



*The Chinese nation-state facilitates the globalisation process and uses its dynamics to further its own (national) interests. The point is not that globalisation is “wrenching China open”, but that Chinese people and authorities alike make claims on global processes and institutions, thus helping to frame them.*

# Crossing Borders

## Urban-Rural Integration and Labour Migration

By Flemming Christiansen

China’s urbanisation has been taking place before our very eyes for the last two to three decades. Given the number of people involved, it is the greatest social transformation in world history in terms of changing the life conditions and occupation of hundreds of millions of people over a short timespan and the scale of labour migration between rural and urban areas, different urban areas, interior and coastal provinces, and China and foreign countries. China has, by and

large, avoided the emergence of the large squatter towns associated with migration in many developing countries, and although China now has three or four mega or “global” cities (each with more than 10 million inhabitants), its urban structure is characterised by a hierarchy of more than 660 cities of diverse sizes. While it is difficult to vouch for the future, this does indicate that at least up to now China has been very successful in achieving balanced development. Key to this success is the political

guidance of the urbanisation process and the ability of social structures to adapt to new economic conditions.

However, the apparent orderliness and balanced outcomes of urbanisation hide a great diversity of conditions spanning a 30-year period. The rise in China’s urban population from 18 to almost 50 per cent of the total population between 1978 and 2011 poses an issue as to what a valid scale and scope of any academic inquiry would be. It is entirely possible to examine the urbanisation



(1) Migrant workers building urban China.

processes at an aggregate level and seek to explain them within overall policy-making; this would provide us with a good textbook rationale and a description of the main dynamics and constraints of the political economy, such as rural industrialisation, agricultural reforms, shifting modes of “primitive accumulation” (i.e. transfer of resources from agriculture for investment in industrial development) and changes in markets, taxation and administrative structures. The price of such an approach would be that the rich variety of social transformations, institutional frameworks and dynamics would be out of focus or only covered anecdotally; it would exaggerate the role of central authorities and diminish the appreciation of the scope of the local authorities, social practices and interlocking institutions at play, and it would pay insufficient attention to regional differences. Conversely, case studies

are always specific and embedded in local politics and particular social practices, reflecting the situational imperatives of those involved. For political scientists seeking to appraise how policies are carried out, the mismatch of “central policy” and “local implementation” (except where implementation show-cases are crafted by political paragons) therefore tends to be frustrating, as it is hard to pin down the causal relationships between political declarations and practical action. For sociologists, the situation is somewhat better, for they take the case as the starting point and look at what people do and which specific social structures and institutional frameworks enable their activities.

Much has been written about China’s migrant workers, the huge army of rural people who entered the cities as construction, manufacturing, service and transport workers, often on precarious terms

and with few or no rights, no social insurance, and distinctly lower wages than their urban counterparts. Politically, their plight became an important priority for the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership (2002–2012). A large amount of resources went into both academic and policy-oriented sociological research on this group, and many non-Chinese scholars also directed their interest towards them. The issues taken up by Chinese sociologists like Li Qiang of Tsinghua University were how migrant workers could be conceptualised as a social stratum with reference to informal sectors, irregular work conditions and other core notions from the sociology of labour and development studies. Researchers from the State Council explored their conditions from the perspective of diverse government departments; they collated data from detailed surveys to report the scope and importance of the phenomenon,



(2) Planning and managing building projects also involves harnessing social inequality for development.

and drafted strategies for improving the conditions of migrant workers, while at the same time optimising their utility for achieving wider developmental policy aims; for example, they proposed using differential minimum wages to push for technological progress in the coastal areas, improving the investment environment for labour-intensive sectors in central and western parts of the country, expanding training provision to migrant workers and reducing or waiving school fees in eastern and western parts of the country to encourage the emergence of a new type of technologically savvy peasant within the next decade. The policy proposals arising from this research thus did not aim to simply improve the situation of the existing migrant workers in their places of destination, but to change their profile and move them to areas where they could serve policy better. Foreign scholars such as Dorothy

Solinger and Lei Guang were particularly interested in the equal rights of labour migrants, examining cases of social exclusion, formal rights, autonomous self-organisation, civil-society support and advocacy, labour activism, and social networks, phrasing the issues as a matter of citizenship. Others, like Rachel Murphy, were focusing more on their contributions to the reform process, the institutions of migration, remittances, backward links to the villages, and informal social safety nets. The research efforts were all conspicuously driven by moral concerns or at least had a strong political teleology. For the Chinese government's policy researchers, greater social justice and strategic approaches to policy-making were the core issues. For Chinese academic researchers, the aim was to bring into play research strategies that could explain social change in such a way as to serve as a longer-term con-

tribution to the dominant discourse; linking labour migration to social stratification and class, of course, went to the heart of the ideological ferment of the late 1990s and the 2000s and was crucial in setting the visionary targets for Chinese development. Foreign academics tended to understand the injustices and inequities as failures of the Chinese political system (a "regime legitimacy crisis" or even the onslaught of "globalisation" and "neo-liberalism", for example) and, by recording and analysing them impartially, hoped to bring about a constructive awareness of the issues.

When dealing with the last 30 years of Chinese labour migration, it becomes obvious that the Chinese state is much more dirigist and imbued with planning approaches than concerned about public opinion. From the point of view of the political system, the shift in 2002 from wealth creation (high growth

rates) to fairness (social justice) as a political tenor was not a fundamental ideological sea-change, but involved merely a refinement of the strategy for developing the political economy. In fact, the deliberate planned use of social and economic inequalities to achieve economic development is an established principle in China; Deng Xiaoping's much-quoted statement "let some get rich first" is one indication. More importantly, however, the emphasis (declared in the Preamble of the Constitution) on the idea that China is in the primary stage of socialism means, among other things, that social inequalities are unavoidable and, by implication, must be employed to expedite development towards higher levels of socialism.

Ideologically, the Chinese leadership is seeking a strategic balance between growth and equality; the strategic, planned deployment of resources, including the regulation of markets, is the main mode of decision-making in the political economy, focusing on 5-year planning cycles within 10-year incumbencies of leadership teams. Development objectives and targets are planned both within hugely abstract policy directions, such as urban-rural integration, and within more specific plans for each county, city and province, as well as the functional departments of the government. This mode is driven by an ideological consensus that is continuously being updated and reinterpreted. In order to grasp the full scope of the urbanisation process and understand what drives social transition, it is useful for any sociologist working on China to take cognizance of the planning mode of decision-making.

The systematised narrative of the development of China's political economy links today's migrant workers seamlessly with the system established in the 1950s. The Chinese economy was then divided into two large sectors, one being the state-owned industrial work units and the other the agricultural people's communes. By separating

these two sectors, it was possible to achieve primitive accumulation for urban industrialisation: through the state monopolies for rural-urban trade and in particular by setting (a) the exchange prices for products between the two sectors and (b) the mandatory production quotas, it was possible to transfer substantial financial means from rural to urban areas. The two basic priorities in the 1950s to the 1970s were simple: (a) to ensure food security and (b) to finance industrial construction. In order to achieve a rational deployment of the workforce in industry, only those workers who were specifically needed in industry were allocated to the work units as labourers and classified under what is known as the hukou system with an "urban residence household registration", while all others had an "agricultural household registration". The former were employed by the state, which took care of all their needs, while the others were collective owners of land and therefore responsible for their own upkeep. In other words, the state, through administrative plan measures, defined social structure and deliberately crafted fundamentally different treatment of these two groups without any presumption of equal citizenship rights. In the 1970s, the people's communes entered into a crisis of demographic growth, with each commune having to accommodate almost double the population on the same piece of land (compared to the population pressure of the early 1950s); huge improvements in productivity had been achieved with labour-intensive measures such as irrigation, terracing, and soil improvements, but the state-owned sector could not meet the need for technological input such as farm machinery and chemical fertilisers. For these reasons, cultivation patterns had to shift towards grain (to meet both the state procurement quotas and the increasing demand for food grain in the villages), dramatically diminishing the ability to generate cash incomes from other agricultural pro-

ducts. The rural reforms starting in 1978 (and fully implemented in 1983) were a response to the crisis. By changing the collective cultivation of the land into household-based production and creating better terms of trade (exchange prices between the state and rural collective sectors), rural non-agricultural production was promoted, which generated opportunities for rural households to earn cash incomes. From the mid-1980s, rural-urban migration of workers began to take place, as the urban planning system (e.g. rationing of commodities and state monopsony of industrial products) was gradually replaced by market exchange. Rural-urban migrants could not normally become urban residents with full rights, and so they became a separate fragment of the urban economy; as their rights were still bound to the villages, they remitted a large share of their incomes to rural relatives, who still worked in agriculture in order to retain their right to land (and therefore a house and a home jurisdiction). The system introduced by the reforms in the 1980s thus created social and occupational barriers, as well as entirely different rights and income opportunities. Migrant workers supported loss-leading or poorly-rewarded agriculture with their remittances and supplied work in an urban setting at wages much lower than the incomes of urban residents, often working longer hours and doing tougher jobs. Although the hukou system changed over time (and was reformed differently in different jurisdictions), it has been retained until today in order to facilitate the upkeep of food security and rural "primitive accumulation" for industrialisation and urban expansion; in the 1990s, other forms of value transfer were tagged onto the rural-urban exchange system, including the requisitioning of rural land by the state, which allowed cities and real-estate companies to make windfall profits at the expense of peasants being evicted and rehoused.



(3) Temporary housing for the migrant workers next to the work site. They earn little, live cheaply and send money back to the village to maintain agricultural production.

This narrative is, of course, not a stated policy. In fact, the unequal rural-urban terms of trade (called the price scissors) were rarely mentioned in publicly available documents or in the media, and the reforms in the 1980s were presented as liberating the peasants' initiative and giving them more opportunities. Their "contributions" (gongxian) to urban development are recognised, but there is no public acknowledgement that the system was designed to create strong social and economic asymmetries. Management of "primitive accumulation" is an integral part of policy-making, with its origins in the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party and Marxist political economy. In the 1980s, a Chinese scholarly debate on Lewis-type dualism introduced the term "dual structure" (eryuan jiegou) to describe the planned or policy-guided rural-urban resource exchange relationship, and it is still being used to debate ways of dealing with rural-urban inequality.

The past few years have seen the emergence of urban-rural integration policy in top level policy-making. The aim is to change rural conditions towards more urban standards of life, for example by improving public provisions such as schools, medical clinics, social services and vocational training, reorganising local public finances, consolidating residential land-use, optimising agricultural land use, and regulating local enterprises better. With this comes the need to improve the conditions for rural migrant workers in the cities, in particular by formalising employment (contracts, pension, health and unemployment insurance contributions), improving housing, providing better public services, and reforming the household registration (or hukou) system. The latter, of course, is crucial, as migrants remain in a precarious situation until they have a permanent urban resident registration. Most of the policies to this end are in place, but they are not yet enforced everywhere and are

often difficult to implement in practical detail. The household registration system, for example, continues to be important across jurisdictions and in relation to a large number of administrative procedures, so that local changes to rules and practices can easily be in conflict with practices elsewhere. Another aspect that hinders the pace is the strategic need to change the direction of unskilled labour migration away from coastal areas, and to keep the mobile workforce flexible; the creation of entitlements and strong affective bonds in the cities of destination may be counterproductive in terms of development strategy and future planning.

The policy on migrant labour under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2002–2012) is to ultimately do away with the phenomenon (obliterating terms like *nongmingong*, *dagong*, i.e. "peasant worker" and "doing [odd] jobs" from the labour market terminology), yet the changes made are local and circumspect in order to retain flexibility so that each city can make political decisions based on its own particular circumstances.

For sociologists wishing to explore migrant work in China, these reflections are valuable because they place the individual occurrences in the broader context. True, cases of people going from one place to another to work can be examined, assuming that the situation is not much different from that in Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines or for that matter Europe, but it would at best be naïve to ignore the specific Chinese political teleology surrounding the issue, and meaningless to emphasise equal citizenship rights as long as policy-making ranks them lower than wider development aims.

Chinese migrant workers make up the main stock of employees in Hong Kong, Taiwan, foreign-invested and joint venture companies in China, as well as in companies that operate under outsourcing contracts with foreign companies. Regulation and policies relating to

inward investment in China have created highly favourable conditions for investors in competition with countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, and have provided Hong Kong and Taiwan businesses with opportunities for expanding their processing industries in cross-border arrangements that have allowed them to complete their transition towards services and technologically advanced production. China's economic openness to FDI and flexible adaptation of competitive practices were complemented in the early 2000s by accession to the World Trade Organization, and also manifested themselves in compliance with norms imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Concern has often been raised that the conditions of Chinese workers have suffered in China's "race to the bottom" and that China's social fabric is being torn apart by neo-liberal institutions of globalisation. However, the size of China's market, the strong government structures, the national planning and regulatory regimes, China's foreign currency reserves and investments in foreign financial instruments, plus the competition among foreign investors in China, give the Chinese authorities coordinated leverage in dealing with even large-scale transnational corporations that is available to few, if any, other nation-states. The Taiwanese investments in the Mainland are of such strategic importance for the Taiwanese economy that they constitute a main factor in cross-strait developments. Companies like Microsoft and Wal-Mart depend on China in so many respects for such a large part of their activities that their dealings with the Chinese authorities are – and have to be – circumspect. Even where Apple has outsourced substantial manufacturing activities in China to the Taiwanese company Foxconn, the practices in Foxconn's Mainland operations reflect on Apple's standing in China. China is, in other words, very skilful in hand-

ling global forces, using them strategically to achieve development aims. In that process, Chinese authorities have incrementally been able to set new conditions for FDI companies, bringing about a transition to more advanced technological and service levels in the littoral regions of China in the last few years and forcing more labour-intensive companies to relocate to the hinterland.

Similarly, millions of Chinese work in foreign countries under very diverse conditions. Their numbers and geographical spread has caused an interesting phenomenon to emerge, which can be referred to as a “transnational community”, an informal sphere of practices and services among Chinese abroad that provides Chinese individuals relatively predictable conditions and support. In addition, the Chinese authorities also interact with both Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese abroad with the aim of rallying their support for China’s development and upholding their links with kinsfolk and hometowns in China. That being said, the most interesting aspect of Chinese people working abroad is the fact that their formal status in the receiving countries determines their role in the labour markets, as it does in China. Undocumented or illegal immigrants, for example, tend to be recruited into informal sectors of the economy, where they work for low wages and under dangerous and insecure conditions; these sectors may be illegal, and may be proven to be illegal in occasional raids, yet their presence is desired because the cheap labour within them is considered beneficial to the economy as a whole, or at least because there is a strong market for their products. Whatever the reasons and mechanisms may be, precarious “illegal” segments of the labour markets in European countries are often imagined as “ethnic enclaves”, as a social other. Chinese people working in such parts of the labour markets in Europe or North America often earn more than they would in China and

can send part of their income back home to China. For them, migrating abroad is not much more of a boundary crossing than migrating to large cities in China, for even in China the hukou system would set them apart and subject them to more precarious conditions than those afforded to the locals. The informal “transnational community”, which provides similar and equally reliable local services in Chinese and is geared to Chinese workers in any country, ensures that Barcelona, Berlin or Boston may not seem that different from some of China’s large cities in terms of precarious working conditions, and the greater risks and hurdles are offset by the higher margins to be earned.

The global dimension has gained enormous importance in sociological approaches to China and yields important empirical insights into how China like any other nation state actively engages with globalisation and influences global institutions and practices.

These broad narratives of aggregate social change, however, are in many ways contextual, necessary background for reaching other aspects of empirical sociological research on how people live through such momentous, large-scale social changes, how their occupational opportunities change, how their families change, and how they use the resources and institutions available to them to change their own lives. These issues can only be examined in the smallest of samples, within the most primary units of social organisation. Much research has focused on atomised individuals in their destination areas, and other research has narrated the long-term migration experiences of one family group. These approaches have yielded important insights, but they often reflect the most radical forms of social change, the former in snapshots of individuals away from home, the other focusing attention on, for example, a family group removed from its social

context. Research could focus on the transition of a community from rural to urban; the peri-urban rural communities that are evicted from their land and rehoused in nearby residential areas as their former land becomes part of urban development are very interesting objects for research because they can tell us more about how new opportunities spawn new forms of social difference; through longer-term research, they can also tell us how families change, which family members leave, and how things change in family cycles in tandem with larger changes in the community and in society. We can experience how people’s value judgments change, how they define themselves in relation to other people in society, and we may ultimately be able to see urbanisation in terms of the ligaments that bind people together across generations. It may also be possible to observe how local authorities deploy their social knowledge of the changing communities to ease and accommodate change. Change, whilst dramatic in its total scale and sometimes causing local conflicts (euphemistically termed mass incidents – *quntixing shijian*), is quite often experienced as evolution, as new challenges that open up new perspectives and in retrospect seem less daunting. And if such change does indeed lead to greater individualisation and a more atomised society, long-term community and family-based research will let us know for certain. Interviewing ever so many young migrant workers in Beijing or Shenzhen as a snapshot will never be able to tell us whether and how their individualisation is affected over a lifetime.

It will be evident from the above deliberations that my approach gives weight to the intersection between political power and the transformation of Chinese society, and also that the research I engage in pragmatically seeks to explain what people actually do under the political, administrative and economic conditions that frame their lives. By focusing on the poli-



tical, I seek to make clear that my research strategies leave little room for ethnic essentialism, culturalism and exceptionalism as explanations. Where they are of importance, it is because they are claimed and used by people within their social and political context. Put plainly, I do not explain Chinese social behaviour with, for example, Confucianism, but I may examine why many Chinese people ascribe their own and their peers' social roles to that tradition.

One important dimension of any political sociology approach to Chinese society will always be to critically understand how Chinese and non-Chinese sociologists alike contribute to the political processes of social transformation in China through their research activities. I believe that the normative political impact of the creation of sociological knowledge is not particular to China, but critically appraising it seems more imperative there than anywhere else. By way of example, the creative adaptation of "foreign" sociological, political and political economy terminology such as "community", "civil society", "Lewis-type dualism", "citizenship" and so on in China has been so closely linked with dominant political discourses in the country that a conceptual back-translation is necessary.

Another dimension of a political sociology approach to China is the need to relate Chinese social developments to global issues, the global supply chains of labour, services, consumption, finance and manufacturing that currently have such a huge impact on how Chinese society develops. Basically all Chinese entrepreneurs, consumers, investors and workers across the world, including in China, make both global and nationalistic claims and assert both cosmopolitan and ethnic identities to the extent that their employment, family life and social status should be understood as contingent on the global context. The Chinese nation-state facilitates the globalisation

process and uses its dynamics to further its own (national) interests. The point is not that globalisation is "wrenching China open", but that Chinese people and authorities alike make claims on global processes and institutions, thus helping to frame them.

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### Zusammenfassung

Die großschalige Arbeitsmigration innerhalb Chinas und aus dem Land hinaus stellt nicht nur ein abstraktes Narrativ von politisch-ökonomischen Prozessen der sich wandelnden Planwirtschaft dar, sondern fordert dazu heraus, die Vielfalt der sozialen Vorgänge, der lokalen politischen Entscheidungsmuster und der individuellen Praxis zu erforschen. Dabei ist zu beachten, dass das chinesische politische System mehr auf Planung als auf soziale Gerechtigkeit setzt und zielbewusst Ungleichheiten zum Einsatz bringt, um Entwicklungsziele zu erreichen. Die Überschreitung der „Grenze“ zwischen Stadt und Land dient sowohl dem Lebensunterhalt der Familien der Migrantinnen und Migranten auf dem Land (und somit der nachhaltigen Versorgung von Agrarprodukten) als auch (wegen der ausbeuterischen Ungleichheiten am Arbeitsmarkt) dem städtischen Wachstum. Diese Einsicht muss der Erforschung der politischen Soziologie Chinas zugrunde liegen. Diese innerchinesische Situation ist allerdings auch der der chinesischen Arbeitsmigranten im Ausland ähnlich, die ein marginalisiertes Prekariat formen. Der chinesische Staat nutzt die globalen Strukturen durch strategische Lenkung nicht nur, um ausländische Investitionen von steigendem technologischen Mehrwert heranzuziehen, sondern auch, um chinesische Arbeitsmigranten im Ausland für Chinas Wirtschaftswachstum einzusetzen. In diesem Sinne ist die politische Soziologie Chinas das Studium einer sozialen

Lebenswelt, die durch politischen Eingriff in die nationale und globale politische Ökonomie gekennzeichnet ist.

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**DOI:** 10.17185/duepublico/73903  
**URN:** urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20210204-114523-7

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