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research ARTICLE

A Country on the Move: Realities, Reform, and the Future of Rural to Urban Migration in China

—Susannah Pratt (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

Had you asked me a year ago what I knew about China, I would have told you about the country's history—that for centuries it was governed by an imperial system that was transformed in the 20th Century into a strict, communist state under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Asked about contemporary China, I would have mentioned the rapidly expanding economy, the outsourcing of millions of jobs to China's low-paid work force, and perhaps I might have remembered reading about the Three Gorges Dam. Beyond that, though, last year China was little more to me than a monolithic, communist state, so foreign and incomprehensible that trying to understand it, or even being *interested* in it, appeared altogether too daunting.

Many reading this might also have the same feeling about China. After all, what articles we do read about the country often concern very complicated economics and politics, issues not easy to digest. For this reason, when deciding where to study abroad, China was not somewhere I had considered. It was only after taking a "Politics in Asia" course that I discovered how fascinating China truly is; and so I decided to spend my junior year spring semester in Shanghai.

China from Western Eyes

Needing a focus for my research, I chose to investigate the income gap between the rich and the poor in China, a topic I knew little about at the time. After some background research, I realized that the wealth gap is very closely related to rural-urban migration; and so I set out to explore this newly occurring phenomenon.



Based out of Shanghai, I spent ten weeks analyzing Western and Chinese academic research, visiting migrant enclaves, volunteering at a migrant school, collaborating with Chinese organizations addressing rural migrants living in Shanghai, and conducting interviews to collect as much information as I could about a topic that is widely misunderstood in the West.

(Left) Rush hour traffic on the streets of Shanghai

Understanding Rural to Urban Migration

For any tourist visiting a Chinese city, one of the most noticeable sights is the number of homeless and impoverished on the streets. These individuals are often darker skinned and visually distinct from more fair-skinned urban dwellers. This is because most are migrants who have moved from China's rural interior to the cities in search of higher salaries, new opportunities, and a higher quality of life. The sheer size of China creates tremendous racial and ethnic diversity among provinces, and migrants from rural China are often physically distinguishable from the urban dwellers.



A group of migrant workers work late into the night repairing the sidewalk of Shanghai's infamous Bund.

Out of a population of 1.3 billion, approximately 120 million Chinese belong to this "floating population" (Solinger). Of Shanghai's 20 million people, some four million are considered migrants, meaning one in every five people on the street is a migrant worker (Wang and Zuo, 277). Within the last fifteen years, rapid urbanization has exponentially increased the demand for cheap labor, and migrants have flooded the cities to capitalize on this change. Other causes of rural to urban migration include the small amounts of arable land available to large populations of agricultural workers; increased unemployment due to agricultural modernization; and high salaries in urban areas, sometimes five times that earned in the countryside.

Most migrant workers are in their late teens to early 20s, about 80% have only primary or middle school education, and 70% are males (Cheng Li, 1137). Most seek work in construction, factories, restaurants, domestic services, and prostitution. These jobs require long hours and include dangerous, undesirable tasks which most urban citizens feel overqualified for (Wang and Zuo, 277).



Migrant workers precariously hang off a newly built-sky-rise, securing an advertisement for cellular phones.

During my time in Shanghai I was able to develop close friendships with many migrant workers who lived in my neighborhood. Mr. Ma, a self-employed telephone card salesman from Jiang'su Province, was one such friend. Lured by the prospect of a higher salary, Mr. Ma left his family in 1980 and worked odd jobs for years without ever seeking a permanent professional position. In the late 1990s, when cellular phones became popular, Mr. Ma began selling phone cards from a makeshift stand on the street. To this day, every morning he sets up a chair in front of the Taiwanese pancake restaurant,

props up a small table, opens his briefcase of telephone cards, and sells his merchandise from dawn until dusk. When I asked him about life as a migrant worker, he replied with a shrug, "It wasn't all that bad." In the early 1990s, his wife and children moved to Shanghai to join him, and although removed from mainstream society, they have been able to create a good life for themselves. After a slight pause, Mr. Ma did confess to me that, even after twenty-five years of living in Shanghai, his home is still in Jiang'su.



The aftermath of government demolition to a low-income housing area in western Shanghai.

Upon arrival in the cities most migrants congregate in small cuns, which are neighborhoods on the periphery of the city made up of low-income, low-quality, and rather dilapidated housing developments. Because of this, the Chinese government has embarked on numerous campaigns to demolish these cuns. One of the most famous and written-about demolition campaigns took place in the mid-1990s in the Zhejiang cun of Beijing, when some 100,000 migrants were displaced from their homes (Li Zhang).

About five minutes away from my University was one such migrant cun, and for research purposes I took to walking through this area on my way home from school. Throughout the summer I conducted informal interviews and observed the overall dynamics of the community. The neighborhood was located at a sewage drop-off point on Suzhou creek, causing the community to perpetually smell of trash and waste. The cun itself was a labyrinth of narrow alleyways, each lined with crumbling, concrete, two-level houses, normally without front doors or permanent windows. Colorful laundry decorated the alleyways, and furniture, buckets, and toys scattered the ground. According to the inhabitants, the community was comprised primarily of migrant workers who worked at nearby construction sites, although some low-income Shanghainese also rented spaces. Those I interviewed said their cun had very little contact with the police or government, and that they were living self-sufficiently and removed from the larger Changning District that surrounded them.

Migration Confronts the Hukou System

The above scenario might sound similar to the situation of immigrants in our own country, and to a large degree it is. However, where a major difference lies in what's known as the *hukou*, a registration system that officially divides Chinese society into rural and urban dwellers depending upon one's place of birth.



A photo taken of the Suzhou cun, juxtaposed to the high-income, newly constructed urban apartments in the background

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao Zedong's intention was to create productive socialist communes; the hukou facilitated this by preventing citizens from leaving their communities. Although the internal social and political dynamics of China have greatly changed since that time, the hukou remains largely in effect today.

What is most important to note is that the type of registration one holds also determines one's social welfare benefits. Your place of birth dictates the

quality of education you receive, government subsidies, and what kind of retirement plan you may collect. In urban areas, schools, hospitals, and welfare programs are considerably more modernized than those in rural

areas, and urban citizens have a much higher quality of life than rural dwellers. Because of this, if rural hukou holders decide to migrate to the cities, they become part of a marginalized constituency, exempt from the social services provided to urban citizens with whom they co-exist.



Xiao Wang and I standing together in our apartment in Shanghai

During my time abroad I lived with a Chinese host family, and we had a live-in maid or aiyi ("Auntie") who was a migrant worker from Henan province. Xiao Wang, or Little Wang, was 39-years-old and had moved to Shanghai in 2005 to make more money and improve the life of her family. She left behind her husband and two sons, ages 7 and 8, and followed in the path of her older sister, who had moved to Shanghai four years earlier. Upon arrival in the city, Xiao Wang went to an unregistered maid agency that links families with migrants. My host family was the first that Xiao Wang had worked for, and she considered herself lucky because of her living and working conditions.

Because Xiao Wang, like many migrants, holds a rural hukou, she has no social security, insurance, or health care. When asked what she would do if she got sick, she said her only option would be to return home for medical treatment. Once a month, Xiao Wang sends nearly her entire salary back to Henan. She plans to stay in Shanghai as long as she needs money, but she said that the separation from her family might be a reason to move home sooner.

Reform of the Hukou

Although the hukou legally prevents migrants like Xiao Wang from moving to the cities, the government has recently created temporary residency permits to allow some migrants to live and work in cities for limited periods of times. To receive this permit a migrant must possess proof of permanent housing within the city and of a secure job, and possess an identification card. This temporary permit then grants migrants certain urban social services, including education for their children, health insurance, and access to government sponsored social outreach programs.



Although working for the betterment and urbanization of the city, these migrants will remain excluded from elevated lifestyles of upper-class urban dwellers.

This may seem like a viable option, but less than 50% of migrants actually apply for and receive this permit (Human Rights in China, 2002). This is because the cuns that most migrants live in do not pass for adequate housing, their jobs are often temporary and informal, and the temporary permit costs 30 Yuan (\$7.00), which most migrants feel is too expensive. Although this amount may seem small, many migrants told me the "extra" social benefits authorized by the permit were too few and so rarely granted that the permit was a strain on their already limited funds.

Education and Discrimination

One of the most contentious issues regarding migration is attendance in city schools. Although recent reforms mandate that all children have the right to education, only children whose parents possess temporary residency permits can attend urban schools. Even then local law enforcement corruption and inherent discrimination prevent these rules from always being honored. Permit-holding migrant families often have to bribe their way into urban schools by paying higher tuitions, *jiedufei*, which can be three times that which urban families pay. For poor migrant workers, high school tuitions are not an option and statistics show that in 2000, only 20–30% of migrant children in Shanghai attended local schools. (Nikopoulos and Qian, 2)

I asked a government official about the *jiedufei*, and she quickly denied its existence, assuring me that any migrant child could enroll in any urban school! Very confused, I discussed the issue with my host mother, who explained to me that this was a very typical party-line response. She told me that no migrant children attend her son's school; and, because of the school's high reputation, migrant students would never be accepted. When I questioned my migrant friends about the *jiedufei*, all explained they paid it annually. These conflicting responses demonstrate the inconsistencies between government and public views of migration in China.

Beyond school segregation, a temporary permit also does not reduce the inherent social discrimination directed toward migrant workers. Although these actions are entirely illegal, the old saying that in China "Law is law, practice is practice" explains this corruption. Whereas at the top legislative level the government may take steps to reform the Hukou, these laws can be manipulated at the local level for individual benefits.



One bystander steps forward to defend the migrant woman, but the police officer remains unmoved and holds fast to her license

I witnessed an unforgettable example of this on an early morning in the park, where I noticed two police officers arguing with an older lady who was selling flowers from her bicycle cart. Suspecting this woman to be a migrant worker, I joined the bystanders and watched the scene unfold. Apparently the police officers had seen the woman selling her flowers in an unregistered area and therefore demanded proof of her temporary residency permit. The woman provided the officers with a license, but they said this was not enough proof and confiscated her license. As she stood there with tears streaming down her cheeks, begging them not to take away her livelihood, they began

deflating the tires of her bicycle. Not only was I struck by the blatant corruption occurring before my eyes, but I couldn't believe that none of the bystanders intervened on the woman's behalf.

Signs of Change

In light of such a grim situation, in recent years the government has initiated some programs to address the plight of migrant workers in China's cities. Wuzhong Lu Primary School, where I volunteered as an English teacher, is funded entirely by the government and enrolls close to 500 students who were denied entrance to city schools. The principal of the school, a government employee, explained to me that education is seen as



Students from the Wuzhong School pose excitedly for their first-ever digital picture.

the best way to prevent migrant children from working illegally in the cities, and that educated children will make better lives for themselves and share what they have learned with their villages back home. At Wuzhong Lu School tuition is subsidized to 50 Yuan (approximately \$6.50 US dollars) per student per semester, which is affordable for most families. Like any public school, issues of limited funds for supplies are a constant problem, but the school provides a tremendous service to migrant children.

The second organization I volunteered at was the All-Women's Federation, Putuo, Shanghai. It is a community center that focuses primarily on the legal protection of women and children's rights, but in recent years the government has allocated specific funding for migrant worker outreach. The center offers professional training seminars, childcare facilities, career advising, financial aid and health consultations, and counseling services. Although this is quite remarkable, the center, like Wuzhong Lu Primary School, can only be used by permit-holding migrants, and therefore is not accessible to everyone in need.

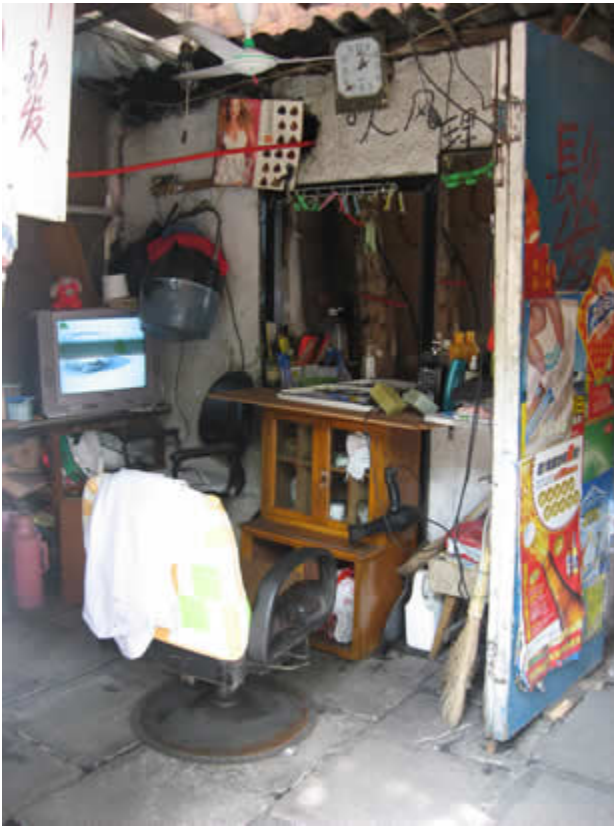


Yao Jun, Head of the All Women's Federation, shows us around the pediatrics and childcare unit of the migrant outreach center.

Looking Toward the Future

Although these programs indicate reform is taking place, the reality is that migration into cities is rapidly increasing, and government initiatives are occurring too slowly. Almost all of these programs remain open only to those possessing legal permits, meaning 50% of migrants must survive completely on their own. Although the economic, social, and political effects of migration remain to be seen, many academics have predicted potentially damaging future implications both in the cities and for China on the whole. I conducted a rather salient interview with a Chinese professor of urban development and social change, who alerted me to many of these issues.

One topic we discussed was how the social dynamics of society are changing as migrants establish self-sustaining neighborhoods like the one I frequented on Suzhou creek. Because these migrants cannot access social services, they often establish private, unlicensed businesses, schools, and hospitals. The government repeatedly deems these facilities "unsafe" and "unfit," and many are closed down. However, what these schools and hospitals demonstrate is the creation of a new social society, completely outside the government's control. In the wake of China's communist past, self-sustaining, private communities are revolutionary and have the potential to socially challenge the one-party state.



A privately owned and run migrant barbershop within the Suzhou community demonstrates the entrepreneurial endeavors migrants are embarking on within their communities.

We also discussed economics and the fact that the development of China simply cannot exist without cheap labor from migrant workers. Should migrants demand better living standards and/or treatment through strikes or protests, this would dramatically impact production and development in the cities. My Chinese professor argued that this is the greatest threat currently facing China's economic growth.

Politically, the migrant population could have a large impact on the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Communist Party has deliberately avoided the creation of social and political groups, but under leadership and organization, migrants could generate a very influential and powerful mass that could politically compete with or threaten the CCP.

Because of the dramatic political, social, and economic ways that migration could impact Chinese cities, current trends and transformations must be observed carefully. Although these issues are easy to write-off as "China's problem," whatever happens in China will be felt across the globe. As it becomes more intimately linked to the West, China is no longer the foreign and distant country that it was ten years ago; and understanding internal Chinese issues like rural to urban migration is tremendously important to understanding a country that will impact everyone in the West for years to come. My entire experience in China, particularly my ten weeks of research, not only alerted me to this fact, but it also generated within me a passion to make understanding China and all its intricacies a lifelong goal.

Foremost thanks go to UNH Professor Chris Reardon who not only introduced me to China in the first place, but who has also supported and helped me along as a mentor and friend throughout my collegiate experience. I also owe tremendous thanks to the UNH Hood House, SURF, and study abroad staff who have dealt with my many unique circumstances and pursuits as an undergraduate. My research and experience in China would also never have been as successful without the friendship and teachings of Cathy Zhu, Yao Jun, Mingzheng Shi, my fellow classmates, and my local friends in Shanghai.

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Author Bio

Senior **Susannah Pratt** will graduate from the University of New Hampshire in May 2007 with a dual major in international affairs and political science and an Asian studies minor. She grew up in Garmisch, Germany. What began as a study abroad semester in Shanghai in 2006 extended to a summer research project funded through the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF Abroad) program. "Everything I read and saw concerning migration in China was completely eye-opening and new to me," she said. "What left the strongest impression on me was the resilience of the migrant workers, particularly their determination to improve their lives in the cities albeit with little help from the government." By focusing her work on migrant workers, Susannah discovered "how many variables and intricacies contribute to the wider politics and social dynamics of a state as large as China." She found her research experience highly satisfying and was astonished by how emotionally involved she became by studying something so in depth. Susannah also experienced a terrific sense of accomplishment in being able to conduct interviews on a sensitive matter in a foreign language: "Conducting research in China not only strengthened my passion for the country, but it also motivated me further to improve my language skills. Being able to communicate confidently in a foreign language opens up hundreds of doors, and allows you to develop friendships and trust which otherwise would not be established."

After graduating from UNH, Susannah's primary goal is to become fluent in Mandarin. After that, she says, "both government and private sector work interest me, and I could see myself working on bilateral relations between the U.S. and China."

Mentor Bio

Lawrence C. Reardon is an associate professor of political science and coordinator of the Asian studies minor at the University of New Hampshire. A frequent mentor, he also serves as Susannah Pratt's advisor for the international affairs/political science dual major. "I was thrilled to have a student carrying out research in China using Chinese," said Reardon. "Susannah established an excellent working relationship with local scholars and was able to begin to investigate the tremendous changes taking place in China and especially Shanghai," he continued. "I can only imagine that this will be the first of many trips to China for Susannah." Dr. Reardon specializes in international relations and international political economy, and has taught at UNH since 1991.