

# The Hukou Divide – a Passé Construct?

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Previous research on the hukou divide has primarily focused on the tangible inequalities between urban and rural residents. In this paper, the reigning perception of the hukou divide is discussed from a social citizenship perspective, by relating recent social policy developments in China to the works of amongst others T.H. Marshall and W. van Oorschot. By examining the current state of the Chinese hukou system through multiple data sources and exploring recent policy developments, this paper shows that the hukou divide, despite having become irrelevant in some respects, continues to be an important determinant of social citizenship. The hukou system has created widespread institutional diversity of social security and sustained the stratification of social citizenship. Through the persistent depiction of rural people as lesser citizens, the hukou system consolidates rural people's self-image as a distinct undeserving group.

**Keywords:** China, hukou, welfare, segregation, exclusion, citizenship

It has often been argued that the decisive challenge for Chinese social policymaking is to abandon the hukou system which segregates the population's social rights according to where they are born (e.g. Solinger, 1999; 2003; 2006; Saich, 2008; Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Frazier, 2010a; 2010b; Shi, 2012; Gao, Yang, Li, 2013; Long & Li, 2016; Li, Liu, Xu & Zhang, 2016). With access to social welfare being determined by residency, one's hukou, which is one's official proof of residency, determines one's social rights. However, on a deeper level, it also defines citizens' roles in society by sustaining the rural-urban divide (Zeuthen, 2012; Gao et al., 2013).

The hukou system is not simply a manifestation of citizenship: it permeates all aspects of daily life, stratifies individuals and regions, and distributes resources and opportunities (Fei-Ling, 2005). The rural-urban divide has created social disparities, both within and between regions. Although some attempts have been made at rural-urban harmonization, Shi argues that "they appear unable to reverse the ongoing decentralization of social protection" (2012, p. 806). This has also been increasingly recognised by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and the system has been modified on several occasions, most significantly in a series of reforms that have been adopted since 2014 (Chen, 2017).

This paper contributes to the current discussion of the hukou system in three ways.

Firstly, it assesses the development of inequality across the rural/urban divide, bringing in other dimensions beyond economic inequality. Secondly, it critically discusses the hukou divide from a social citizenship point of view, by relating recent social policy developments in China to the concept of social citizenship. Finally, it discusses the resilience of the system, drawing on van Oorschot's (2000) theory of 'deservingness'. It is argued that there is still a long way to go in terms of institutional reforms and that the hukou system may have made an impact on the deservingness heuristics of the Chinese population.

Social citizenship is a core concept throughout this paper. The subject of social citizenship and migration and their changing manifestations in today's China distinguishes between those who are full members of society and those who are not, as a result of the hukou system. Citizenship is often understood from a civil/legal perspective, thus emphasising one's ability to engage in the electoral system. However, in the case of China, meaningful participation within the political system is still negligible (Solinger, 2003; Hu & Saich, 2012; Saich, 2017). Instead, I follow amongst others, Marshall's concept of social citizenship focusing on individuals' 'social worth' and economic and social ability to fully participate in society, by focusing on the welfare-related rights and duties of social citizenship. The presence of the hukou system means that there is no such equal social

worth at this time.

### **A path-dependent trajectory**

The hukou system, deeply embedded in Chinese socialist ideology and the planned economy, loosely translates into ‘household registration record’. In its current version, the hukou system dates back to the Great Leap Forward in 1958-59, where a hukou was assigned to everyone. The hukou was used to standardize access to housing, food, land, education, medical care etc. The paternalistic Chinese government assumed responsibility for the welfare needs of the population.

When the system was first introduced, a rationing was put in place to guarantee the survival of non-agricultural hukou-holders, while millions of agricultural hukou-holders starved to death (Zeuthen, 2012). While urban citizens were taken care of by the government, rural citizens were to overcome hardship by “rely[ing] on the masses, rely[ing] on the collective, regeneration through production, mutual help and mutual relief” (Wong, 1998, p. 94). As such, the welfare system was relatively generous for urban hukou-holders, while it was meagre for rural citizens (Gao et al., 2012).

Despite the phenomenon of economic growth since the late 1970’s, inequality has continued to rise. The World Bank has attributed this to the spatial inequality that exists between urban and rural areas (Atinc, 1997). To this day, China is made up of dual societies with distinct economies (Fei-Ling, 2005; Suda, 2017). The economic system is highly fragmented on several levels of society throughout China but is often simplified by a dual classification - a rural economy, which is shrouded in poverty and based on traditional agriculture. Nonetheless, poverty has decreased a great deal since the economic reforms. Moreover, urban economies in China experience rapid expansion, and increases in trade, foreign investment and con-

tain some of the most advanced industries in the world.

In recent times, interest in the hukou system has mainly focused on the ‘floating population’ it creates: more than 200 million migrant workers, who are living in urban areas with a rural hukou, are to a varying degree excluded from urban welfare schemes (Kongshøj, 2015b, p. 71; Zhao, Jia & Zhao, 2017, p. 107). Studies have shown that rural-to-urban migrants are more prone to experience segregation or unsuccessful integration as a result of structural and policy barriers, particularly through the persistent institutional segregation of social security determined by the hukou system (Solinger, 2006; Shi, 2012; Chen, 2017). Below, I first assess the development of the rural-urban divide on several dimensions of inequality. Secondly, I consider recent policy developments, with a specific focus on hukou reforms. Finally, I assess the (remains of) the hukou system from a social citizenship perspective and discuss how such divisions may be reproduced as deservingness heuristics.

### **Dimensions of inequality**

The standard account in academia and media, that the hukou system has been abandoned, has been called into question in several studies (e.g. Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Zeuthen, 2012; Kongshøj, 2017). The rationale is that the reigning discourse is founded on a misconception of the current hukou system: even though the distinction between non-agricultural and agricultural occupations has been abolished since the 1990’s, the hukou is still registered according to residency.

If we compare the development of per capita income of urban and rural households since 1978, we see that the urban-rural income ratio peaked in the period 2006-2009: at that time, average disposable income was 3.3 times higher in urban areas than in rural areas, com-

pared to 2.6 in 1978. However, since then, inequality has steadily decreased to a ratio of 2.7 by 2015 (CSYD).

In 2015, 8.6% of the rural population received the minimum living allowance (MSLS), compared to only 2.4% of the urban population (UNDP China, 2016, p. 156). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the MSLS is considerably lower in many rural areas: the average benefit paid was 37 yuan/person/month in 2007 compared to 102 yuan/person/month amongst urban counterparts (CDRF, 2012).

Several studies have established that educational attainment and allocation of educational resources are highly correlated with income levels (Yue, Sicular, Shi & Gustafsson, 2008). The data on rural-urban differences in educational attainments are highly fragmented, though several studies have established the existence of a rural-urban educational gap in terms of, among others, expenditure, quality, outcome, and job prospects (e.g. Wu, 2012; Li, 2012; UNDP China, 2016; OECD, 2017; Suda, 2017).

The 2000 and 2010 censuses (CSYD) do show that illiteracy rates have decreased in both rural and urban areas between 2000 and 2010. Moreover, when comparing the average illiteracy rates between rural and urban areas we find that the gap has diminished by 2.8 percentage points from 2000 to 2010 (CSYD). This indicates that the educational system has improved on a national scale, though there was still a small gap of 2% between rural and urban illiteracy rates in 2010.

China's efforts at achieving a universal welfare system is above all evident within the field of healthcare: almost 95% of the population were covered by a health insurance scheme in 2011 (Tang, Tao & Bekedam, 2012), however, a substantial share of the expenditure is still borne by citizens themselves. In 2011, the average reimbursement rate for inpatient care

stood at 47%, with more than half the cost being covered by the patients or their families. Furthermore, compensation rates varies considerably across the country; in 2007-2010 it ranged from approximately 400-1852 yuan/person (Huang, 2015, p.451). Tang et al. (2012) note a decline in private expenditure after national policies began to replace the old disease-ridden public welfare system at the start of the millennium – an important step in the pursuit of universalism given the importance of tax financing in universal welfare schemes.

Despite improvements in the financing of the healthcare system, a sizable difference in per capita healthcare expenditure between rural and urban areas does persist. Though the ratio between expenditure in rural and urban areas have declined significantly from 2000 to 2014, a considerable gap remains. By 2014, expenditure was 2.5 times higher in urban areas (CSYD).

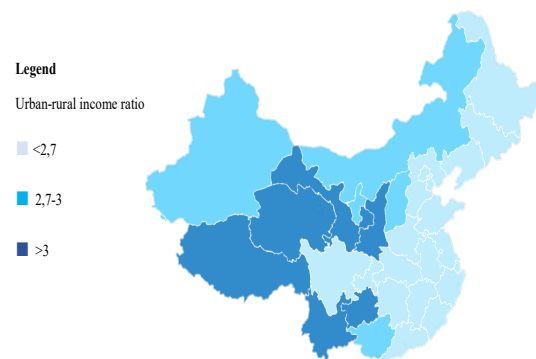


Figure 1: Urban-rural household income ratios, by province, 2015

Source: China Statistical Yearbook Database

Regional differences in the rural-urban income gap are compared in Figure 1. Firstly, it should be mentioned that the national average of urban-rural income ratio is 2.7 and spans from 1.8 in Tianjin to 3.4 in Gansu, which signifies great regional differences. Secondly, as shown in Figure 1, twelve of the 31 provinces have an

urban-rural income gap equal to or above the national average and are almost all located in the western economic zone. One possible explanation for the higher urban-rural income gaps in this area could be the relative size of the rural areas in proportion to the urban areas and their varying stages of 'development'. Furthermore, these regions are the last to benefit from the market reforms and opening up since 1978.

It appears that there have been great advances in income levels, educational attainment and healthcare across China and that the rural-urban gap in these fields is slowly shrinking. Furthermore, it appears from Figure 1, that the rural-urban divide might have become less relevant in terms of economic principles, than other divides; regional divides, for instance, have become more prominent. It is therefore important to distinguish between the 'rural-urban divide' and the 'hukou divide'. As the distinction between rural and urban is slowly being washed out and coastal development has made some rural areas on the coast more affluent than some urban areas in the west, the rural-urban divide is becoming less significant, while the hukou divide continues to be the entrenchment of social strata as it facilitates social exclusion (Zeuthen, 2012; Gao et al., 2013).

### **Recent policy developments**

The 2000s witnessed a discursive turn in the Chinese government, where constructing a 'harmonious society' became an official goal. This led to social policy-making being framed as "putting people first" and "equalization of basic public services" (Ngok, 2013). Despite the nebulosity of these terms, it is evident that this reflects an aim to lessen the consequences of social risks such as poverty, unemployment and illness, as well as to reduce inequalities (Kongshøj, 2015a; Saich, 2017). This was accom-

panied by the formulation of a more coherent, comprehensive and inclusive policy framework in China; one that is focused on vulnerable groups in society such as rural and migrant populations (Saich, 2017; Carillo, Hood & Kadetz, 2017). This new realm of policies is supposed to reflect principles such as democracy, equality, freedom and the rule of law (Gow, 2017). However, we should keep in mind that the conceptualisation of these principles is "most contentious when compared with their common-sense meanings in western liberal political discourse" (Gow, 2017, p.102).

The aim of several policy initiatives was to promote and ensure the sustainable development of the rural economy by retaining and attracting a young rural labour force; initiatives included the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NRCMS), the promotion of agriculture and the improvement of rural infrastructure (Ahlers & Schubert, 2009; Chen, 2017). Furthermore, after two decades of pursuing coastal development, China sought to even out regional development by implementing the Western Development Programme in 1999 in order to ensure continued progress (Hongyi, 2002).

Along with policies promoting rural development, there have been a number of policy initiatives designed to reduce discrimination against rural-to-urban migrants (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Chen, 2017). The largest of these programmes is the 'New National Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020)', which was the first national policy strategy on urbanisation. Subsequently, the State Council presented the 'Suggestions for Advancing the Reform of the Household Registration System' in July 2014 and laid out plans to relax the hukou system. The suggestions specify the conditions upon which rural-to-urban migrants can apply for an urban hukou. The proposal distinguishes between

small cities, where migrants can apply for an urban hukou with almost no restrictions, and megacities where access to urban hukous remain strictly controlled. Thus, in the foreseeable future, the new policy framework will do little for those residing in the largest cities in China.

The new policies enacted in 2014-15 guarantee a decent standard of living for China's rural population and form a solid step in integrating the growing rural-to-urban migrant community into urban welfare structures. It can only be assumed that the purpose of these policies is to further inclusive urbanisation and eventually remove the welfare disparity between residents with rural and urban origin. Nevertheless, this probably has a long way to go.

### **Social citizenship and civic stratification**

The founder of the sociology of citizenship, Marshall (1964), emphasises the exclusion of non-citizens as a prerequisite for inclusive citizenship, as legal rights and duties are bestowed upon all inhabitants within a state territory, creating a uniform collective. For Marshall, social citizenship, in general, involves an equality of membership status and ability to participate in society. Roche (1992) builds on Marshall's work in his book 'Rethinking Citizenship'. He defines welfare in a rather broad sense to include things such as work, education, health and quality of life – and thereby, social citizenship as the right to attain these.

Others, such as Taylor-Gooby (2008) also emphasize the rights and duties components of social citizenship. As he frames it, "Social citizenship concerns the rights and duties associated with the provision of benefits and services designed to meet social needs and enhance capabilities, and also to guarantee the resources necessary to finance them" (Taylor-Gooby,

2008, pp. 5-6).

From the viewpoint of Marshall, individuals are equal if they are all governed by the same social rights and possess economic equality; however, a key point in the definition by Taylor-Gooby is that social citizenship also entails the possibility of enhancing one's capabilities. The distinction between resources and capabilities is an important one to make in this regard. Inspired by the thoughts of Sen (1985), capabilities is the feasibility that you can access – or have the freedom to pursue – valuable functionings, such as being educated and healthy, or having access to basic amenities.

Following the thoughts of this rather central paradigm within social citizenship, the solution to economic and political inequalities in China may be to create uniform social rights and secure that citizens are granted equal social worth. The dominant ideology adopted by the central leadership in the 2000s might suggest a movement towards a more inclusive welfare system based on a notion of equal citizenship for all those living within the People's Republic of China and could seem to offer the potential for a welfare system built on citizenship, as envisioned by Marshall amongst others.

However, despite the numerous policy programmes that have been enacted, we should not exaggerate the actual impact of the reforms on the hukou divide. The hukou system remains the primary institutional barrier for inclusive integration of rural-to-urban migrants into the somewhat more progressive urban welfare system. The notion that migrants do not need welfare support, due to them owning land in their home villages has become untenable (Hu & Saich, 2012). The population remains locked into vastly different socio-economic structures in terms of access to public goods and services and even though the system has become more permeable, social citizenship is



still rarely granted to migrants in major cities (Saich, 2017; Woodman & Guo, 2017).

The system of resource allocation built into the Chinese welfare state and facilitated by the hukou system favours urban areas and creates vast inequalities between urban and rural areas. Despite the rhetoric of universalism in the discourse of the Chinese political leadership in recent years, the urban bias remains strong and the notion of citizenship forming the basis for welfare policy decisions remains far off (*ibid.*). Unequal entitlements along hukou differences have created tremendous social stratification within the Chinese welfare state. Coupled with the process of regionalisation of social protection, this has shifted the boundaries of social citizenship to localities and thus created a spatial form of social citizenship in regions and cities (Shi, 2012). Meanwhile, Woodman suggests that citizenship has taken an even more granulated form in China, as the rural/urban distinction is just one of a number of distinctions, each contributing to variations in welfare rights and the “relative value accorded to citizens” (2016, p. 343).

In other words, the Chinese population does not have access to uniform social rights – quite to the contrary, there has until now been a persistent reproduction of differentiation through the hukou system. This creates a barrier for inclusive social citizenship to evolve because of the inability to overcome the institutional fragmentation of social security within regions. In the words of Solinger “the hukou – very much as a badge of citizenship in a Western society would do – to a very large extent continues to determine one’s life chances, including one’s work opportunities, social rank, wage, welfare, and housing” (2003, p.7). This results in urban citizens enjoying inclusive social citizenship based on their access to welfare, while rural-to-urban migrants are “denied genuine membership” (Solinger, 1999, p.7).

The hukou system is a possible institutional explanation for negative perceptions and ‘otherization’ among the Chinese population because it results in dual social citizenship. Several studies have shown that public support for welfare policies is deeply affected by the institutional arrangement of the welfare regime (e.g. Titmuss, 1974; Pierson, 1994; Larsen, 2006; Slothuus, 2007). Deservingness theory describes how individuals consult a deservingness heuristic, which guides opinion formation, in order to evaluate whether certain individuals should or should not be entitled to certain social benefits (van Oorschot, 2000; 2005; Larsen, 2006). Van Oorschot identifies five ‘deservingness criteria’: control, need, identity, attitude and reciprocity (2000, p. 36); identity and reciprocity are important in the context of the hukou-divide. The Chinese urban population perceives those on the other side of the hukou divide as a different group whose deservingness is low, mainly because they are perceived as ‘others’ and because they are not perceived as having contributed to the common good (Kongshøj, 2017). The hukou system, by nature, may thus be recognized as facilitating deservingness perceptions that tend to maintain and reinforce the institutional division.

Not only does the hukou system impede economic equality, but being ‘rural’ is also highly stigmatized. Many rural subjects come to perceive themselves as ‘undeserving’ of care and internalize this stigma. Rather than perceiving themselves as ‘sick citizens’ they identify as “peasants unworthy of state care” (Long & Li, 2016, p.1695). Rural people are thus discouraged from furthering their capability development and social citizenship status, both in terms of health, and also in terms of educational attainment. Urban citizens have access to a broad range of welfare goods, jobs, subsidized housing, education, medical care and pensions. Rural citizens do to some degree, have

access to these community resources, however, their opportunities are highly limited, as they do not have access to quality education or formal employment with pension benefits (Cai et al., 2012; Li et al., 2016). During their life course, rural citizens do not enjoy the same opportunities as urban citizens – they have fewer prospects for moving up the social ladder and accumulating wealth, which especially places rural elders at a greater risk of poverty in old age (Cai et al., 2012).

Needless to say, rural-to-urban migrants are often placed at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, as they carry out precarious, dangerous and unhealthy work. They are at high risk of becoming ill or disabled, have little knowledge of and experience with medical care, and have limited access to urban health-care facilities, not to mention their exposure to the educational system. Fully aware of their marginal citizenship status in urban areas, migrants from rural areas are generally hesitant to identify themselves as urban citizens (Woodman, 2016; Chen, 2017; Woodman & Guo, 2017).

There are immense barriers to inclusive social citizenship because of the inability to overcome the institutional fragmentation of social security across the hukou divide, and because of the lack of trust in people on the other side of the hukou wall. The institutional logic of the hukou system promotes widespread institutional diversity of social security, which tends to create a divide in the Chinese population similar to that between national citizens and immigrants. Rural citizens are aware that they are receiving less than their urban counterparts are but justify such differences “by referring to urban residents’ superiority” (Long & Li, 2016, p. 1696).

In short, even though the hukou divide has been modified as regards to small and medium-sized cities, it remains a divisive force as regards the big cities, and it is likely to be re-

inforced by perceptions of deservingness that are likely to make the hukou divide highly resilient.

## Concluding discussion

The hukou system continues to carry great importance for determining people’s status in society, however, it has become misleading to refer to the hukou divide in China today, not least because of the varying levels of development across the country, which result in some rural areas on the coast becoming more prosperous than some urban areas in the western part of China and effectively dilute the rural/urban divide.

Nonetheless, the hukou system continues to be relevant for how social citizenship is granted in China. Firstly, it serves not only to register the population, but also to stratify the population. Secondly, it controls population movements, as migration is conditional under the system and will often lead to social exclusion, as rural-to-urban migrant workers are left without the same rights as those with an urban hukou and are treated as a distinct undeserving group. Lastly, by definition it divides the population by creating a dual social citizenship and imposing perceptions of deservingness that bolster the divisions.

The last aspect in particular is of great importance for this paper. The fragmented welfare system, which segregates China’s population through inclusion and exclusion of certain groups from particular social rights, continues to define social citizenship. The pervasive institutional diversity of social security and sustained stratification of social citizenship have created a breeding ground for protectionism against outsiders, urban or rural, excluding ‘others’ from access to local social benefits, thus denying them genuine citizenship. Through the persistent depiction of rural people as lesser citizens, the hukou system is



constraining rural hukou-holders in an idea of themselves as a distinctly undeserving group.

Recent policy developments have however shown faint indications of a rights-based approach in assessing access to public goods and services. With continued reform impetus and a sustained focus on inclusive and holistic welfare institutions, the hukou system just might shed its reputation as a force of segregation and embrace integration. Though everyone is a citizen somewhere, growing numbers of people are disconnected from their citizenship entitlements. Thus, for now, the hukou divide, as a construct that controls social citizenship, continues to live on.

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