First of all, the elimination of the historical distinction applies only to former local- *hùkǒu* holders, who do not see any change in their actual status or benefits, besides the nominal change. Moreover, former agricultural *hùkǒu* holders, who used to live in villages right outside and under the jurisdiction of expanding cities, have seen their land confiscated by local authorities in exchange for the new resident status. In the majority of cases, the loss of land rights, justified by urbanisation and

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<sup>22</sup> Chan, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Chan & Buckingham, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, 2010.

nationalisation of land, has been replaced by unfair compensation or even nothing.<sup>26</sup> What is even worse is that those peasants had no access to the social welfare system which had been granted exclusively to original permanent *hùkǒu* holders. In this regard, Wang notes that the most tangible consequence of *nóngzhuǎnfēi* abolition in many localities has been the increase of the “three-nos”, an expression that refers to people with no land, no job and no social welfare protection.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in recent years, many peasants have complained about unfair compensation and have claimed the ownership of their land and refused to give up their agricultural *hùkǒu* away to developers and local officials, but their request was never heard.<sup>28</sup> In the face of such injustice, it is obvious that the formal elimination of agricultural and non-agricultural duality in some Chinese cities did not have any impact in reducing rural-urban population divide or easing migrant workers settlement in urban areas. Those involved in the reforms have not seen their status improve nor their benefits increase, and this is why many scholars recognise the abolition of *nóngzhuǎnfēi* as a mere nominal restoration that have not made any difference in the life of the most disadvantaged.

Even though the *nóngzhuǎnfēi* reform has never been officially approved by the State Council, it has been source of inspiration for a number of *hùkǒu* policies both at national and provincial level. One notable example is the easing of *hùkǒu* transfer to small towns. Published by the Ministry of Public Security and the State Council, the “Pilot Scheme for Reform of the *Hùkǒu* System in Small Towns and Improving the Management of Rural *Hùkǒu* System” finally allowed rural workers to obtain permanent residential status in small towns, and therefore to resettle enjoy the same benefits of urban *hùkǒu* holders. In order to legally settle outside their registration area, migrant workers were required to own a property, have a stable income and to be resident in the city or town of destination for a certain number of years. According to Cui and Cohen, the policy was “a boom to peri-urban development” and by the end of 1990s, more than 500.000 rural citizens had definitely moved to almost 400 towns

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<sup>26</sup> Wang, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> In 2007, several Chinese provinces were a place for land riots, where self organised peasants protested to have their land back. However, Beijing intervention was minimum: local authorities’ land grabbing activities were restricted and peasant were given higher compensations for their land loss.

across China.<sup>29</sup> The following year, central authorities issued a general guideline allowing new residents' parents, children and spouse to obtain local *hùkǒu* provided that newcomers met the specific requirements of local governments. Moreover, a further directive eliminating the annual quota for *hùkǒu* transfer has given a push to urbanisation of small centers, since every citizen in possess of the aforementioned qualifications could automatically become a permanent local resident, without the previous limitations. It is important to notice that this phenomenon has also interested bigger centers, even though in a different way; in fact, those who wanted to settled to big cities, were required to meet higher entry standards.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.1.2.2 *Hukou* for talents and investments

Since the first attempts at decentralisation, city and regional governments have taken advantage of their new powers to attract more resources and develop local economy. By looking at the last 30 years, it is fair to say that one of the big changes made by this second wave of reforms has been the introduction of measures encouraging rural to urban migration of talented and rich people in the name of economic and social development. The last section of this paragraph aims at describing two of the most significant reforms of this kind: the “blue-stamped” *hùkǒu* policy and the *hùkǒu* point system.

In order to satisfy the growing demand for rural-urban migration and permanent settlement in the major cities, local authorities started to promote a transitional *hùkǒu* that would have allowed a selected group of people to permanently change their residential status. First appeared in 1992, the “blue-stamped” *hùkǒu* is so named because the seal validating this type of document was in blue instead of red or black, which were respectively used for permanent rural and urban hukou until the early 2000s.<sup>31</sup> The new kind of transitional *hùkǒu* worked the same as the local permanent *hùkǒu*, granting its holders equal rights and status as those of local citizens. “Blue-stamped” *hùkǒu* holders had the possibility of becoming permanent residents after a period of five years. But who had access to this new category? The “blue-

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<sup>29</sup> Cit. in Cui & Cohen, 2015. pp. 330.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

stamped” *hùkǒu* was granted to migrants who could afford to purchase a house in the city of destination or were particularly talented and skilled individuals, preferably with a high education level. The practice of “*hùkǒu* for talents and investments” has been gradually implemented in big cities and even Shanghai city government issued some “Provisional Regulations on Management of Blue Stamped residence Registration” in 1994, with the aim of facilitating residency requirements and movement of talented and wealthy people to the economic center.<sup>32</sup> Similar policies were adopted in Guangzhou until the turn of this century, where around 20,000 migrants received a “blue-stamped” *hùkǒu*; in this case, targeted groups were investors, property buyers, and government employees.<sup>33</sup> Researchers agree on the fact that the advantages brought by the new transitional *hùkǒu* were mainly visible in children education and business license application.

Generally speaking, it is pretty clear that local governments have taken advantage of the introduction of competitive *hùkǒu* transfer categories to attract human and monetary capital to their municipalities. As a result, blue chop *hùkǒu* has been a tool used by local governments to increase consumption and investments and hence economic growth in their area of responsibility. After the abandonment of “blue-stamped” *hùkǒu*, several governments have issued entry requirements along the lines of previous reforms. For example, in the early 2000s, Chinese citizens had access to Guangzhou local *hùkǒu* through four different channels. Besides the obtainment of a blue chop *hùkǒu*, local residents’ children and spouse could obtain permanent *hùkǒu*, assuming the latter satisfied basic entry requirements. Another way to become permanent residents of the city, was to pay a huge amount in income taxes for 3 years running. Last but not least, successful applicants were required to acquire skills and knowledge demanded by local employees; academicians and doctorate-degree holders who studied abroad enjoyed a great advantage compared to those graduated from college or Chinese universities.<sup>34</sup>

With the aim of rising from the financial crisis of 2008, many municipalities started to offer local *hùkǒu* through the purchase of a housing unit.<sup>35</sup> The “*hùkǒu* for

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<sup>32</sup> Cai & Cohen, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Wu, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, 2010.

investment” policy, in Chinese *gòufáng rùhù*, had been already implemented by few cities, but has reached its boom in more recent times. Major centers like Chongqing, Chengdu and Hangzhou have openly put local *hùkǒu* on sale for outsiders; buying an apartment in one of the designated cities would have allowed rural migrants to get a local *hùkǒu* and definitely settle in their working area. In an effort to revitalise real estate markets and attract major investments to mainly inland zones, governments sold over priced and empty apartment complexes to migrant workers. Wang reported that the tighter was the population control exercised over the urban area, the higher was the price official were asking for one single apartment. It follows that in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, buying a *hùkǒu* would have been more expensive, but at the same time, would have symbolised higher social prestige and quality of life. However, prohibitive prices and the ambiguity of those measures have given rise to criticisms among Chinese and overseas scholars. What has been justified by local officials as an attempt to stimulate domestic economy in times of crises, was simply a way for real estate developers to make profits over people’s savings, without any regard for environment and residents’ living standards. Some opponents have even labeled the “*hùkǒu* for investment” scheme as illegal, since it publicly sells *hùkǒu* also in cases in which the commercial practice has been categorically banned by the law.<sup>36</sup> It goes without saying that the commercialisation of *hùkǒu* system has led to numberless episodes of corruption and to the proliferation of black-market.

Another example worthy of note when talking about reforms in large centers is the institution of a point account system for *hùkǒu* registration that have been implemented in the last decade. More precisely, between 2010 and 2016, a total of 11 big China’s cities have experimented in this field.<sup>37</sup> A study by Zhang et al. reported that in 2017 more than 6,000 people obtained Guangzhou *hùkǒu*, while in 2018 Shenzhen allowed 10,000 migrants to become permanent urban residents. According to the study, each city has set their own eligibility criteria for individuals to register in the point system, which usually includes resident permit, social insurance, criminal record and stable employment.<sup>38</sup> For example, smaller cities like Qingdao ask

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Zhang et al., 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang et al., 2019.

applicants to have a residence permit for more than three years, which is a reasonable time if compared to those requested by megacities like Beijing. Beijing, for its part, has the highest requirements for insurance payment, which needs to be paid for 7 years in a row before becoming a criteria for *hùkǒu* qualification. It goes without saying that larger population means higher entry requirements and smaller entry quotas. However, by giving a general look at the data collected in the study, it is easy to see how many similarities there are between this scheme and those described above in this chapter. Young age, high educational attainment, stable job, property ownership, investment, level of innovation and entrepreneurship are eligibility criteria for all the cities that have joined the scheme, even if with some differences. Although the point account system seems to give migrant workers the hope for obtaining permanent citizenship in a more transparent way, in reality, the scheme mainly involves that section of population that is already placed at an advantage over the majority or China's rural migrant workers.

Generally speaking, the second wave of *hùkǒu* reforms had been an experimental period when, by delegating decisional and implementation powers to localities, the Chinese State had been able to adapt the household registration system to the current needs and goals of the nation. Decentralisation, central to the opening of *hùkǒu* system, served local authorities in adjusting policies and financial expenditures, but at the same time, it was a major responsibility for provinces and municipalities. Local governments were responsible for the distribution and implementation of welfare provisions in their area, and therefore, since larger population means higher expenditures, it was easier for them to exclude migrant workers from receiving equal social benefits by, for example, reducing entry quota or tightening application requirements.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, local governments have created diverse *hùkǒu* regulations depending on heterogeneous development models and socioeconomic conditions. At this point, it is possible to assume that decentralisation had encouraged the creation of a system where migrants had been subject to unequal treatment by localities and excluded by almost every reform plan. The experiments described in this section clearly show the limits of *hùkǒu* reform to this day: *hùkǒu* transfer had been

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<sup>39</sup> Wu, 2013.

granted to a selected group of wealthy investors, businesspeople and young talents who had the privilege of studying in the best schools. In the following paragraph, I will talk about the efforts of the current leadership to develop a more comprehensive reform of the household registration system: in 2014, China has launched a new urbanisation plan, which is the first national attempt to remove the limits described before.

### 3.2 China's National New-type Urbanisation Plan 2014-2020

The devolution of fiscal and administrative powers to local governments has been a common tendency in the management of China's *hùkǒu* system, which has undergone substantial changes over the past 40 years. Many cities started to open their doors to promising young men and women, investments and capital, while others have abolished the historical distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural residential status. According to researcher Kam Wing Chan, besides fiscal and administrative decentralisation, the Chinese leadership has also moved in another direction, in the attempt to improve the system.<sup>40</sup> By following closely the development of *hùkǒu* in the last decades, Chan identified a “human” trend adopted by the State under some circumstances. For example, starting from the late 1990s, central and local governments began to grant local *hùkǒu* to children, spouse and elderly parents of migrant workers who had been previously able to get permanent residence in the city. In more recent years the Chinese leadership has shown interest toward a humane approach to internal migration and hence has implemented further reforms aimed at making the lives of ordinary citizens. At this point, changes in the household registration system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should reduce institutional, social and economic barriers that still prevent rural residents from settling in cities; they should grant access to goods and services without distinction to rural and urban communities. Contemporary reforms, which have been identified by Cui and Cohen as the third period of reforms, should be designed to all China's migrants, and should not be limited to a selected group of people as in the past.<sup>41</sup> There is growing evidence that limitations imposed by the *hùkǒu* system have given rise to the polarisation of Chinese

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<sup>40</sup> Chan, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Cui & Cohen, 2015.

society and the increasing presence of an army of rural workers without citizenship rights in the cities, which inevitably led to social unrest and uncomplete urbanisation.

In response to scholars' criticisms and public discontent, in 2013 the Chinese authorities started to promote the idea of a "new-type" urbanisation, centered on humans instead of buildings and investments. The third Plenum in the November of the same year has recognised in the country's rural-urban social structure the major obstacle to social development and hence economic growth.<sup>42</sup> With the promise of definitely eradicating the historical divide between the city and the countryside and guaranteeing equal citizenship rights to the entire country's population, China launched its first urbanisation plan. In March 2014, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council jointly published "China's New-type Urbanisation Plan, 2014-2020".<sup>43</sup> In the attempt of addressing social inequalities and establishing a "people-oriented standardised *hùkǒu* system by 2020 that will support the movement of rural, agricultural workers and peasants", the national plan first target was to grant urban *hùkǒu* to 100 million rural residents.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the plan aimed at urbanising 60% of China's entire population by encouraging rural residents to settle in small and medium size cities. Many scholars and spectators have seen in the government's commitment to the new urbanisation strategy the beginning of the dismantlement of the decades-long *hùkǒu* system, since the leadership itself has started to recognise in the old regime an obstacle to the future development of the country.<sup>45</sup> Although the success of the plan depends mainly on the outcome of the ongoing *hùkǒu* reforms, many are the goals and the reasons pushing the government to embark on a new path.

In this paragraph, I will provide a detailed description of the new urbanisation plan, analysing its key policies and goals. In order to understand the main drivers and the circumstances behind the reforms, the first section of the paragraph will draw a general picture of China's urbanisation peculiarities and mechanisms, with a focus on the land discourse in the last decades.

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<sup>42</sup> Chan, 2014 (a).

<sup>43</sup> Chen et al., 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Cit. in Cui & Cohen, 2015. pp. 332.

<sup>45</sup> Chen et al., 2019.

### 3.2.1 Background to the plan: land-centered urbanisation and social unrest

Since its early years, the PRC has followed an exceptional path to urbanisation. Generally speaking, the process of urbanisation implies the gradual transformation of a given society from rural to urban and the proliferation of modern cities inhabited by former peasants. However, as I have already explained in the first chapter of this paper, Chinese urbanisation was never completed mainly because of the *hùjī* system, and this has led to significant imbalances in the harmonic development of population, resources and environment. Although this “incomplete urbanisation” has saved the country from many of the common pitfalls characterising urban expansion in underdeveloped nations, such as the proliferation of slums, poor urban services and widespread poverty, it has been criticised on several fronts.<sup>46</sup> In this regard, Wang et al. identified three major problems characterising China’s urbanisation model: the household registration system, land-centered urbanisation and imbalance in spatial distribution of urbanisation itself.<sup>47</sup>

First of all, China’s underurbanisation owes its nature to the *hùkǒu* system, which have limited residence transfers and city settlements over the last decades. Restrictions on *hùkǒu* transfer, even if with few exceptions, have led to a process of urbanization without citizenisation, at the expense of rural migrant workers who do not see their legal and civil rights recognised. Looking at urbanisation in its traditional sense, data show that China has rapidly developed from an agricultural country inhabited only for 18% by urban citizens in the Maoist era to an industrialised economy, where 60% of people lives in the cities.<sup>48</sup> During the same period, towns and cities have been multiplying: in 1978 there were no cities with a population over 5 million, while today more than 300 cities have a population over 10 million. Such big figures are a clear demonstration of urban development, which has even surpassed economic growth in the last ten years.<sup>49</sup> However, these data refers to China’s *de facto* urban population, which includes both temporary and permanent city residents; in fact, while

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<sup>46</sup> Cit. in Chan, 2009. pp. 209.

<sup>47</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Chan, 2014 (a).

<sup>49</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

*de facto* population has already reached 53% in 2014, *de jure* population was only about 35%.<sup>50</sup>

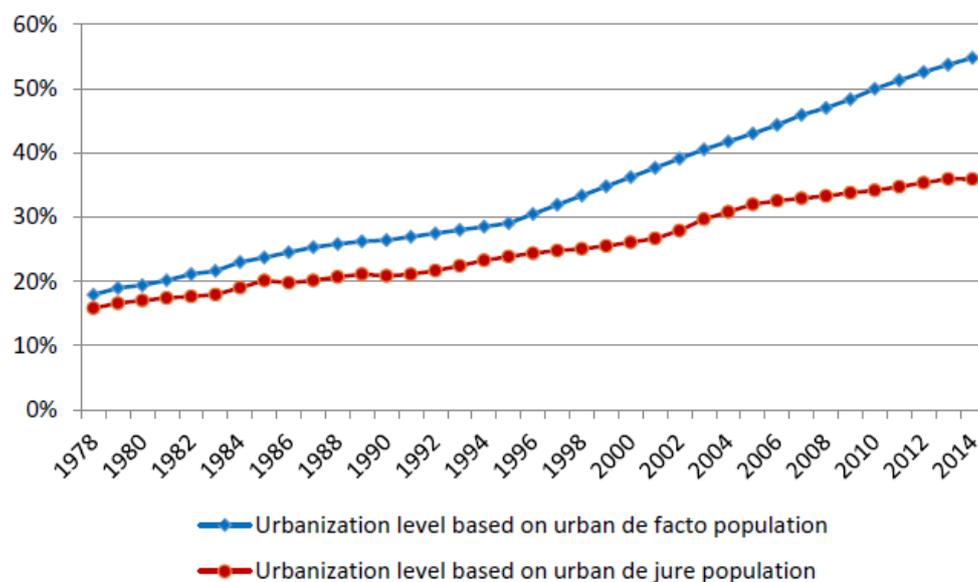


Figure 1: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2014).

Looking at the figure above, it is interesting to notice how the widening gap between the red and the blue lines corresponds to the period of China’s highest economic growth. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that in the same year the number of migrants with no urban rights reached 245 million, meaning that 18% of national population was excluded from the social service system and was most likely suffering discrimination.<sup>51</sup> It is simply unacceptable that the second largest economy in the world does not take care of the majority of its working force; in a country where maintaining sustainable economic growth and social stability are major priorities for the current leadership, migrants should be considered a valuable asset.

Another issue with China’s urbanisation process is the imbalanced relationship between the speed of urbanisation and the actual growth of urban population. According to Wang et al., in the period going from 2000 and 2011, new urban centers have grown by almost 77%, while urban residents have registered an increase of 50%

<sup>50</sup> Chan, 2014 (a).

<sup>51</sup> National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014.

instead.<sup>52</sup> By looking at the graph below, it is possible to see how the land dedicated to urban construction has expanded from 7,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the early 1990s to more than 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> in 2011; the pink line, which represents the growth rate of urban population, is far below the blue line that symbolises city expansion.<sup>53</sup>

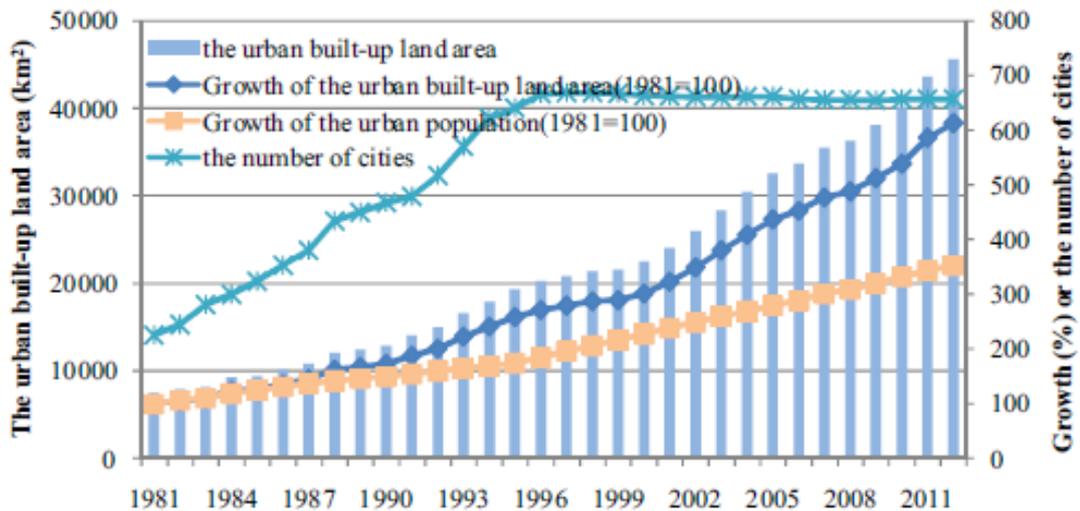


Figura 2: Chen et al., (2016), *Challenges and the way forward in China's net-type urbanisation. Land Use Policy*, pp. 335.

The statistics are clear: China's economic boom has been accompanied by the exponential growth of cities and towns, although people urbanisation has not kept pace with urban development and construction industry.

Against this background the following questions arise: what are the mechanisms behind China's rapid urbanisation and what are the consequences of this peculiar phenomenon? One of the distinguishing features of Chinese urbanisation is the land conversion from agricultural use to non-agricultural use. Since the onset of economic reforms, the government has started to allow land transfer for construction purposes in order to boost GDP growth; as a consequence, many cultivated fields have gradually been replaced by factories, highways and skyscrapers, without taking into account the long-term consequences that the acceleration of urbanisation would have had on both urban and rural realities.<sup>54</sup> If on one side urbanisation of people was

<sup>52</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Chen et al., 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Liu et al., 2014.

struggling to keep up with urbanisation of places, on the other side land conversion has induced serious problems in the agricultural sector, such as loss, abandonment and pollution of arable land and the increase of landless peasants. For the reasons listed above, the excessive expansion of urban land has resulted in several episodes of low efficient use of natural resources. For example, Liu et al. reported that starting from the early 1990s, a large amount of farmland has been converted into special zones, which today account for almost 1,500 national and provincial area of 6 km<sup>2</sup> each; however, the writers added that more than 30% of total urban land has been abandoned and left unused due to scarce demand.<sup>55</sup> With regard to abandoned urban land, worthy of mention is the growing phenomenon of “ghost cities”, which are the result of galloping housing supply and infrastructural projects that have never met proper demand.<sup>56</sup> Besides arable land decrease, inevitable outcome of fast urbanisation and land conversion for non-agricultural purposes is the loss of property and property rights by former inhabitants. Once rural land has been converted into non-agricultural, peasants cannot claim their management rights anymore, since land rights have already shifted from collective owned to state owned.<sup>57</sup> Direct consequence of land conversion is what has been defined by researchers Chen et al. as *in situ* urbanisation, where villagers become urban residents without moving to the city.<sup>58</sup> However, although they should be entitled to the same benefits of their urban counterparts, in most cases landless peasants fail to obtain an urban *hùkǒu* and find themselves with no land, no rights and, worst of all, no income. Over the last 20 years, tens of millions of farmers have lost their land; in many cases, this have resulted in land disputes and popular resistance.

Last but not least, commentators have pointed out the imbalance between the spatial distribution and the scale of urbanisation. Since constructors have been incentivised through favourable policies to invest higher amounts of money in coastal areas and special economic zones, it is obvious that megacities are not uniformly

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> The most famous case of China’s “ghost town” is Ordos, a wealthy coal-mining city in Inner Mongolia; originally designed for one million people, the district is now inhabited by empty office towers, theatres and sport fields.

<sup>57</sup> China’s land right system has been explained in the third paragraph of the first chapter of this paper.

<sup>58</sup> Chen et al., 2017.

distributed all over the country. According to Chen et al., land-centered urbanisation has favoured the emergence of urban agglomerations, such as the three famous agglomerates Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, The Yangtze Delta and the Pearl River Delta.<sup>59</sup> Studies have revealed that air and water pollution levels have reached their peak in correspondence of these high-concentration areas. It is clear that together with land conversion, population agglomeration has led to the modification or disappearance of several natural environments and poses a threat to food security and citizens' health. China's pollution problems have not only an impact on its people and its natural environment, but are now topic of global concern and have irreversibly affected the country's international image.

In light of the main issues afflicting China's rapid urbanisation, the current leadership has decided for a radical change of course. With the aim of repairing the damages caused by the urban sprawl of the last decades, the central authorities are committed to abandon the old land-centered urbanisation model, in favour of a new, human-centered development scheme, shifting their attention to problematics closer to its population's heart.

### 3.2.2 From land-centered to human-centered urbanisation: NNUP's key policies and goals

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, China's National Development and Reform Commission released the "National New-type Urbanisation Plan", hereinafter referred to as NNUP, which opened up the path towards a new way of urbanisation for Chinese people and the country's development.<sup>60</sup> The original document consists of 31 chapters and its content goes beyond the physical and construction aspects that have characterised previous development schemes. As the country's first official plan on urbanisation, NNUP has the goal of proposing an alternative model of urban development that hopefully can make amends for past mistakes. Since the earliest days of reform, Chinese authorities have published the plan main policies and objectives by designing specific priority areas that will be discussed below.

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<sup>59</sup> Chen et al., 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Chan, 2014 (a).

According to Chen et al., the NNUP testifies to the desire of the government to create a new path for the country's urbanisation.<sup>61</sup> The writers agree on the fact that the core of the national plan is the shift from the old model of land-centered urbanisation to a more positive people-oriented urbanisation. Since the human dimension is at the center of the entire idea of revitalising the country, it follows that the State's primary mission these days is to find a solution to the long-standing issue of rural migrant workers and their right to the city. With regard to the main goals and policies of the plan, by analysing the literature on the topic, it is possible to identify four macro areas covering a variety of aspects, which will be presented as follows: human-centered urbanisation, land management and residential construction, sustainable development and the promotion of regional balance between urbanisation spatial distribution and scale structure. I will divide this part into two sections for convenience.

#### 3.2.2.1 Human-centered urbanisation and a new approach to land management

First, China's urbanisation plan advocates the reduction of the gap between *de jure* and *the facto* urban population. Since the discrepancy between agricultural and non-agricultural residents in the cities is a direct result of China's household registration system, the new human-centered approach to urbanisation aims at making adjustments at the *hùkǒu* system. Even before the official implementation of the NNUP, the central government had issued three documents covering the *hùkǒu* system; while the first and the second directives were of more general nature and were closely modelled on previous changes in the model, the third document had a decisive role in the overall plan.<sup>62</sup> The document in question was a notice for the promotion of 100 million non-agricultural *hùkǒu* holders to permanently settle in urban areas. On a practical level, the citizenization of 100 million peasant-workers meant that the country was planning to extend the coverage of urban and social benefits to another 100 million people in around 6 years.

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<sup>61</sup> Chen et al., 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Chen et al., 2018.

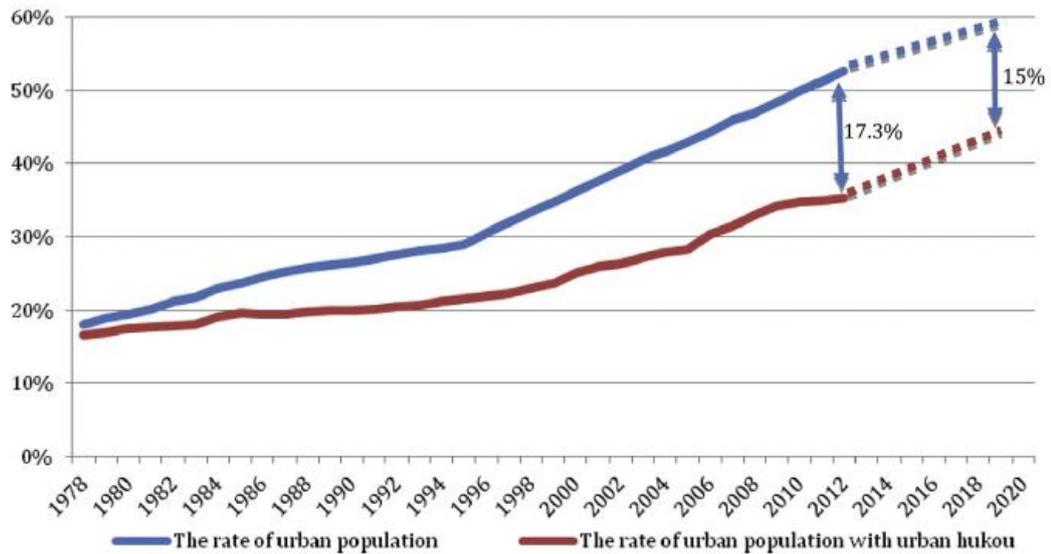


Figure 3: National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2016).

By the end of 2020, China hoped for the urbanisation of 60% of its total population, plus the significant increase of the number of its urban residents. As I already said in the previous paragraph, the gap between *de facto* and *de jure* population has always been a major cause of social unrest and underdevelopment in China's megacities; the NNUP wanted to reduce this gap by rising urban-*hùkǒu* population from the previous 35%. By looking to the plan details, researcher Kam Wing Chan noticed that the first who would benefit from the government's action would be college-students, skilled workers and long term migrants.<sup>63</sup> In the attempt to implement a more people-oriented urban strategy, local governments had to further promote the extension of basic public rights to towns and cities residents, whether their *hùkǒu* is rural or urban. For the first time, education, healthcare and housing incentives would have covered China's *de facto* urban population; for example, compulsory education for migrant children, which is one of the major obstacles to integration and settlement in the cities by rural workers, was supposed to cover more than 99% of total population. Together with education, vocational training, healthcare and retirement insurance would have been granted to almost the totality of people living in cities and towns. Concerning housing incentives, the plan set out to double its policy target by

<sup>63</sup> Chan, 2014. (a).

2020, although migrants' eligibility criteria for social housing have not been mentioned.

The shift from land-centered to people-centered urbanisation implies, of necessity, higher awareness on natural resources by the government, investors and citizens themselves. As it has been previously explained, the past 30 years have seen the conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural, which has resulted in uncontrolled and unjustified overbuilding in most of the cases. In order to slow the pace of an urbanisation that seemed to be out of control, the NNUP called for a reform of land management.<sup>64</sup> What pushed the leadership to make such statement was the fact that the current amount of farmland available at that time had almost reached 120 million hectares, a "red line" below which food security cannot be guaranteed anymore. The reform proposal was committed to ensuring a more efficient use of rural land, by further enhancing farmers' property rights, giving peasants higher compensations for their plots, and first of all, by introducing alternative mechanisms of land conversion and market-driven prices for urban land allocation. Moreover, the NNUP provided for the market-based pricing of industrial land, of which a big portion would have been transformed into urban land for commercial and residential use, with the purpose of spurring consumption mainly in small and inland centers. With this regard, Chinese government has approved the construction of 12 national districts since the beginning of the plan, including the west coast of Qingdao, Jinpu in Dalian and Tianfu in the Sichuan province.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, the new reform proposed to reduce land appropriation for non-public welfare, with the hope of further strengthening the arable land protection system.<sup>66</sup>

Among the initiatives undertaken by the current leadership with regard to land management, the one concerning rural land market is definitely the most remarkable. The NNUP promised to grant equal market rights and prices for both rural and urban land; in this way, rural collectively-owned land can be sold and leased on the market

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<sup>64</sup> Griffith & Schiavone, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> China's media reported that almost 4,000 new districts have been built in cities, with the aim of housing 3.4 billion people in the coming years. In order to promote people urbanisation, the government has undertaken multiple projects in the building sector: the initiative previewed the construction of new housing that would have replaced shantytown houses in rural areas, and the introduction of incentives in the rental housing markets.

<sup>66</sup> Griffith & Schiavone, 2016.

with the same rights and at the same prices of State-owned urban land. Consequently, on one side, peasants would finally be able to occupy, use and profit from contracted land, on the other side to mortgage, guarantee and transfer their property.

### 3.2.2.2 Sustainable development and the return of small towns

With the aim of achieving sustainable urbanisation, the NNUP has proposed the development of both intra-city and inter-city networks. In order to improve urban citizens' living and working conditions, the plan has allocated funds to urban infrastructures: in cities with a population of over one million people, public transportation would have to be improved to reduce traffic congestion, as it represents an increasingly serious problem in China's today megacities.<sup>67</sup> With this section on urban infrastructure, the plan provided for the increase in urban public water up to 90% and the total coverage of urban community service facilities up to 100%. To further incentivise sustainable urbanisation, the government has promoted the coordination among different cities and the creation of an intra-city network that could limit traffic congestions and pollution. With this regard, it is worth mentioning the emphasis placed by the new plan on environmental protection and the enforcement of existing environmental regulations.

The concept of sustainable development can also be considered a possible answer to the huge imbalance between urbanised land and urbanised people affecting Chinese society, whose consequences have already been listed above. In order to alleviate this problem, the NNUP has been committed to ensuring the increase of population density in urban area; so, in the attempt to limit the damages coming from misuse of urban land, the plan stated that the new urban construction land would have not to exceed 100 m<sup>2</sup> per person.<sup>68</sup>

Decades of imbalanced urban development driven by the concentration of major investments in special economic zones and in strategic areas have inevitably led to internal disparities in contemporary China. Besides the huge rural-urban income gap, which is object of discussion in the first chapter of this work, it is common knowledge that eastern regions are a way more developed than the center and the west of China.

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<sup>67</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Chen et al., 2016.

To meet the challenges brought about the mass concentration of rural migrants into big industrial centers, the government is trying to redirect farmers to small and medium-sized cities.<sup>69</sup> Over the last years, this has been one of the main point on the State agenda and can be considered the tracking mechanism of the overall project of new urbanisation and revitalisation of the country. In November 2014, central authorities updated the old classification of Chinese cities according to their population size; the current categorisation can be found in the table below.

**Table 2**  
The category of city size in China.

| City size         | The number of urban resident population                               |
|-------------------|---|
| Small City        | I type Between 200 and 500 thousand<br>II type Less than 200 thousand |
| Middle-sized City | Between 500 and 1000 thousand   |
| Big City          | I type Between 2 and 5 million<br>II type Between 1 and 3 million     |
| Mega City         | Between 5 and 10 million  |
| Super Mega City   | More than 10 million  |

Source: "Notice on adjusting the category of city size" published by the state council of PRC in Nov. 20, 2014.

Figure 4: Wang et al., (2015). The new urbanization policy in China: Which way forward? Habitat International.

In order to attract new urban residents to small and middle-sized centers and less developed regions, the NNUP issued a differential urban *hùkǒu* registration system for each city that falls within a specific category. At this point, it is clear how *hùkǒu* reform would play a key role in the human-centered urbanisation of the country. An official decree issued by the State Council in 2015 has made public the eligibility criteria for urban *hùkǒu* in small, medium and large cities.<sup>70</sup> In megacities with over 10 million population such as Beijing, stable employment and residence, participation in urban social insurance for 7 years and other severe restrictions are fundamental requirements for eligibility. Large cities with a population between 5 and 10 million have established entry requirements similar to those of megacities, although less

<sup>69</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Zhonghua Renmin Rongheguo Guowuyuanling 中华人民共和国国务院令, 2015.

severe. Moving one's attention towards medium cities with a de facto population between 1 million and 500,000, entry requirements are lowered and becoming a local resident becomes easier. Concerning smaller urban centers with less than 500,000 population, having a legal and stable job in an urban district, or being a resident town of a county government are sufficient requirements to obtain permanent local residence. If until recently purchasing a house was a requirement for farmers to obtain urban residence status, the shift in national policy has made it easier for them to receive urban *hùkǒu* by simply renting a house in small and medium size cities. On the other hand, megacities are tightening migration controls; the most representative example is the municipality of Beijing, which in 2017 has introduced a points-based residence registration system based on previous models.<sup>71</sup> According to the current Beijing point system, whose mechanism has already been explained in the first chapter of this paragraph, applicants can get 15 points for a bachelor's degree, 26 for masters' degree and 37 for a doctorate. By establishing a rigid entry hierarchy, China's first tier cities are successfully excluding the majority of the population. Given this, it is clear that the NNUP objective is to close the access to megacities and large cities and at the same time to open the doors of smaller urban centers, in order to encourage the migration flow in a certain direction.

### 3.2.3 Migration for consumption: what is behind the NNUP

History teaches that in times of difficulty a country must find one's own way out, and in doing this, it should use every means available. In the case of China, *hùkǒu* reform has proved to be a valid tool at the service of the CCP and the State; by keeping the household registration system but at the same time adapting it to the contemporary scenario, the leadership has been able to guarantee social stability and the development of a successful economic model based on export and cheap labour over the last three decades. With the advent of new economic balance, China needs to readapt its institutional system and the NNUP and the latest *hùkǒu* adjustments are the best tools in its own hands.

Starting from 2012, China has experienced a substantial economic slowdown, the first one of this magnitude since the reforms and opening-up. Although, compared

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<sup>71</sup> Chen, 2016.

to other super-powers, the country's economy has reacted relatively positively to the recent financial crisis, China's GDP growth rate has fallen from more than 14% in 2007 to less than 7% last year.<sup>72</sup> The slowdown of the Chinese economy has been topic of debate and concern among economists, both at home and overseas; according to scholars, the country is now experiencing a delicate stage in which the decreasing export volume and the rise in wages could eventually lead to the risk for loss of competitiveness in international markets and, therefore, in the domestic arena. Moreover, the emergence of countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh as low-cost manufacturers, has posed a real threat to China. In order to avoid the "middle income trap", the Chinese government has chosen to stimulate internal consumptions by creating new internal markets.<sup>73</sup> The creation of new internal markets is at the center of new urbanisation, which is seen by the leadership as one of the fundamental paths to achieve sustained economic growth. The fact that people-centered urbanisation plays a demand-side role in stimulating national growth has been clear to the leadership even before the official launch of reforms. With regard to the implementation of new urbanisation, the Premier Li Keqiang said: "We will develop the regional small and medium cities, and enable more and more rural farmers to find jobs nearby (...) once we break through this barrier, China will successfully rise again like a phoenix and shine brightly."<sup>74</sup> The Chinese Premier saw in small cities and towns and in the coordination between rural and urban development the potential for future domestic consumption and the rise of household income. Data show that in 2010, urban residents' consumption was 3.6 times higher than rural residents, with an average annual consumption of 15,900 yuan for urban residents against only 4,455 yuan for rural ones.<sup>75</sup> Based on those figures, the government's hope was to transform rural farmers into urban workers and hence increase per-person consumption by about 10,000 yuan. By keeping the annual urbanisation growth around 1%, so that more than 10,000 peasants would have been integrated into the cities, total consumption was

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<sup>72</sup> Fang et al., 2016.

<sup>73</sup> This can be better summarised by the concept of the "middle income trap", a theoretical economic development situation, where a country's income grows up to a certain level and then stops. This usually happens when a developing country loses its competitive advantage in export and is not able to find a new process or a new market to maintain export growth.

<sup>74</sup> Li Keqiang, 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

expected to grow more than 100 billion yuan every year, and consequently attract investments.

The latest *hùkǒu* reforms were intended to let migrant rural workers and peasants to settle in small and medium-size cities, which would have offered easier access to urban residence and therefore the entitlement of State social services. Commentators noticed that at the time when migrants will not worry about paying extra fees for their children education in the city or for private healthcare, they would use those money to invest in their business and eventually contribute to the economic development of their town. Besides the economic contribution that new urban dwellers can give to China's domestic consumption, there is no doubt that by becoming full-fledged urban residents, millions of citizens would be able to overcome all those institutional and social barrier that had seemed insurmountable before.

China's NNUP was launched with the aim of creating an innovative economy through the urbanisation of a significant share of the floating population. When looking at the new human-urbanisation, political scientist John R. Taylor talks about a Chinese "urban dream".<sup>76</sup> The creation of new sources of internal consumption and domestic growth will hopefully lead to the expansion of the urban middle class and eventually narrow the wealth gap that still divides the city from the countryside in contemporary China.

### 3.3 Reactions to the NNUP and the future of *hùkǒu* system

China's new urbanisation is thought to be the biggest human-resettlement experiment in contemporary history. Since the beginning of economic reforms, urbanisation rate has been growing in leaps and bounds, and has moved from 17% in 1978 to 59% in 2018.<sup>77</sup> Thanks to the new urbanisation plan, the government is trying to promote the citizenization of its people by lowering requirements to enter China's middle and medium-size cities. By becoming fully-edged urban citizens, students and migrant workers with an agricultural *hùkǒu* could finally make a point to the instability that has characterised their migratory experience for ages. When looking at the future of the country's urbanisation, many scholars are confident that the NNUP will have a

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<sup>76</sup> Taylor, 2015.

<sup>77</sup> *The World Bank*, 2018.

positive impact on the lives of common citizens. In this regard, Chen et al. identified four aspects to the spirit of the new type urbanisation, which they described as follows: humanism, inclusivism, harmonism and sustainability.<sup>78</sup>

- Humanism is a crucial aspect in the development of urbanisation. Over the past years, economic growth has relied heavily upon cheap labour and investments in construction, without any regard for citizens' welfare. Today, recent *hùkǒu* reforms and the promotion of people-oriented public services are trying to create a fairer system. Humanism refers to accessible education and healthcare, more employment services, housing guarantees, better compensation for land loss and respect for peasants' rights.
- Inclusivism means more benefits for everybody. Mass rural-urban migration has inevitably resulted in family divisions and in the exacerbation of social differences inside the same country. The NNUP aims at taking care of those who were left behind in the countryside by gradually including them into modern cities; the integration of the most vulnerable groups both in the city and the countryside will lead to the growth of a prosperous society.
- Sustainability refers to the idea of development in harmony with nature and people. China needs to make amend to the wild urbanisation and uncontrolled rural land transformation for non-agricultural use. The country needs to reckon with serious natural and social emergencies, such as pollution of soil, air and water and resources shortages.
- Harmonism stands for the coordination of all the aspects of new urbanisation and is indispensable for the success of the plan. Economy, land, ecology and society should work together to ensure a better future for China's population, especially for peasant workers.

The last paragraph of this paper intends to analyse future perspectives of the new urbanisation and their possible implications in China's internal migration patterns. After the description of the challenges posed by the NNUP, I will provide some alternative measures to the plan and future adjustments of the *hùkǒu* system, which can offer interesting insights for further research on the topic.

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<sup>78</sup> Chen et al., 2019.

### 3.3.1 An assessment to the National-New urbanisation Plan: achievements and challenges

On March 2014, China's central government released its "National-New urbanisation Plan", which promised to grant urban citizenship to long-term temporary residents and rural migrant workers by 2020. It has now been 5 years from that promise, and the results are starting to be seen. Although Chinese authorities and commentators have praised the work of central and local governments and their commitment in the new urbanisation plan, it cannot be denied that the implementation of the new plan is a challenging task on multiple fronts. I will start by making a general assessment about of the NNUP up to nowadays; in the second part of this section I will explain the main challenges faced by the new human-centered urbanisation.

In one of their works, Chen et al. shared a positive approach to the results of the plan on China's population and economic development; by analysing the progress which have been promoted vigorously by regions and State departments until 2018, the writers listed a series of positive figures that testify the efforts of the country in the past few years.<sup>79</sup> After recognising the damaging effects of semi-urbanisation and their impact on rural population, the government has paid greater attention to the citizenisation of its peasants. In fact, several cities have relaxed their entry restrictions and implemented their residential permit system, by ensuring basic social coverage to more and more rural residents: in 2015, on a total of 277.47 million rural migrant workers, 55.85 million had access to pension, 51.66 million to healthcare, 42.19 and 74.89 million had respectively received unemployment and work injury insurance.<sup>80</sup> According to the study, the National Development and Reform Commission has approved the establishment of experimental zones, where the construction of new-type urbanisation has been successfully carried out so far. At present, these pilot areas cover 2 provinces and more than 200 between cities and towns; through the implementation of a chain of command that goes from the central to local governments, new pilot areas have been able to carry out many aspects of the NNUP and hence become the first models for change. Experimental zones are designated areas characterised by relaxed

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<sup>79</sup> Chen et al., 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

conditions for settlement and wider social service coverage, the establishment of a real financing mechanism for urbanisation, higher investments rates and the redevelopment of low efficiency urban land. Another important achievement for the NNUP is the urban growth in Central and Western China: while in the first 2000s the urbanisation rates were respectively 36% and 34%, right after the implementation of the plan they rose up to 49% and 47%.

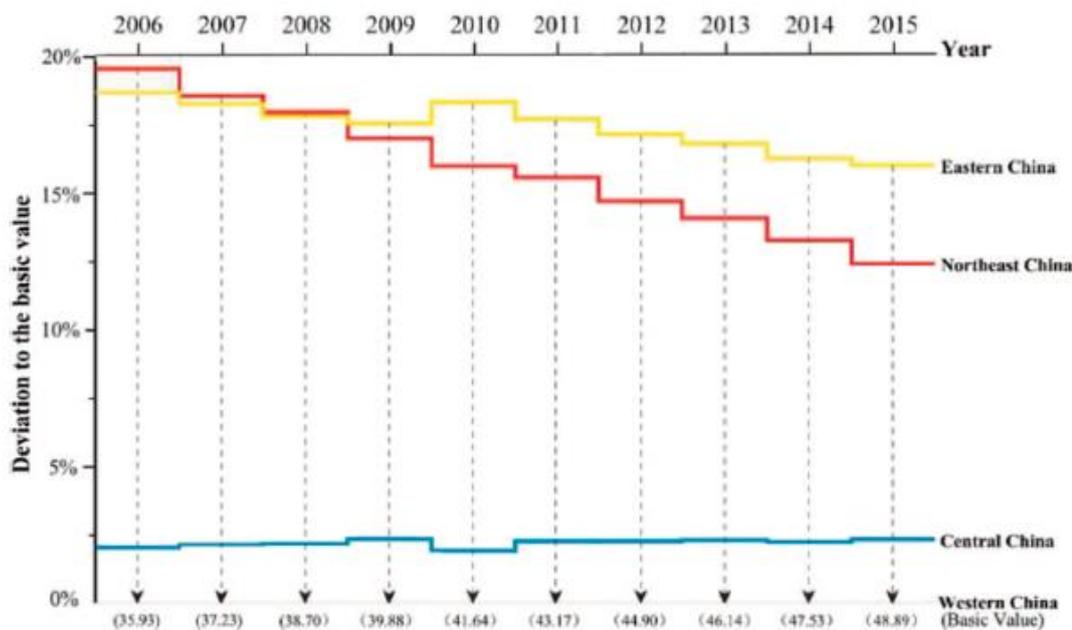


Figure 5: Chan et al., (2019). *China's urbanization 2020: a new blueprint and direction. Eurasian Geography and Economics, 55(1), 1-9. (a). pp. 9*

Although these data are evidence of the government's genuine commitment, the complete realisation of the new human-centered urbanisation is threatened on several fronts. With regard to the ongoing *hùkǒu* reform, Chinese and overseas scholars are skeptical about its effective implementation and have expressed their concerns about practical aspects closely related to *hùkǒu* transfer as well as complementary key policy areas.

In front of the ambitious plan of people urbanisation, many wonder if China would be able to bear the costs of this unprecedented transformation. The first question that arises here concerns rural-urban *hùkǒu* conversion: how much would it cost to grant urban citizenship to a typical migrant worker? In the years before the official release of the plan, estimates have calculated that each new urban resident would have

costed to the State around 100,000 yuan.<sup>81</sup> The amount planned was supposed to include compulsory education, medical care, pension and incident insurance, other social securities and additional housing costs. Local media have expressed their concern over the possibility of urbanising the entire floating population, which at that time accounted for 230 million people. It was clear that the country could have never been able to afford such expense all at once and that would have taken more time to give all rural migrants urban citizenship. Going more deeply into economic considerations, major source of resistance to *hùkǒu* reform are local governments, basically because they are primarily responsible for the allocation of social services. According to researcher Kam Wing Chan, local government do not possess a self-sustainable financial system that can satisfy both population growth and market economy.<sup>82</sup> In fact, enterprise taxes, debt finance and land sales are still the main sources of local revenues; moreover, in the majority of cases, local tax revenue cannot cover local expenditures, and hence it becomes almost impossible to extend social coverage to all urban residents. The ongoing *hùkǒu* reform aims at transforming agricultural land into non-agricultural land in a quicker and easier way. Even after the implementation of the NNUP, land finance still constitutes the main source of local income and the absence of an adequate tax system prevents cities and towns from focusing on sustainable urbanisation.<sup>83</sup> Although commentators have emphasised the urgency of a fiscal reform, the NNUP seems to ignore it.

At this point, I would like to open a parenthesis about the importance of land finance in local economies and how it connects to the new *hùkǒu* reform. The expression “land finance” refers to the mechanism according to which a local government leases the land in its possession to economic agents, who most of the times are construction and real estate companies or agribusiness companies.<sup>84</sup> The money coming from land leasing are used by local authorities to invest in local infrastructure and provide public services. “Selling” the land to construction or agricultural companies automatically implies the transformation of land from agricultural to non-

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<sup>81</sup> Chan, 2014. (b). The rough calculation is based on constant prices of the year 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Wang et al., 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Zhan, 2017.

agricultural and the consequent relocation of former peasants.<sup>85</sup> Generally speaking, local governments must invest in the designated land before setting it aside for lease; for example, if the leaser is a manufacturing company, infrastructure, plants, water and electricity systems should be provided in advance. It follows that, since land finance is a consistent source of local revenues, attracting potential “buyers” is in the interest of the government itself. This mechanism, which is at the basis of land-urbanisation, has been called by researcher Shaohua Zhan a “tripartite alliance”, where rural and urban enterprises work together with local governments to increase their revenues.<sup>86</sup> In order to reach their goals, especially in the last 10 years, the tripartite alliance has tried to move rural population away from farmland and the ongoing *hùkǒu* reform has offered them a way to accelerate the process. By moving peasants definitely to the city, constructors, agribusiness and local officials hope in the consolidation of the Chinese fragmented farmland, and therefore, are pushing for rural-urban *hùkǒu* transfers. At the same time, the ongoing *hùkǒu* reform aims at boosting the urban housing market by transforming former peasants into consumers. Given this, it is evident that regardless of the NNUP’s good intentions, China is still implementing a land-based mode accumulation and this poses a threat to people-centered urbanisation.

Besides the economic challenges, the differentiated registration system needs to obtain the favour of those who are the protagonists of human-centered urbanisation: rural peasants and migrant workers. Over the past decades, migrants have tried to integrate into cities, but they have repeatedly faced institutional, market and social exclusion; however, together with the abandonment of children and elderly parents, barriers to enter the city have not prevented migrants from moving. It is well known that the majority of migrants, especially the younger generation, mainly aspire to become urban citizens of megacities like Beijing and Shanghai, because of better job opportunities and social services, and they are ready to live in the city, even if not as local residents. On the other hand, when looking at smaller cities, migrant workers are reluctant to resettle and acquire urban *hùkǒu*. Although the NNUP has almost abolished the barriers to enter small towns, farmers seem less willing to move

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<sup>85</sup> I decided to put the words “selling” and “buyers” in quotations because there is no actual sell of lands, since the government remains the only owner of the land.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

permanently to a new place. The fact is that many of them have shown interest in working, living and even buying a house in the designated cities, but at the same time they are not willing to give up on their rural *hùkǒu*. The reason of their choice lies in the fact that in case of retirement or impossibility of obtaining a suitable job, rural migrants may always return to their village and live on their land. Mainly because of the lack of confidence in the government ability to provide for their future sustainment, many of them refuse to join the program and keep their original residence status. In this context, closing the access to big cities and opening the doors of smaller ones could be counter-productive and the government is likely to wait longer than expected to see results. According to Chen et al., local and central authorities should take more into consideration the role and the motivations of rural migrant workers in order to guarantee the implementation of the plan and the realisation of a human-centered urbanisation.<sup>87</sup>

Among the key policies launched by the government in 2014, the new *hùkǒu* reform is essential to the realisation of people-centered urbanisation, but it is definitely the most challenging to implement. If rural peasants and migrant workers do not receive urban *hùkǒu* and all the benefits that it entails, if the government does not provide affordable housing and real employment opportunities, then it will be impossible to convince people to leave their rural benefits and move to the towns. Moreover, Chinese planners should be cautious and keep their promises, otherwise new urban citizens will find themselves with no job, no social assistance and what is worse, no land to return to. Given this, solving the challenges posed to the ongoing and even future *hùkǒu* reforms is crucial to the success of the plan and more generally to China's economic growth and stability.

### 3.3.2 What's after NNUP: the future of *hùkǒu* reform

By analysing the situation described above, many commentators have argued that the ongoing *hùkǒu* reform does not take into consideration the actual patterns of population migration.<sup>88</sup> Historically, Chinese people have tended to move from small agricultural areas towards big urban centers because of the huge disparity in job and

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<sup>87</sup> Chen et al., 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Chen, 2017.

life opportunities that has contributed to the consolidation of rural-urban divide. This contemporary divide, in turn, has channeled population flow primarily in one direction, and it seems that this tendency has remained unchanged to date. Although the NNUP, whose aim is to steer the migration flow to smaller centers, has given the first results, big cities are still the main target for the majority of Chinese migrants. According to Chen et al., it is unlikely that this tendency will be reversed, unless central and local governments will work together to improve the quality of residents life.<sup>89</sup> In their work, the authors propose a series of policy adjustments that if implemented, could help China to pursuit human-centered urbanisation.

The first step in attracting potential consumers to small and medium-sized cities would be to guarantee a more balanced resource distribution between towns and megacities. As it has extensively been explained in previous chapters, China has allocated monetary, natural and human resources mainly to designated urban areas, which have become the center of the national development strategy. Under this policy of “urban bias”, Chinese policy makers have always believed that by focusing on the modernisation of industrial sector and the rapid construction of megacities, the development of agriculture, rural areas and secondary urban reality would all come together.<sup>90</sup> What the government needs to understand is that it should support the ongoing transformation of the country by investing more in those areas and sectors that have come second until today. It is obvious that metropolis are a way more attractive since local residents can have access to the best hospitals, the best schools, subsidised housing and even easier admission to college; besides, as a result of major investments and State resources allocations, these places may appear as full of job and life opportunities to those who come from smaller realities. Given this, the authors suggest that in order to reduce the current polarisation, the government should redirect investments to second and third-tier cities and hence foster local employment; this may lead, on the long run, to the change in migration flow and the increase in small and middle-sized population centers.<sup>91</sup> Employment does not only provide jobs, but also stability, which combined with urban social benefits would be a competitive advantage

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<sup>89</sup> Chen et al., 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Chen et al., 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Chen et al., 2017.

for the NNUP targets. With reference to China's social welfare system and its influence in migrants' settlement decisions, researcher Kam Wing Chan looks deeper into the nature of social inequalities and proposes the establishment of a unified urban and rural social system.<sup>92</sup> According to Chan's revolutionary vision, only by granting equal access to social goods and benefits to Chinese entire population, the creation of a unified society and the realisation of people-urbanisation would be possible. Since the concentration of better hospitals, schools and housing incentives is still one of the main drivers of internal migration to this day, rebalancing basic public services could bring a visible change in future migratory patterns. Under the unified system proposed by Chan, people would finally have the right to move inside their country without losing their citizenship rights. In one of its documents, the NNUP has started to think about a future comprehensive reform of the *hùkǒu* system; the leadership has moved its first steps towards unified access to pensions, medical assistance and education, but the road is still long.

At this point, I would like to introduce a different approach to future *hùkǒu* reforms, which constitutes an alternative to the ongoing urbanisation plan. Over the last decades, the leadership have tried by all means to avoid the "urban diseases" by implementing an urbanisation with Chinese characteristic, where formal access to large cities has been almost impossible. To this regard, researcher Kam Wing Chan criticises the policy of opening small cities and closing the big cities because it goes against the actual patterns of Chinese internal migration.<sup>93</sup> According to Chan, the inconsistency between recent *hùkǒu* policies and real migration tendencies is the result of the limited capacity of small and medium-sized cities to absorb employment. On the other hand, larger cities grow at a faster rate because of favourable policies, higher investments concentration and the establishment of agglomeration economies.<sup>94</sup> Agglomeration in megacities has been one of the main forces driving economic growth in the last 30 years, and it is expected to foster China's future scientific and

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<sup>92</sup> Chan, 2014. (b).

<sup>93</sup> Chan, 2014. (b).

<sup>94</sup> Agglomeration economy is a localised economy where a big number of industries, companies and services are located near to each other and hence benefit from the cost reduction and higher efficiency resulting from this proximity; agglomeration economies are typical of urban economies.

technological development. In front of this continuous trend, the author rejects the idea behind the NNUP and claims that “the key to *hùkǒu* reform is to open the door to *hùkǒu* registration in very large cities.”<sup>95</sup> Officials, commentators and individuals have always seen in large urban populations the source of problems such as heavy traffic and rent increase; therefore, the reason why urban *hùkǒu* should not be granted anymore in large cities is that they have already exceeded their carrying capacity. In his work, Chan explains that the amount of population that a city can host does not depend on its natural resources nor its surface area, but on its social infrastructure and hence its financial resources. What the author is trying to say is that if a megacity was able to guarantee social coverage for all its residents, with no distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* status, there would be no need for the government to hinder migrants’ settlements. The reason why China is steering population flow away from big urban centers lays in the huge debt in the supply of social services for its floating population. Since China’s large cities are still a sought-after destination for migrants, the government should start to think about including them into the urbanisation plan. The author’s last suggestion is to first expand *hùkǒu* reform to second-tier cities such as Xi’an, Dalian and Chengdu: in this way, by taking advantage from agglomeration economies, they could accommodate more and more migrants.

By looking at the future of *hùkǒu*, researcher Kam Wing Chan expresses every confidence in a positive outcome. In his works, he hopes to see a country where people can move freely and chose by themselves their place of residence.<sup>96</sup> However, the NNUP alone is not enough to guarantee free internal migration, and *hùkǒu* reform will take more time to be completed. Chan claims that by 2030, it would be possible for the entire migrant population to solve the *hùkǒu* issues once for all, admitted that the government will engage in faster opening of small as well as big cities and implement supporting measures in the name of human-urbanisation.<sup>97</sup> The author believes that once the first stage of reform will be completed, meaning granting *hùkǒu* to non-local university students, managers and skilled workers, cities will gradually start opening their doors to common migrant labourers. The reason why he chooses to give priority

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<sup>95</sup> Cit. in Chan, 2014. (b). pp. 13.

<sup>96</sup> Chan, 2014. (b).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

to young graduates is that they are China's most important resource of human capital. Moreover, they are major tax contributors and therefore would participate actively in economic productivity and growth; the same applies for skilled workers, who would earn higher wages, pay more for social welfare and hence receive higher social benefits. Chan believes that by the time these two categories will be fully integrated into urban society, the number of unskilled labourers will decrease and greater social equity will be achieved. At that point, it would be easier for the government to extend social services to the rest of floating population. In order for the future reform to be successful, the author underlines the urgency of a reform of local tax structure; he proposes the division of general social welfare, including education and pensions, from local services; while the former could be financed through national and regional fiscal transfers, the latter could be primarily financed through local taxes. Moreover, China should put more attention on rural land transfer, grant fair compensation to landless peasants and commit itself in the establishment of a unified social welfare system. In his policy memorandum, Chan profiles the aim, principles and steps the State needs to follow to guarantee a comprehensive *hùkǒu* reform. The article sets the stage for a possible future path for people-centered urbanisation, which would convert China's floating population into consumers and protagonists of the country's economic future and eventually put a point to the inequities resulting from the household registration system.

### 3.4 Comments and Conclusions

On 18 November 2017, a fire killed 19 people in a migrant township in the district of Daxing, Beijing city.<sup>98</sup> In response of the tragedy, the Beijing government started a 40-day campaign to inspect fire hazards, which was immediately followed by a huge wave of evictions and demolition of neighbourhoods across the capital. On the pretext of evacuating unsafe buildings, tens of thousands of rural migrants have been forced to abandon their apartments and to close their activities without any notice. On that occasion, together with houses, several migrant schools have been shut down and the majority of migrants had no choice but to leave. At that time, many commentators identified in the wave of evictions the expression of a wider strategy to restrict

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<sup>98</sup> Li et al., 2018.

population growth in the country's capital and to realise the goal of curbing Beijing's population to 23 million people by 2020.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, this operation was not an isolated episode; in the recent years, many are the migrant districts that have been evacuated in the name of urban development. Migrant evictions have intensified since the launch of the NNUP, since the government is demolishing farmers' residential areas in the outskirts of big cities to re-develop them. Together with landless farmers, thousands of migrant workers who have been forced to leave the big city, and are finding themselves with no house and no work. Although the new urbanisation plan is offering them a way out, now it is too early to say if it will succeed or not in its intent.

Even before the establishment of the PRC, Chinese internal migration has been monitored and limited by the Party-state. Over the last decades, *hùkǒu* has been the main instrument implemented by the government to serve China's economic interests and guarantee social stability. Although many see it as a relic of the Maoist era, the household registration system is still one of the main drivers of internal migration; the reason why it still affects population movement and migrants' behaviour lies in its adaptability to the changing socioeconomic environment. In fact, the Chinese leadership has never abandoned the *hùkǒu* system, but they have decided to give it a new shape, so that it could serve the new market economy and maintain control on population flows. In 2014, the central government launched the National New-urbanisation Plan with the aim of urbanising 60% of total population by 2020. With the promise of taking the distance to the land-centered urbanisation model that has been at the basis of China's imbalanced urban growth for years, the leadership has proposed a human approach to development and has called for equality among its citizens in the future. By opening the doors of small and medium-sized cities, Beijing is planning to create new centers of consumptions away from the industrialised coastal areas and hence boost domestic demand. Farmers and migrant workers are encouraged to permanently settle in small towns, characterised by lower entry requirements and where *hùkǒu* transfer is granted at a very low "price". However, many are the challenges posed to the plan to work: equal financial aid among all cities, the unification of rural and urban social welfare and the reform of the fiscal system are changes needed to achieve people-urbanisation. Five years after the implementation of

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<sup>99</sup> *Congressional – Executive Commission on China*, 2018.

the plan, large cities are still rural migrant workers' favourite destinations and no significant inversion of tendency has been registered. Many believe that the only way for China to steer future migration flows towards less developed regions is to listen to its migrants' requests and concentrate its efforts on the promotion of equal rights and benefits. Sustainable development of people, cities and the countryside are essential for China's economic growth, both at home and in the international arena.

## Conclusions

Even before the establishment of the PRC, China has been a scene of human movements from the inland regions to the coastal zones, from the city to the countryside and from the countryside to the city. In all these years, the government has managed to steer the flow of people in accordance to the State objectives, and they have availed of economic and population policies to serve the interests of few. Among the diverse tools used to monitor and control migration, the household registration system has proved to be the winning card of the Chinese regime. Responsible for the immobility of its people, the *hùkǒu* system gave rise to the creation of an unbalanced society, where first-class and second-class citizens travel on two parallel tracks and are never to meet again. Thanks to a system that ties citizenship with the place of birth, Chinese migrants do not share the same rights and privileges with their city counterpart, and episodes of discrimination are an everyday occurrence. As the second chapter shows, institutional and social exclusion coming from the limits imposed by the *hùkǒu* system inevitably leads to market segregation, making impossible for migrants and their families to move up in the social ladder and settle in the city. China's rural migrant workers are the undisputed protagonists of the economic miracle that has impressed the whole world, but until today, they still face exclusion and discrimination because of their residential status. Over the last years, through local experiments and comprehensive reforms, China's *hùkǒu* system has been able to maintain its monitoring role and readapt to the socioeconomic environment.

In March 2014, the central authorities launched the National New-type Urbanisation Plan with the aim of urbanising 60% of total population by 2020. In the attempt of addressing social inequalities and establishing a “people oriented standardised *hùkǒu* system that will support the movement of rural agricultural workers and peasants”, the national plan central target is to grant urban *hùkǒu* to 100 million rural residents.<sup>1</sup> With the promise of promoting a more human-centered approach to urbanisation, the plan aims at steering migration flows to small and

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<sup>1</sup> Cit. in Cui & Cohen, 2015. pp. 332.

medium size cities by easing criteria for the transfer of *hùkǒu* and hence encouraging citizens to leave the overcrowded metropolis and settle in minor centers.

As I explained in the third chapter of this thesis, the key idea behind the NNUP is to create an innovative economy through the urbanisation of a significant share of the floating population: by opening the doors of small towns, Beijing aims at generating new centers of consumptions away from the industrialised coastal areas and therefore boosting domestic demand. The need for new sources of internal consumptions comes from the fact that China is currently experiencing a delicate stage where the decreasing export volume, the rise in wages and the emergence of new low-cost manufacturers pose a real threat to the country's economic competitiveness. By boosting domestic consumptions, China hopes to achieve a sustained economic growth in the near future. Another not to be underestimated factor pushing for the implementation of the ongoing *hùkǒu* reform is the intention of the government to accelerate the transformation of land from agricultural into non-agricultural. By granting urban *hùkǒu* to peasants, local governments, constructors and agribusiness would finally come into possession of the Chinese fragmented farmland and, at the same time, boost the urban housing market by transforming dispossessed peasants into consumers. It goes without saying that the reasons behind the urbanisation plan are once again purely economic ones.

At the present day, although the plan has started to show its first results, many are the challenges that are threatening the future of human-centered urbanisation, first costs. This thesis showed that to date China is not ready to bear the costs of millions of new urban citizens, to pay for their education, medical care, pensions and ensure them equal access to social services. The reason behind this is the lack of a self-sustainable financial system by local governments, who are supposed to be primarily responsible for the allocation of social services. What has been criticised the most is the fact that the latest *hùkǒu* reform did not come together with a new fiscal reform, which would have ensured the extension of social coverage to all urban residents. In a system where local governments are still relying on enterprise taxes, debt finance and land sales, the serious risk is that the formal *hùkǒu* conversion would not be followed by the actual transformation of peasants into fully-fledged urban citizens.

Another major obstacle to overcome is the lack of confidence from migrants and rural-*hùkǒu* holders in the government's ability to provide for their future sustainment. In fact, in the last years, many migrant workers have showed interest in working, living and even buying a house in smaller towns, but at the same time, they have been reluctant in giving up on their rural privileges. As I argued in the final part of this paper, rural land is still a source of security for China's migrant workers, and the government's promises for job opportunities, affordable housing and social services alone are not enough to convince farmers to give up their land. In the view of this situation, one of the enemy of the 2014-2020 plan is definitely time. This dissertation argues that only by extending the plan for another decade, China's floating population would be able to benefit from State incentives and the separation between first-class and second-class citizens would be like to disappear. The reform of *hùkǒu* is a gradual process that requires the full support of the population and major commitment from central and local governments through equal financial aid among all cities, the unification of rural and urban social welfare and the reformation of the fiscal system.

The aim of the NNUP was to reach the urbanisation of 60% of total population by 2020; according to official data, the country's urbanisation rate has already reached 59% by the end of 2018.<sup>2</sup> Although to the outside eye the plan has proved to be successful, what official data take into consideration is not the *de jure* urbanisation, but the *de facto* urbanisation rate, which includes millions of rural migrant workers who are still considered as illegal aliens by the State. By analysing the relationship between the Chinese migratory phenomenon and the implementation of the new urbanisation plan, this thesis shows that the human-centered urbanisation has not taken into consideration needs and demands of China's migrant population. Moreover, despite the government's efforts to steer migratory flows away from big cities, to date no substantial inversion of tendency in migratory patterns has been registered. Five years after the implementation of the plan, large urban centers are still rural migrant workers' favourite destinations. The opportunity of better job, sure income, higher life standards for themselves and their children are still factors driving migratory choices

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<sup>2</sup> *The World Bank*, 2019.

in contemporary China. The NNUP has been told to be the biggest migration experiment of our time; however, more time and efforts are required from both government and population to make it a reality.

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