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Not Drowning but Waving?

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By Tom Bannister

“When you are in the valley, and you look at the sky, it is so small; once out of the valley, I realise how big the sky is. Then I can fulfil myself.”

(A Chinese migrant labourer, quoted in [an article](#) by Eric Florence)

There are many migrant workers in China. Look from any urban window and you will doubtless see several hundred constructing the next high-rise apartment block in that city's endless stream of development. The migrant worker is one of the most remarkable features of the reform era; with numbers [in the range of 200 million](#), they represent around 3% of the world's population and would form the world's fifth most populous country. Together they have created the phenomenon of China's 'floating population' (*Liudong renkou*, 流动人口), the largest peacetime movement of people in history. However, this is not the ordinary trend of urbanisation that can be seen in other developing countries. Chinese government policies, implemented in the pre-reform period, mean that the majority of this migration is temporary, in name if not in practice. The major barrier that prevents permanent recognition of migration is the hukou (户口) system, introduced in 1958 to control rural-urban movement. During the Mao era, one's hukou defined eligibility for food rations, housing allotment, and access to education; someone holding a rural hukou would face considerable difficulty in seeking to obtain an urban one. Since the early 1980s, the system has been gradually changed but remains only partially reformed. Rural hukou-holding migrants are still largely denied access to the public services available to the officially recognised urbanites living around them. They no longer plough their fields but they retain their rural hukou status, straddling rural and urban spheres with the aspirations associated with the latter but lacking the means to achieve them.

However, a couple of months ago the Chengdu municipal government announced [a series of reforms](#), scheduled to come fully into effect in 2012, that will effectively remove the difference between rural and urban hukou. When they are implemented, Chengdu will have the most progressive migration policy in the whole of China.

The Chengdu Changes

The Chengdu city government, along with those of [several other major Chinese cities](#), has been steadily reforming its hukou system over the past decade. However the changes announced in Chengdu will mean a major step forward in this process: residents will be able to freely change their registration from rural to urban. This will open up urban registration to more than five million rural residents within the Chengdu municipal area and begin a new phase of urbanisation. Urbanisation is a key component of [Beijing's strategy](#) to develop the relatively underdeveloped west of China. Chengdu and nearby Chongqing are considered the motors for this western development. The reforms will, of course, put immense pressure on the city's public services but, with its economy already booming, Chengdu may have the resources to cope. As one government official, Qin Daihong, reassured the [Economic Observer](#), “We are not closing the gap between rural and urban areas overnight. Instead, we have been investing in this field for seven years”. As a pilot for far-reaching reform, Chengdu seems to be a good choice.

Other less obvious economic benefits recommend Chengdu as a suitable candidate. Up until now, the flow of migrants from west to east has been a well-documented trend. With Sichuan being the major province from which emigration occurs, the new reforms will likely arrest this imbalance and further fuel the growth of the province's economy. A secondary effect of this is the impact that the reforms will have on domestic consumerism. As Beijing is well aware, China needs to develop its domestic market rather than continuing to rely on exports for economic growth. Urban residency opens a rural migrants' eyes to materialistic consumer culture, transforming their ideals and values. With China's current rural migrant population standing at 200 million and its rural population remaining high, extra consumers will help to expand the domestic market. On a social level, the reforms will also make it easier for rural families to migrate together. In many Sichuan villages, much of the remaining

population is made up of those who are unable to embark on migratory labour, such as children and the elderly. Chengdu's new reforms make it possible for migrants to attain permanent residency, thus reducing the tendency for family units to fragment.

With the hukou system affecting so many different areas, however, the potential problems with the Chengdu reforms are as numerous and complex as the prospective benefits. Principal amongst them is one of the original reasons for the establishment of the hukou system: the avoidance of the massive slums that have sprung up in most other developing countries. Whilst the rural poor are visible in any Chinese city, there exists nothing like the sprawling favelas of Rio or the mass slums of Lagos. However, Chengdu could become an exception to this; the metropolis is already developing at a rapid rate and is [set to become](#) one of the world's fastest growing cities. This was the case before the reforms were announced. The changes to the hukou system will open up the city to another potential five million rural Chengdu migrants as well as making it easier for migrants from outside the municipal area to settle in the city. Even with conservative estimates of inward migration, it is possible to envision a day when Chengdu's streets house slums unknown elsewhere in the country.

At a civic governance level, numerous potential problems exist. Chengdu already experiences major traffic problems; a few months ago the city opened its first subway line, and it is already overused. Further in-migration will put further pressure on the transport infrastructure. Elsewhere, despite having invested heavily in its education system over the past decade, the impact of thousands of new students will be a huge shock to the city's schools. On a macro-level, as rural schools stand empty, class sizes in urban schools will have to increase. On the micro-level, an influx of rural children into urban schools will presumably not be welcomed by city parents in a country where urban schools are rated considerably better than rural ones.

Whilst the positive impacts on the urban economy are frequently cited, the negative effects on the rural sender areas are less often discussed. As [The Economist](#) recognises, a mass exodus from the countryside could affect the domestic grain output, potentially undermining China's [much-discussed](#) policy of self-sufficiency in grain. The new system will also make it possible for urban hukou holders to apply for rural hukou status. The way that land is owned and traded in the countryside is already complex enough but an influx of rich urbanites will complicate the situation yet further. Perhaps most worrying for rural dwellers is that it gives the opportunity for urbanites to move to the countryside and potentially buy-up a lot of land. With the income disparity between China's rural and urban areas [a well-documented problem](#), this scenario is a real possibility.

There are also foreseeable negative social effects on the urban receiver area. Migrant labourers have often been viewed with a large degree of prejudice and hostility by urban dwellers who often only experience the negative effects of inward migration first-hand. The problems associated with migrants will sound familiar to UK [Daily Mail](#) readers: migrants are accused of taking advantage of social benefits, causing increased crime and taking locals jobs. The new changes may well do little to dispel these links.

The issues surrounding the reform of China's hukou system are clearly extremely complex. If Chengdu is to be an effective pilot, then it will need to take the following two aspects into consideration:

Direction. As has been [pointed out before](#), migrants need to be directed to areas where there are jobs in order to avoid a 'blind flow' (盲流). Otherwise, if mass migration occurs to one area, the job market soon becomes saturated and unemployment rapidly exacerbates the existing problems. With Chengdu's reforms, this remains a prevalent issue. Many migrants will arrive in the city with little financial reserves. If they cannot find a job their ability to migrate further is limited. In order to avoid the criminalisation of migrants, as well as the emergence of mass slums, migration needs to retain an element of top-down co-ordination.

Education. Urban migration is sometimes romanticised in the Dick Whittington, streets-paved-with-gold, mould; the reality is often very different. Informing migrant workers in the receiver areas about their rights will make them less susceptible to discrimination. Educating migrants in the sender areas about the realities of urban migration will ease the flow by filtering out those rural dwellers who are unprepared for a move to the city. Equally, improving the urban public's perception of rural migrants

will combat discrimination and lessen the pressure on the city authorities to treat migrants as a problem.

The issues relating to Chengdu's reforms, and the reform of the hukou system as a whole, touch on every facet of contemporary Chinese society. Furthermore, having such a significant effect on such a large number of people, and on the emerging development of a world power, they are also of great importance on a global level as well. China's vast rural population has long been impoverished; in 1932 the historian [R.H. Tawney](#) said of the Chinese peasant, "even a ripple is sufficient to drown him". Today those peasants are viewed by many as holding the country back from modernisation. As [one municipal government official](#) noted, the Chengdu reforms will change "the term 'farmer' from an identity to a mere profession". Having been shackled to the land for hundreds of years, first by feudalist bonds and then by Maoist central planning, few disagree that setting the rural population free is the correct way forward. Whether the country is ready for it now will be revealed by the Chengdu reforms.

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