

Urban Development Issues in China's Cities: Part Five

How a simple registration document can divide a city into two separate worlds

“Should the *Hukou* system be replaced?”

By: Wei Chong, journalist for the Chinese web edition of the *Financial Times*

Date: 12 February 2007

Abstract: Government statistics indicate that rural-urban migration has doubled since the 1990s, due in large part to economic factors. Over 10% of the population – nearly 150 million people – have moved to China's cities. 80% are migrant workers, known as *nong min gong*, who fill the lowest positions on the employment ladder. Under China's unique household registration system, these workers are still classified as migrants even though many have lived and worked in a city for many years.

For the author, China's *Hukou* system (whereby individuals are assigned to a compulsory place of residence) is particularly questionable in that only city dwellers are entitled to the local rights and social benefits such as health care, education, housing and other public services guaranteed by the system. A situation emerges wherein city residents enjoy inexpensive services provided by peasant workers, who by their large numbers also boost the city's economic growth. A large number of concerned citizens, however, is calling for the abolishment of this system to allow migrant workers living in cities access to the same services.

Drawing on examples of similar systems in other countries, the author suggests that to further improve economic development, the *Hukou* system – which opposes cities against rural areas – should be replaced by a registration process that allows Chinese citizens to relocate freely. Cheng also rejects the “migrant slum” theory put forth by supporters of the current system, and goes on to raise the important issue of whether a new system will in fact guarantee peasant workers access to services or simply be window dressing for the government's promise of “equal rights for all”. Abolishing the *Hukou* system is likely to place heavy financial pressure on municipal governments, and providing basic social services to all rural-urban migrants is a move which some say will cause a mass exodus towards cities.

The issue of household registration affects not only the daily lives of migrant workers and the development of migration, but also impacts the host cities and native residents. In light of this fact, will abolishing the *Hukou* system be enough to eliminate the social inequalities it has created?

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