**Abstract**

**C**hina’s *hukou* system, a household registration system implemented to prevent mass exodus from the impoverished countryside to the urbanized cities, divides the people of the country into urban and rural residents. A resident’s accessibility to social services and welfare benefits is determined by the *hukou* and depends on the local policies. Hence, the entitlement to enjoy state services such as education, health care and pension retirement is not equal across the China’s provinces.

The overall problematic of being a resident in an urban city while holding a rural-*hukou* are the constraints found within the social security system preventing the migrants from fully becoming a part of the society in which they live and work. But another policy within the system highly debated in contemporary China is the policy of inheritance; in short, the *hukou* is inherited.

Inheritance of the *hukou* means that children of migrant workers are not entitled to enjoy state services on equal terms with their urban peers, even though they are born and raised in the cities. Due to the designation as a rural resident, migrant parents have to comply with a special set of rules requiring extensive prerequisites in order to let their child enroll into an urban school. Furthermore, if a rural *hukou*-holding child wishes to obtain higher education, the student is required to go back to the province in which the *hukou* have been issue and sit the entrance exam allowing the student to enroll into an urban-located college or university.

**T**he primary focus of the thesis is China’s *hukou* system and the societal challenges and social consequences of its limitation to adaption, integration and social inclusion with a special view to China’s urban-residing second-generation migrant children. Moreover, attention will be paid to the level of engagement demonstrated and exercised by additional actors in the debate on maintenance or abolition of the system serving to illuminate the impact of social stratification and status attainment.

* *Rikke Dige Honum*

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**The *Hukou***

**– Societal Challenges and Social Consequences**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Key words: hukou, second-generation migrant children, urbanization, reform

**The *Hukou***

For more than half a century, the people of China have been subject to a system geographically segregating the citizens into rural and urban populations. The *hukou* system, primarily defined as a powerful tool to perform public administration, is characterized by its bifurcated method of maintaining social control. Itis a compulsory registration of a resident’s household determining the individual’s access to state services.

Originally, the geographical division served to control mass exodus of rural migrants to China’s urban areas, but over time the implementation of the system has turned out to create a critical distinction within the people bringing about social, economic and political implications.

The *hukou* is inherited. Practically, this means that children to migrant parents holding a rural *hukou* are categorized as rural residents, even if they are born and/or raised in China’s urban areas. As a consequence, the access to education is significantly limited for China’s urban-residing second-generation migrant children who have inherited a rural *hukou;* a little red book defining their social status regarded as secondary importance compared to their peers holding an urban *hukou*.

The reduced opportunity for second-generation migrant children to enroll into urban schools caused by factors found within the *hukou* system and the educational administrative system related to it, has resulted in more cases of social unrest among migrant parents as well as the children themselves. As a result of the great disparity within the urban-residing populations, most of China’s metropolitan cities are today comprised by two socially diverse classes of citizenship.

Over time, a number of laws and regulations to the prevailing *hukou* system have been enacted by governing administrations, and since the 1970s, migratory controls have been significantly lifted. Despite the legislative proposals, hesitation to implement the initiatives has however been reigning among China’s local governments. Consequently, a huge number of the second-generation migrant children are still obliged to comply with constrained local regulations and are continuously being denied access to enrolling into urban schools as well as carrying out further exams allowing them to obtain higher education.

Because of these constrained conditions, the number of campaigns leading to confrontations between migrant families and local urban citizens has over the years been steadily increasing. Equal stratal tensions are in evidence in the relation between local governments and residing migrant workers; a relationship characterized by a lack of social trust from time to time resulting in violent clashes. For these reason, the legal and social framework of the *hukou* system has over the years become a crucial political issue.

**PROBLEM FORMULATION**

***Why has reforming of China’s household registration system, the hukou, in recent years become crucial to China’s second-generation migrant children in the contemporary debate on the inheritance of unequal opportunities?***

* What are the main issues of the *hukou* system in contemporary China?
* In what ways does the *hukou* constitute a barrier to obtaining an education for second-generation migrant children in the cities?
* Who are the main actors of the debate and what are their responses to the discussion on maintenance or abolition of the system?

**2. METHODOLOGY**

*The Hermeneutic Circle* will throughout the thesis constitute as a means to understand and interpret a number of fundamental issues found within the *hukou* system. The problem formulation and the appurtenant sub-questions serve to frame the observed issues contributing to the discussion of the social consequences of the *hukou.* The methodological angle of the hermeneutic circle supports the understanding of the incorporated concept of social and human capital. In immediate continuation hereof, selected theories and theoretical aspect as well as selected empirical data applied as a means to address the issues of the system in contemporary China will be presented.

**The Hermeneutic Circle**

The method of obtaining an understanding of - as well as gaining knowledge about a certain factor is called *hermeneutic*. The hermeneutic circle elucidates the process of alternating understanding and pre-understanding and is often applied in studies where the empirical data consist of qualitative outcomes that cannot be measured on a scale[[1]](#footnote-1) as seen in the societal challenges and social consequences of the Chinese household registration system.

In this thesis, the hermeneutic circle will be applied to obtain an understanding of the *hukou* system and its reception in contemporary China. By means of the analytical aspects of the hermeneutic circle, the thesis strives to gain an insight into institutions as well as populations associated with China’s current issue on social deprivation and economic inequality, especially noticeable in the cities. The 4 relevant actors incorporated in the understanding process are: the central government, the local governments, the urban residents, and the migrants.

Especially by reason of the many internal disputes alongside with external critics of the system, I find it interesting and highly relevant in the light of China’s rapid development to take a look into the above-stated involved parties and examine their arguments for and against a preservation of the system.

**Aim and Scope**

Throughout the last century, debates on stabile and sustainable societal development have increasingly been characterized by the importance of incorporating different kinds of capitals. Viewed primarily through an economic lens considering labor skills and knowledge as important features, the notion of the concept went from the primer view to the overall market interest of producing actual *economic capital* to incorporating *human capital.*

The discussion on “capitals” has along the way been incorporating many aspects. The integration of human values - individual’s engagement in societal affairs, interaction and networking – has presented the presence of *social capital* as the structure of and bond between economic and human capital.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet, long before the term became one of the most popular exports from the sociological field applied onto everyday affairs, the Austrian theoretician Peter Michael Blau already in the mid 1950s displayed his interest in social phenomena. Despite the fact that the apparently intangible factors explaining the essence and significance of social and human capital can seem rather complex when connecting them with real life, Blau worked out numerous studies within the field of social strata and structures in an attempt to explain their influence on daily life in terms of social exchange and social integration. The formulation of theoretical schemes to explain social differentiation led to a book on exchange theory.

Many scholars have throughout time contributed to the discussion on social capital, among these Bourdieu 1980, 1983/1986; Lin 1982; and Putnam 1993*[[3]](#footnote-3)* and during the 80s and 90s theoretical aspects, especially focusing on the concept from a sociological perspective, were developed. Alejandro Portes is one of the scholars who, through his work as a sociologist and on the basis of his personal history, worked out studies on - and developed acknowledged theoretical aspects to the importance of understanding the two-sided phenomenon of “capital”.

Recently, University lecturer in Sociology of China, Rachel Murphy has indirectly contributed to the discussion on social and human capital in contemporary China by examining the country’s divisive dualistic socio-economy. Her primer focus area comprises migrant workers who she argues are considered as economic labors rather than as complex human beings.[[4]](#footnote-4)

While Murphy argues that social development goes hand in hand with economic development, the deeper view into the social and political status quo in contemporary China as a general topic throughout the book clearly displays the issue of the government’s vested interest in economic development; a predominant focus on economic development that has meant a neglect of social concerns and brought about critical human costs.

**Opting In and Opting Out**

The main concern of this thesis is the social consequences of the *hukou* system. Among other highlighted factors are the restrictions within the system imposed on China’s second-generation migrant children hindering them from obtaining an education. Regrettably, this system has not only affected the educational system by excluding numerous of students from enrolling into urban schools, it has along with its constraints brought about a society characterized by its divergence and divisiveness within the people. Therefore, the thesis strives to provide a thorough examination on current issues through a number of theories and theoretical perspectives.

Noticeably, the selected theories and theoretical perspectives represent three different points of return, they are formulated upon research from three very different case studies and they represent three time perspectives. Nevertheless, they all study the influence of social stratification and status attainment, the social consequences and economic costs of unequal distribution of resources, adaptation, integration, and social inclusion.

The selected theories and theoretical viewpoints that throughout the thesis will constitute as analytical material derive from studies by Alejandro Portes & Alejandro Rivas, Peter Michael Blau and Rachel Murphy, respectively.

In the light of the premise behind the notion of social capital and human capital, the thesis will start by looking at the situation of China’s second-generation migrant children through Portes’ immigration theory framed by Portes and Rivas’ study on adaption of migrant children.

Despite the fact that Portes and Rivas’ theoretical contributions have arisen from the operation of examining *immigrants* crossing national borders to settle, I have come to the conclusion that the thoughts behind their way of operating, examining and analyzing the process of successful integration of immigrants for the purpose of generating a healthy and equal society in certain aspects highly resembles the current situation of migrants in China. Furthermore, the consequences of failed social inclusion put forward in their study leave the impression of not only reflecting the situation of the Hispanic and Asian American immigrants crossing national borders but also to a great extent the situation of migrant workers crossing borders inside their own country.

On the other hand, unquestionably, applying a theory developed from the study of Hispanic and Asian American immigrants crossing national borders to reside in another country than their country of origin naturally distinguish their situation from that of China’s migrant population. Hence, the theory will also include an elaboration on these tangible differences.

In the second part of the thesis, aspects formulated by Peter Michael Blau will be applied in the analysis of the hierarchical system that characterizes contemporary China, and the status difference that to a large extent hinders migrant children and their families from initiating campaigns against unequal opportunities and political interfering in national policies.

In order to reflect the actual situation of contemporary China, I have chosen to include theoretical aspects formulated by Rachel Murphy. The theoretical and analytical perspectives on contemporary China derives from her contribution to *Labour Migration and Social Development in Contemporary China*.[[5]](#footnote-5) By focusing attention to the largely overlooked human costs for migrant families and the second-generation migrant children, Murphy demonstrates the neglect of social concerns as a consequence of the overshadowing focus on economic development. She addresses the issue of the lack of interaction among social strata and calls for attention to the relationship between migration and development.

**Empirical Framework**

The empirical data will primarily consist of studies on the *hukou* system published in books and journals*.* Furthermore, recent newspaper articles, TV news, broadcasts and documentaries all reporting about or directly from China will be applied to explain, discuss and analyze the current issues of China’s household registration system.

In the process of obtaining relevant empirical data, I judged that the selected contemporary studies would contribute with a deep understanding of - and thoughts behind the system. The secondhand empirical data incorporate thorough studies with a close view into the issues of the *hukou* highly relevant in the process of suggesting possible answers to the problem formulation. I considered the possibility of incorporating firsthand materials but came to the conclusion that only a limited number of cases would not be sufficient in the process of elucidating an issue that concerns millions of people. Moreover, the problem formulation and the additional sub-questions discuss the involved actors and question their responses to the current debate. Single individuals would have only limited opportunities to contribute with adequate information. Therefore, I chose to not acquire firsthand materials.

**3. THEORY**

To get a deep insight into the underlying thoughts behind the selected theories, the theory part will hereby provide an elaboration on the theoretical viewpoints that will be applied as a means to illuminate, examine and analyze the problem formulation attempting to address the issues of the *hukou* system in contemporary China.

* **Alejandro Portes**

Alejandro Portes is professor of sociology; today assigned the position as premier sociologist at Princeton University and faculty associate of the Woodrow Wilson School of public affairs, NJ. Born in Havana, Cuba, Portes himself became an immigrant when he left his home country in 1960 to migrate to the United States as a political exile.

During his career, Portes has composed some 200 articles primarily concerned with *immigration*, *national development*, and *economic sociology*. Winner of the Robert Park award for the book within the field of urban sociology, *City on the Edge, Transformation of Miami* (1993) from the American Sociological Association in 1995, the Cuban-American sociologist is a highly recognized researcher within the sociological field of studies. [[6]](#footnote-6)

In order to understand the social consequences of being a migrant, Portes commenced examine social stratification and status attainment focusing primarily on migration and social integration. He later combined these fields of study with his interest in urbanization and local as well as national development.

Subsequent studies also include the *informal economy* examining the ramifications an economy running parallel with the state economy, primarily consisting of unregulated service jobs, such as construction work and service sector jobs. Portes saw how workers laboring under such conditions were deprived from enjoying the same social security net as registered employers. Furthermore, a consequence was the missing access to basic public services, such as health care and education.[[7]](#footnote-7)

After the composition of *SOCIAL CAPITAL: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology*[[8]](#footnote-8) discussing the reliability of the concept *social capital* to explain different social problems and processes in general, Portes began to study concrete groups of people and their methods of adapting into new societies on the basis of on the one hand, being able to produce human capital, and on the other hand being met with a positive reception in the receiving society.

Upon the study of the necessity of human and social capital within a given society incorporating among other factors *positive reception*, *equal rights* and to a great extent also the opportunity to educate enabling economic development and political stability, Portes formulated the theory:

*“Immigrants are often* in *the society, but not yet* of *it,”[[9]](#footnote-9)*

From centering his early work on first-generation immigrants, Portes later included the second generation – a generation born and grown up in the given society. Knowing that these second-generation children’s environment mainly would be characterized by their current life but most likely also heavily marked by their cultural background, Portes followed the process of the second-generation and their adaption into the society.

Focusing on the fact that the first-generation of immigrants possibly might return to their place of origin while the second-generation perceiving the receiving place as their home most likely had come to stay, Portes put forward the theoretical perspective:

*“Whether [the children] succeed or not, economically and socially, will determine the fate of the ethnic groups that come out of today's immigration as they did for Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and Italian Americans in the past.”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Seen from a wider perspective when talking assimilation and social integration of a given group of people, Portes’ outcome of the surveys put an emphasis on the importance of a centered **integration** strategy with the key concept of “segmented assimilation”. The segmented assimilation illustrates the division between different groups of the society and acknowledging that successful assimilation might require both different technical strategies and practical methods.

In 2011, Portes and his colleague Alejandro Rivas thereby initiated a study on the societal process of adapting migrant children.

* **Alejandro Portes & Alejandro Rivas**

Incorporating crucial points within the process of enabling a positive outcome of the second-generation’s ability to integrate into the society, culturally as well as socio-economically, the *The Adaption of Migrant Children* (2011) examines how young migrants adapt to life in given society and advances suggestions to facilitate such circumstances. Through the undertaking of researching the integration process with a view to understanding what goes *ahead* of successful integration, Portes and Rivas incorporate values such as the degree of human capital embedded in the culture of origin, and the importance of a good reception in the hosting society. [[11]](#footnote-11)

*The Adaption of Migrant Children* discusses the issue of the existence of two socially diverse classes of citizenship and recognizes the sharp distinction that has arisen within populations of heterogeneous societies or societies characterized by a high number of newcomers. Portes and Rivas state:

*“The overall advancement of the immigrant population, however, is largely driven by the good performance and outcomes of youths from professional immigrant families, positively received in America. For immigrants at the other end of the spectrum, average socioeconomic outcomes are driven down by the poorer educational and economic performance of children from unskilled migrant families, who are often handicapped further by an unauthorized or insecure legal status.”[[12]](#footnote-12)*

After identifying large disparities in resources available to the immigrant families, the two sociologists are here raising the dilemma of the sharp division *within* a population living side by side in a given society.

The important point is not whether the population is constituted by a group of Americans and a group of Hispanic immigrants or by a group of urban dwellers and rural migrants, the prime concern regards the second-generation migrants children’s ability to overcome societal obstacles by letting them-selves integrate into the society. In other words, both the hosting society *and* the settlers are responsible for the establishment of a stabile society with development potential.

**Second-generation Migrant Studies**

The studies of the second-generation migrant children are to a great extent focusing on the contrast between being *of* the society or simply residing *in* it implying that the differences are crucial to future development of any community, greater society or a whole nation.

Noticing that *The Adaption of Migrant Children* is a view into the situation of Asian American and Hispanic young immigrants and their welfare in the US makes it clear that Portes and Rivas’ case study differs from that of this thesis. However, I have chosen to apply the rather questionable yet very interesting theory and additional theoretical formulations onto the problem formulation, as China’s *hukou* system often has been criticized for treating the urban resided migrant workers as immigrant despite the fact that this population *is* in fact of Chinese origin and not – as in the case of Portes and Rivas’ studies of Hispanics and Asian-Americans – foreigners choosing to reside outside their country of origin.

Hence, the intention of this thesis is to apply the message *behind* the theories onto the case of the second-generation migrants currently resident in China’s urban areas with a special view to social deprivation caused by the inheritance of unequal opportunities. The aspect regarding the importance of a good reception in the receiving destination will as well be utilized in the process of analyzing the ability to perform both socially and economically among children from unskilled migrant families.

**Limitation due to Differentiations**

As highlighted in *Aim and Scope,* noticeable circumstances distinguish the situation within the studies by Portes and Portes & Rivas from that of this thesis. Hence, the following paragraphs serve to display both evident differences between as well as vital similarities within the two cases.

Firstly, the concrete focus in Portes and Rivas’ study looks at the situation of Hispanic and Asian American *immigrants*, whereas this study intends to examine that of China’s *migrant* population.

Secondly, the physical relation to an individual’s place of origin reflected in the visibly different appearance between Hispanics and Asian American immigrants vis-à-vis their native US peers, which clearly distinguish the situation of immigrants in America from the migrants in China’s because the latter category comprise only native Chinese.

Thirdly, the mental relation to a settler’s place of origin plays an important role in the process of adapting to another. Many Chinese migrant workers have a strong social as well as economical relation to their place of origin, which helps explaining why many hold on to their rural *hukou*.

First of all, first-generation migrants oftentimes consider their place of origin as their actual home while the urban home constitutes as a temporary working place for which reason they also tends to leave the cities at festivals, such as the Chinese New Year. By bringing along their children, the second-generation migrant children residing in the urban cities, the parents give their children an opportunity to bond with the region to which their hukou belongs.

Moreover, the reason why many migrant workers insist on maintaining their rural *hukou* is due to the current requirement stipulating them to give up their rights to use farmlands and housing sites. Exchanging a rural *hukou* for an urban one means that one cannot anymore claim the right to receive economic recompense in compensation for seized land; a compensation that authorities currently are obliged to issue.

**Opportunities within the Similarities**

On the other hand, Portes and Rivas’ study incorporates aspects that are highly relevant in today’s discussion on China’s *hukou* system. Below displayed are some of the most interesting similarities important in the explanation on *why* I, despite distinct differences within the two cases, have chosen to apply the selected theoretical aspects to analyze a national system. Interesting similarities like the comparison between the method of assimilating foreign populations into a given society within the *hukou* system and additional international systems.

Firstly, internal migration in China can in more aspects be likened to crossing national borders. The explanation for this postulate shall be found in the migrants’ degraded social status determined by the rural *hukou,* and the limited access to benefit from the cities’ social services and welfare benefits. Therefore, China’s migrant workers are often said to be treated as immigrants in their own country.

Secondly, Chinese migrants to a great extent suffer under conspicuous discrimination - discrimination oftentimes leading to social exclusion. The noticeable fact in the case of the Chinese migrants compared to migrant children in America, is that they – like their peers – all are native Chinese and therefore not necessarily appears differently.

Thirdly, children who are being born in America will at the time of birth automatically be perceived as American citizens, whereas children born in China’s urban cities do not automatically benefit from a such social good due to the fact that an individual’s social status already is inherited in the *hukou*.

These facts not only cause vulnerabilities to China’s migrants but also hinder this population in achieving the improvements in life, which made them migrate in the first place.

Regardless of classification and categorization, however, the focus of this study concerns a group of people that – like the focus groups of Portes and Rivas’ study – has left their place of origin to resettle in a new society for the purpose of improving quality of life. And just like the ability to perform in the society in which an individual is resident affects the opportunity to produce social capital for the Hispanic and Asian Americans, so do the same terms affect the Chinese migrant workers who have chosen to reside in the country’s urban cities. Factors like human relations, networks and forums enabling developmental performances all play a central role in the process of optimizing the quality of life.

With these values in mind, I have chosen to use the main points affecting the assimilation process highlighted in the study by Portes and Rivas to investigate, examine and analyze the *hukou* system as a challenge to contemporary China. The analysis will illuminate the distinct social consequences as a result of the creation of a division within the people of China. Finally, in the light of the selected theoretical aspects, reformation of the system as said to be a necessity in order to maintain social and political stability will be discussed.

* **Peter Michael Blau (1918-2002)**

Peter Michael Blau was an American sociologist and theorist. Born in Vienna, Austria, he immigrated to the United States in 1939. Throughout his time Blau worked within the field of Structural Sociology and occupied various influential positions. He was a fellow of the National Academy of Sciences and a member of the American Philosophical Society. Furthermore, Blau taught at the Tianjin Academy of Social Science in China as a Distinguished Honorary Professor. The theories developed by Peter Michael Blau are considered a valuable contribution to contemporary research within the field of sociological structure and continues to be influential in the study of modern society.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Exchange & Power in Social Life* is one in more landmark works of Blau presenting original thoughts on social psychological and sociological structures explaining social change and societal structures as being an outcome of negotiated exchanges between different parties. In the originally 1964 published book, Blau considers how social life become organized into associations of human beings – human associations formed in increasingly complex social structures.

Contrary economic exchange as a transaction occurring in the economic marketplace, Blau’s theory on social exchange concentrates on social interaction with the purpose of benefitting from a given act. Blau writes:

*“Social exchange differs from such variables in that it pertains directly to*

*the process of give-and-take between two or more persons”[[14]](#footnote-14)*

The Exchange Theory perceives social exchange as a form of social activity in which the subjective importance of benefit over cost characterizes the exchange process. It examines social actors and their interpersonal activities, and regards the act of social engagement as a means to achieve a desired goal – a performance most likely entailing some kind of costs to the involved actors, whether that may be found in tangible objects or intangible actions.

The Exchange Theory focuses on the social interaction between two or more actors and the developing aspects within the performance of social exchange. It pledges that the exchange is done in favor of the individual performing it enhancing the influence of self-interest, which brings about a focus on economization in order to keep costs below rewards. This situation though, does not change the fact that the performance is a process of exchanging something – a reciprocal exchange.

Analytically, the Exchange Theory applies concepts deriving from the study of lower level exchange processes (cf. individual performances) to approach a given case. Initiating an analysis from the bottom and up enables the researcher to go into depth with crucial factors of the social interaction as well as the influence of social strata. Among other components, the work operates with the existence of *mutual attraction*, precariousness within the exchange process and *mutual trust*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The exchange process - obtainable through interpersonal interaction – can be affected by the existing societal stratification, visible for instance in cultural norms or rules governing the relation among individuals, groups and institutions. This connects to a positive extent with the theory’s postulate asserting that social structures are governed by norms and values.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Up to the present time, Blau’s theories are still applied in analysis studies investigating societal structure as well as social structure and behavior. The characteristics of performances within the exchange theory therefore constitute as a good basis for understanding social structures by explaining how “exchange” can lead to a clearer division within the social structure as well as facilitating social change.

Over the years, reviewers have criticized Blau’s theories and theoretical views for displaying inconsistency, in all probability by reason of change within his theoretical orientations and areas of study. Indeed, Blau’s primary focus examines individual performances. His theories have however been found to be applicable in analyses on collective performances, in which ranked classes rather than individuals represent the stratified system. Despite various critics, Blau’s general interest in the stratified dimensions of social life affecting status differences, the distribution of resources, and power differentials in exchange processes comprise a consistent focus in among other works his *Exchange Theory,* his *Status Attainment Theory,* and the *Macro-Structural Theory.* By applying the Exchange Theory, the basis of the above-mentioned theoretical aspects will be used as a means to frame the construction of this thesis.

* **Rachel Murphy**

Rachel Murphy, University lecturer in the Sociology of China and Faculty Fellow at St. Antony's College at the University of Oxford. Her publications on societal development in China include among other works *How Migrant Labor is* *Changing Rural China* (2002), *Chinese Citizenship: Views from the Margins* (2006, co-ed with V. L. Fong), and articles in *China Quarterly*, *Population and Development Review* and *Journal of Peasant Studies*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The work that will be applied in the process of answering the problem formulation, however, is the 2008 published *Labour Migration and Social Development in Contemporary China. [[18]](#footnote-18)* With a deeper view into the social, political and economic situation in contemporary China in the light of the predominating *hukou*, the book assesses the potential of development and change vis-à-vis the potential of creating even greater inequality causing increasing social tension. By addressing the issue of the neglect of social concerns, Murphy emphasizes the relationship between migration and development and states,

*“Social development and economic development*

*are two sides of the same coin.”*

As displayed in the study *The Works of Peter M. Blau: Analytical Strategies, Development and Assumptions[[19]](#footnote-19)* examining selected theories developed by Blau, his studies reveals a general interest in social stratification and social structures affected by the power difference within a certain society. Besides from Blau’s consistent focus on social strata and the consequence that hierarchical conditions can bring about, he also operates with individual performance as playing an essential role in status attainment. The assumption that individual performance effects integration is compatible with the study by Portes and Rivas, which argues that development of a specific population highly depends on the ability to perform.

As Portes and Rivas’ study, Murphy’s contribution to the 2008 published *Labour Migration and Social Development in Contemporary China* also examines two socially diverse classes. It recognizes the sharp distinction between the two social strata and highlights potential consequences of inadequate focus on social concerns, such as educational and economic performances. Moreover, Portes’ early interest in urbanization and the later studies examining the integration of second-generation migrant children highly resembles Murphy’s interest in the issues within contemporary China as an effect of the *hukou* system, for instance displayed in the neglect of social concerns causing extensive barriers to the country’s migrant families.

The presence of power differentials within the social strata is a consistent topic in all three works. The structure reflects a lack of interaction among its actors, which to a large extent hinders the natural process of exchange. The unequal distribution of resources hinders the ability to perform as an individual human being – a societal obstacle consequently impeding the overall development of social change.

**4. ANALYSIS, Part 1**

More than half a century ago, when establishment of socialism was the new societal priority, much effort was put into organizing and administrating the population in service of the planned economy. The government of the time therefore initiated a nationally applicable household registration system called *hukou.* Implemented in 1958, the *hukou* was to serve two main purposes; on the one hand, controlling the population mobility, and on the other hand, determining the access to social services.

Though the *hukou* as we know it today is very different from the 1958 implemented system, the utilization of means to control the country’s vast population is a much older phenomenon in the national history. Internal chaos upon regional unrest leading to wars in the 1920s and 1930s required national initiatives that could help restore the social order and stability. Shortly after the founding of the PRC in 1949, the government therefore launched the idea of household registrations ensuring stability and balance. In that way, the *hukou* system has continued from the end of the 1950s and until today.

**The *Hukou* in Modern China**

Throughout its time, the *hukou* has gone through extensive revision. On the national level, Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 “Reform and Opening-Up” policy, an ideology of *Socialism with Chinese characteristics,* and China’s partial shift from a planned to a market economy attributed the term “urbanization” an intensely new value. China’s entry into the global market brought about possibly the most rapid urbanization ever seen. The changes in the country’s internal policy furthermore fostered a domestic transformation on the country’s socioeconomic development.

The currently standing central government aims at establishing a greater middle class that will create more equality among the people. On the local level however, the many revisions has not been simultaneously adopted. Local governments explain the delay in adopting the centrally carried out reforms by referring to the lack of necessary capital.[[20]](#footnote-20) Literally, the delay means that the *hukou* policies vary greatly from across the country.

While the rapid economic growth throughout the last decades has been paid much attention, the simultaneously lack of attention paid to the development of the civil society has brought about severe social costs. This neglected component of societal development as a whole has had a major influence on national social stability and necessitated reformation on social policies, such as the *hukou.*

The challenge consists in the necessity of granting migrant workers with an urban *hukou* in order to give them a chance to achieve the same standard of live as their urban peers; an undertaking of restructuring a system that in a report published by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is described as “*de facto* discrimination against internal migrants in the fields of employment, social security, health services, housing and education.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

As notices earlier, the *hukou* originally served to prevent mass exodus from the countryside to China’s urban cities and thereby create disastrous slum quarters around the cities. But from the 1980s and on the *hukou* has transformed from being a chain that ties its holder to a piece of land into becoming a lifeline that gives its holder access to public services in the hometown. This has brought about a direct affect on Chinese citizens across the country socially as well as economic.

The underlying issue of the system is that not all *hukous* are equal. Due to the delay in the process of implementing centrally carried out amendments, different provinces provide different benefits to their residents. As the benefits offered in a given province depend on the provinces’ ability to fund the services, the biggest disparity in the access to social services is found between urban and rural *hukou* holders. The lack of fiscal to provide even essential social services has not help alleviate poverty and create a society with equal access to employment benefits, health care, pension and equal right to education.

Today, the limitations of the individuals’ access to social services comprise a great concern, internally as well as internationally. The *hukou,* preventing residents when outside their registered region from utilizing the above-highlighted social services has brought about two socially distinct classes in China’s urban cities. As a natural consequence of parents moving to the cities in search for employment, children of migrant workers are either left behind to attend local public schools while staying with relatives or brought into the cities where the parents are forced to comply with urban prerequisites in order to have the child enrolled into an urban school. The first group goes under the term “the left behind children” while the latter deals with the urban residing migrant children.

**The Integration of Migrants**

Today, China is the most populous nation in the world.[[22]](#footnote-22) Still officially a Communist nation, the country has though since the early 1990s experienced a growing disparity between the flourishing urban provinces primarily located along the coast and the impoverished countryside. The gradually increasing urbanization means that China has now entered the urban age indicating that more than half of the population now lives in towns and cities. [[23]](#footnote-23)

Still registered in their rural hometowns hundreds of kilometers away, rural migrant workers continuously travel to the country’s blossoming urban areas to follow the dream of improving the quality of life. Nevertheless, they still face a far-reaching and consequential institutional barrier upon their arrival – the *hukou*.

The migrant workers – in the earlier period of their arrival referred to as the “floating population”[[24]](#footnote-24) – to a large extent stay very limited in their job requirements. With a *hukou* still linking them to their place of birth, they are often offered the low-skilled, psychically demanding jobs categorized as the three D’s; jobs that covers the dangerous, dirty and demeaning fields of work. Furthermore, due to low-income employments, most migrant workers are not covered by a social insurance, as their access to social services is linked to their *hukou* home*.[[25]](#footnote-25)*

The group of migrant workers comprises 150 - 200 million farmers[[26]](#footnote-26) - a number that is very much dictated by the fluctuations of demand from foreign purchase orders. The wages in the cities still exceed that of what rural jobs generally would pay, which explains why migrant workers still leave primarily for economic reasons. Furthermore, the urban jobs often seem more attracting and contemporary.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Though the income disparity is said to have narrowed since its peak in 2008, China’s migrant workers were still by then dominating the labor force in dirty and dangerous trades. 70 percent of construction workers were migrants, so were 68 percent of manufacturing employees. And, not surprisingly, 80 percent of the laborer employed in China’s coal mines were likewise comprised by migrant workers.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The increase in the Gini coefficient from 0.425 in 2005[[29]](#footnote-29) to 0.474 in 2012[[30]](#footnote-30) reveals that China is still facing a severe gap within its people. And despite urbanization and initiatives to loosening up constraints within the *hukou,* the rural population still counts as an important part out of the total population now comprising 1.344 billion people[[31]](#footnote-31). Unfortunate for the rural population however, the fact that China has now entered the urban age will in all probability not move away the generally overshadowing focus on the country’s urban economic development.

**Institutionalized Classicism**

China’s segregating household registration system - originally with the intention of securing a geographical division of rural and urban populations - is often referred to as “institutionalized classicism”.[[32]](#footnote-32) Abstractly, the term simultaneously frames the limitations of an actual geographic move, as the *hukou* to a dominating extent binds an individual to its place of birth (being the institution) *and* defines an individual’s social status in the social strata (being the class indicator).

Concretely, the term equally reflects the frustration and powerlessness among the migrants, andthe deep resentment that seems almost like an ingrained prejudice against the lower class. Unable to comprehend and sympathize with the other part, these conditions has provoked violent clashes between the two groups as well as hostileremarks at online chat forums – remarks of rather discriminatory character.

Despite the many adjustments that have been enacted by the Chinese government since the inception of the system, the *hukou* is these years facing yet another significant societal challenge crucial to continued social and economic development – China’s second-generation migrant children.

Inheritance of the *hukou* basically means that children of migrant workers – despite being born and brought up in the city – are not considered as urban citizens. An inherited rural *hukou* thereby prevents a child of migrant workers from enrolling into urban schools on equal terms with its peers holding an urban residence permit.

In the light of Portes’ assimilation theory, the thesis will hereby continue into an analysis upon the country’s current issue of findings means to effectively deal with the unequal right to education. Primarily, the inherited *hukou* posing a hindrance to the second-generation migrant children aiming at obtaining an education in their actual urban home will be illuminated through an examination strategy incorporating 2 perspectives (shown below).

**Rural *Hukou*-holders’ Urban Problem**

1. **Mandatory prerequisites**

Rural citizens located in urban areas are required extensive prerequisites if they want their child to educate in an urban school. Oftentimes the required documents are unachievable and the obligatory enrollment fee is not affordable to the migrant parents.

1. **Regional Barriers**

Despite the possibility that some migrant workers would be able to conform to the prerequisites, they face especially two noticeable barriers*:*

* Limited enrollment opportunities into urban primary and secondary schools
* The university entrance exam, the *gaokao,* as a means to obtain higher education

In short, some of the absolute greatest barriers to incorporate migrant children into the public school system can be ascribed to the general neglect of social concerns. By reason of their rural *hukou,* China’s many migrants experience that they are being stigmatized as a homogenized group preventing them from acting as independent individuals.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Socially, migrant children suffer under severe discriminatory conditions. The categorization as for instance the “low-class people”-label oftentimes excludes the children from participating in programs mandatory in order to continue their education.[[34]](#footnote-34) On the local level, underfunding and overcrowding might contribute to the explanation on why local governments hesitate to implement the centrally enacted reforms to the system. The unequal enrollment requirements along with the prejudice against the migrant population comprise crucial factors in the continuation of social exclusion and helps to explain why successful integration of the migrant is still facing severe challenges.

Regarding the university entrance exam, students must go back to their place of household registration to take the *gaokao* and thereby obtain the right to enroll into a university. Most of the top universities are located in China’s developed metropolitans, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The requirements to enter these universities are relatively high than those at the less attractive universities. Furthermore, the universities earmark more seats for local students than students from other parts of the country, which does not help the already fierce competition among the urban residing but rural *hukou*-holding student fighting for their right to obtain a education on equal terms with their local peers.

**The Educational System**

Today, local Chinese governments are to follow a 2006-amended version of the 1986-implemented Compulsory Education Law. The amended version aims at providing all children - regardless of geographical location - with nine years of free compulsory education.[[35]](#footnote-35) According to the bill, all children should be equally allowed to pursue an education. For some reason however, some students seem to be given a preferential treatment by the system. The answer to the controversial condition conflicting with the Compulsory Education Law shall be found in the inherent discriminatory restrictions within the *hukou*.

Since the number of migrant workers settling in the cities has enlarged predominantly due to China’s rapid urbanization, migrant children increasingly accounts for a larger percentage of the urban-residing generation obtaining an education. But despite the fact that China’s first-generation migrants throughout the last decades have sacrificed their rural life for modest living conditions and a typically physically hard job to integrate into the society, the presence of the *hukou* system does not only exclude this “floating population” from integrating, it also shuts out the large number of the second-generation migrant children, which is the primary cause to the distinct **inequality** in the education system. For the same reason, the system has among other critics said to create a rural-urban apartheid likened to South Africa’s segregating system providing the white population with preferential treatments.[[36]](#footnote-36)

By putting up a different set of rules for the urban-residing group of migrant children who attempts to obtain an education on equal terms with the local peers, the *hukou* system practically stratifies the students into social classes determining who is more important. The division between the two groups places the migrant children in a situation of insecurity harming their future opportunities to attain social an economic success; a situation potentially producing negative long-term consequences on more than one level.

As Portes & Rivas point out in their study of the adaption of migrant children, an unauthorized or insecure legal status can be a severe hindrance to children from unskilled migrant families in performing both socially and economically in the society.[[37]](#footnote-37) And by taking a deeper look into the current situation of China’s migrant workers, multiple anecdotes reveal the story of families still suffering from a vague legal status not acknowledging their valuable assets to the economic development of the cities.

Guo Jigang and his wife Ge Yaru are some of the country’s many migrant workers who have left their rural home to join China’s army of migrant workers - all in search for a better future for the family. The young couple, 30 and 26 years old, respectively, plans to someday open their own store and do life savings that will enable them to send their son to middle school. But even if Guo and Ge do safe up enough money to realize the dream of sending their son to school, having life savings is not equal to a sustainable security net for the family Guo says, stating, *“I'll still be a migrant worker”*.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Guo admits that there is not much hope for the villagers resident in China’s cities, following with the statement: *"Really any hopes are for the children.”*[[39]](#footnote-39) For that reason, Guo and his wife has chosen to have a second child and thereby defy the country’s One Child Policy. Their status as migrant workers and the barrier to obtain security rights, such as pension and going to the old people’s home, force the villagers to make certain reservations. In Guo and Ge’s case, their children will be their security net and existential unease about the future are being put on them: *“All of that we put it on the shoulders of our children. So if there aren’t enough kids, and something goes wrong, we are also done for.”*[[40]](#footnote-40)

Gou and Ge’s situation to a great extent demonstrates the reality of China’s approximately 2.3 million *liudong renkou* (流动人口), literally meaning “floating population, to whom a life in uncertainty is the cruel reality.

Regulatorily, the migrant workers are prevented from integrating into the society by reason of the restrictions caused by the *hukou*, that among other limitations inhibit them from making use of the local government benefits, as health care and education. Factually, a brutish and discriminatory attitude demonstrated by the urban residents is oftentimes what meets the village families when they decide to reside in the cities.[[41]](#footnote-41) Their lower-perceived societal status determined by their rural *hukou* alongside with the general urban perception portraying migrants as *“poor, dirty, ignorant and prone to violence”*,[[42]](#footnote-42) excludes China’s numerous migrant workers from achieving recognition. With regards to the children, the lack of acceptance only further complicates the educational accessibility problems and impedes the migrant children’s opportunity to educate in order to make them equally compatible when entering into the labor market. Neither legally nor socially accepted by the society, the migrant population’s existence in the cities have been likened to that of illegal immigrants’ in other countries,[[43]](#footnote-43) for instance stated in an article published by the government-owned Global Times commenting on migrant workers presence in the cities. In the case of the migrants however, the difference is just that China’s “second-class citizens” are not *im*migrants but *migrants*.

The process of adapting into a society is not, according to Portes & Rivas, a developmental step that happens to a child alone. [[44]](#footnote-44) Rather, it is an undertaking that necessitates interaction among all implicit actors. Unfortunately, a concerted effort based on accommodation and cooperation can be difficult to bring about in a society highly characterized by institutions habitually working independently in accordance with their own interest.

Seen from the children’s point of view, the process of adapting to life in a city that, despite being their home, does not consider the second-generation migrants as local residents can seem unrealizable. The perception of not being accepted by the society can engender the need to exercise self-affirmation and collective social unrest.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Compulsory Education**

For a migrant child to enroll into an urban school, the family is met with prerequisites deciding whether the child is qualified for enrollment. Background documentation, papers on current health status and an oftentimes unreasonable fee are some of the factors that from an economic perspective can prevent the migrant children from enrolling. Each year these requirements mean that numerous of migrant children must return to their “*hukou*-home” and attend school - as exemplified in the case of Deng Zongwei below.

Deng, one of China’s many migrant workers, has crossed the border from his hometown Yongzhou, Hunan, to go to Dongguan, Guangdong, to find a job in the Pearl River Delta. The Hunan-*hukou,* however, has now forced his 5 year-old son and his wife to go back to their home and have the son enrolled into a rural school. Attending school in Guangdong province would have been a costly affair, as the school fee amounting to no less than ¥ 12,000 a year. Despite the fact that Deng’s wife have to quit her job to go back, the couple judged that a free education for their son would be worth the sacrifices.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The presupposed prerequisites for enrolling into urban schools as well as for obtaining higher education preclude the second-generation migrant students from breaking the social inheritance. By reason of the *hukou* only, they are already by the time of birth designated a predetermined position in the social strata. The status level assigns them only a temporary existence *in* the city preventing them from integrate into and becoming *of* the society in which they live and study.

The economic and social repercussion as a consequence of the *hukou* is an obstacle for a second-generation migrant child to performing as an independent individual. The ability to produce human capital and achieving success in life do, according to Portes & Rivas, highly rely on a positive reception in the receiving society. Furthermore, development and integration of the individual highly dependent on the family’s societal performances and their level of integration.[[47]](#footnote-47) Regrettably for the migrant populations located in China’s metropolitan cities, policies within the *hukou* means a maintenance of the currently dominating social stratification which to a large extent determines their chances of attaining a higher and more respected status in the societies.

After discussing the mandatory prerequisites within the educational system barring migrant children from enrolling into urban schools, the thesis will now go into a discussion on the issues of the regional barriers.

**Higher Education**

The second accessibility problem second-generation migrant students are facing in the educational system occurs as they graduate from college and apply to take the national university entrance exam, the *gaokao*. Completion is a prerequisite for enrolling into a national university. After enrolling students can continue their studies.

However, the rules within the educational system prescribe that students holding a rural *hukou* are not allowed to take the *gaokao* in the cities where they live and study if they do not hold a local *hukou*. Therefore, all applicants – regardless of present geographical location – are forced to go back to the province in which their *hukou* is issued and take the *gaokao*; a practice that in recent years has become highly salient.[[48]](#footnote-48)

To intensify the competition even further, many of China’s top universities primarily located in metropolitans such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou earmark more seats for local students. For instance, a 2011 example from Peking University, Beijing, shows that the university accepted 28-41 times more local applicants than counterpart students from the surrounding provinces Anhui, Henan and Guizhou.[[49]](#footnote-49)

These enrollment terms preventing rural applicants from competing on equal terms with their urban counterparts, put an even stronger pressure on the migrant children. Future job opportunities do to a dominating extent depend on impressive achievements obtained during the time of educating, as urban companies oftentimes are more partial to choose employees holding an urban *hukou*. Due to the limited number of *hukous* issued by local governments to local companies, the latter are restricted in terms of employing non-local *hukou* holders. The preference is a necessary reservation, as non-local employees will most likely at some point try to obtain a local *hukou* through the company.

Besides from societal pressure to succeed, the restrictions furthermore engender severe competition among the rural students - internally. Knowing that only a limited percentage of them will have the change to enroll into one of the good universities divides the students into two primer groups; the first one comprises children from well-integrated, advanced migrant families with the right facilities enabling them to focus only on their study and giving them the foundation of skills to put all effort into continuing to do so. The second group comprises the students who choose to receive no more education and following in the steps of their parents meaning becoming a migrant worker. In Beijing alone, children from migrant families account for more than 400,000 of the city’s current precollege students.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The migrant children, a group of young people out of whom many come from unskilled and less well-off families, as the son of Guo and Ge, are caught between a system that limits their chances of attaining an education by regulating their access to educational institutions and parents who have sacrificed their rural existence in order to provide their child with the education that they never had a chance to obtain themselves. Migrant workers who are employed in an official company and pay tax are assured pension at the age of retirement. But migrant workers leaving their rural home to work on the streets in the urban cities belong to the economic system Portes has termed the “informal economy”. This group of workers is not registered as employees in a local company and is therefore not registered in the local tax system, which means that they have no rights to benefit from the local pension system in case they have already obtained a local hukou. If they are still holding their rural hukou, they can at the age of retirement go back and enjoy their local right to pension.

Local pension or not, migrant workers, unless offending against the one child policy by having another child, to a great extent rely on their only child to support them at the age of pensioning. The child is oftentimes their only chance to enjoy a decent retirement; a situation reflected in their immense sacrifices.

According to Portes & Rivas’ study on a society’s ability to adapt, great concern should be put into integrating the group of second-generation migrant children, as the overall development of this population to a great extent depends on the ability to perform as an individual in the society in which the child reside. In *The Adaption of Migrant Children* Portes & Rivas observe that, *“average socioeconomic outcomes are driven down by the poorer educational and economic performance of children from unskilled migrant families, who are often handicapped further by an unauthorized or insecure legal status”[[51]](#footnote-51)*, which to a great extent is in evidence in many Chinese migrant families. The children are forced to obey an educational system systematically segregating this one group of students from the rest, which constitutes a serious impediment to advance an education in order to improve their socioeconomic level.

One of the main key factors in achieving successful assimilation of China’s millions of migrant families must therefore lie within the process of giving them a positive reception followed by acceptance of their existence and presence as an integrated part of the society. As Portes and Rivas pledge, the overall advancement of the migrant group highly relies on societal factors allowing the individuals to act as independent human beings in order to improve their own lives. By empowering the migrant population to govern their own lives – developing human relations, networks and personal performances – enables the potential to generate human and social capital.

***“The* hukou *system is a disaster for the children of migrant workers”***[[52]](#footnote-52)

Zhan Haite, a migrant workers daughter obtaining an education in one of China’s popular metropolitans, Shanghai, received in June last year a message stating that she could neither attend high school nor take the national college exam in Shanghai. Zhan’s Jiangxi-*hukou* means that she is not a local Shanghai-resident and for that reason she has to go back to her *hukou*-home in which she has not been a resident sine 2002.[[53]](#footnote-53)

With a sign saying: *"Please give me the right to take the high school entrance exam"*[[54]](#footnote-54) Zhan went to meet the Shanghai education commission. However, the education commission rejected her application, which is the explanation to why she turned to the public. From the Chinese online social platform Sina Weibo the story about the Shanghai girl eager to take the college entrance exam soon spread around the world. Zhan was determined to fight for her right to educate on equal terms with her Shanghai classmates, stating: *“(…) my parents and I never gave up talking to Shanghai's education commission.”*[[55]](#footnote-55)

Zhan Haite was known to the world because she challenged the system by personally turning the authorities that denied her access to take the exam whereupon she conveyed her message through the social media. At the time, Zhan was only 15 years and not old enough to receive punishment for her affairs, but her father was held in jail for supposedly “scratching a police officer”.[[56]](#footnote-56)

As responds to her online protest, Zhan experienced an explosion of reactions to criticizing her plea. Furious netizens answered by saying that she should *"get out of Shanghai right now"* and required the government to “protect” the city.[[57]](#footnote-57) The most critical reaction was carried out by a group of urban Shanghai residents calling themselves “Shanghai Defense Alliance” who were physically trying to stop Zhan from entering the Shanghai Bureau of Education.[[58]](#footnote-58) The Zhan’s were later evicted from their house in Shanghai.

Even though the articles do not tell what happened after the eviction, it is presumable that the migrant family upon a brave and dedicated emotive plea was forced to return to their place of origin, their *hukou*-home.

Similar to the occurrence of Zhan Haite, China Daily published in January 2013 an article illustrating a group of migrant parents entangled in a significant debate discussing the discriminatory restrictions of excluding their children from taking the *gaokao* in the city. Through campaigns incorporating petitioning at local education commissions as well as social media simultaneously displaying the parents’ dissatisfaction and apparent search for equality. But as previous attempts to make an impact on the system yet again this debate faced a political deadlock.[[59]](#footnote-59)

China’s millions of migrant students are rejected by the society in which they have spend most of their lifetime. Forced to return to their province of origin, the procedure to which this group of students are subjects, is often criticized of treating them as if they were immigrants in a society that to the majority frames their entire upbringing.

To integrate the group of first-generation migrants is one thing. First-generation migrant workers from the countryside have come to the city to generate economic profit, not to adapt into a society build up on values that heavily vary from those of their own place of origin. Furthermore, it is a fact that first-generation migrants are likely to return at the age of retirement. But there is a distinct difference between China’s first-generation migrant workers and the second-generation migrant students.

To the migrant children, the urban society constitutes as their home more than anywhere else. These children have throughout their time in the cities developed urban aspirations on equal terms with their peers; the have, in other words, most likely come to stay. Nevertheless, the presence of the *hukou* does not only classify the population of a given city into different social strata, it also engenders discriminatory conditions, which continue to homogenize the migrant children inhibiting them from breaking the social inheritance and changing their integration level from being *in* the society to becoming *of* it.

**Sum Up**

**S**ocially, the currently prevailing *hukou* system shows severe signs of preventing China’s migrants from integrating into the society. The children, despite born and raised in the cities, still face controversial restrictions negatively affecting their capability to develop as human beings. The ability to perform as an individual furthermore enables the development of social capital; important societal features that – if present – are in favor of both the individual and the receiving society.

The dilemma is reflected in the actual fact that many of the migrant children regard themselves as a part of the metropolitan societies, they see themselves as urban residents. On the basis of their living circumstances they are therefore more likely to stay in the urban provinces in which they have grown up - opposite their parents, among who many choose to preserve their original *hukou* with the intension of moving back to their place of origin at the age of retirement.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Portes & Rivas argue that successful integration requires a positive reception. Regrettably though, the *hukou* seems to have the opposite affect. By dividing the population into groups receiving social services according to their *hukou*, the system is working against the national policy of promoting equal rights to education which in more cases have engendered social unrest, as displayed throughout more examples above.

China’s new leader of the ruling Communist Party Xi Jinping has drawn attention to the government’s undertaking of the late 1970s implemented *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*[[61]](#footnote-61) and emphasized that this particular policy is essential to *“complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects, advance the socialist modernization and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”*[[62]](#footnote-62) But a rejuvenation to simultaneously create a more equal society while maintaining social stability requires that the government recognizes the social disparities within its people. Preservation of the *hukou* must necessarily be reconsidered and benefits must be weighed against costs.

**P**olitically, the *hukou* is simultaneously of benefit to societal stability and sustainable growth and posing a threat to a continuation of the Chinese Communist Party.

By means of the *hukou*, the Chinese government has throughout decades kept migration flow under control and built up impressive, largely slum-free metropolitans. Postulating that abolition of household registration would lead to mass exodus from rural to urban China and hence, possibly turn the big cities into “Latin-American like slums”, the Chinese government continues to pledge preservation of the system.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Yet, the central government’s official argument for maintenance of the system seems to also incorporate another political aspect. In a study of authoritarian regimes, the political scientist at Ohio State University, Jeremy Wallace finds that regime survival to a great extent depends on the level of urban concentration. There is a predominant tendency that mega cities threat the survival of a regime. Whether it is a nondemocratic or an authoritarian regime, massive concentrations of people to a high degree influence the longevity of a given regime.

The reason why mega cities can constitute a threat to the continuation of an authoritarian regime is, according to Wallace, because such huge cities usually are characterized by slum areas *“where the regime does not exert full control”.* [[64]](#footnote-64) Allowing mega cities bringing together masses of people also increases the risk of social unrest and the organizing of collective campaigns and protests.

Despite possible preponderance of the urban population residing in China’s metropolitans, the political scientist does not see an increasing risk of turmoil in the near future. *“I tend to come down on the stability side in China, because the nature of China’s megacities is that they are filled with the winners of the reform era,”[[65]](#footnote-65)* he states.

Visions of maintaining social stability and enhancing sustainable growth have however, given rise to a policy named the “China Dream” (中国梦). The dream is characterized by its aims of realizing a rejuvenation of the nation and creating national prosperity and human justice.[[66]](#footnote-66) Alongside its composition, the “China Dream” has brought about a subordinate vision referred to as the “urban dream”.[[67]](#footnote-67) [[68]](#footnote-68)

Nonetheless, political interaction and cooperation among central and local institutions required to carry out national reforms are to a considerable degree challenged by the existence of the *hukou*. By enacting a number of regulations to the *hukou*, as for instance the implementation of the 2006-amended version of The Education Law enacted for the purpose of providing all children with 9 years of free compulsory education, the migrant families should already by now be allowed easier access to the cities’ social services.

Regrettably, local governments tend to hesitate on centrally enacted though nationally valid regulations. The reason for this prevailing hesitation is greatly due to policymakers concern that loosening up household registration policies will bring about an immense influx of migrants inevitably affecting the stability of the urban societies. Furthermore, urban governments fear that the initiative will not be well received among their local residents.

For these reasons, hesitation to implement regulations enacted by the central government posing a potential threat to the social stability as well as urban economies has been reigning on the local level.

**E**conomically, maintenance of the *hukou* can be a threat to continued economic growth based on increased domestic consumption. Due to the limited access to social services and welfare goods, urban-residing migrant workers rarely contribute to domestic consumption. Most of their income goes to savings, especially used to pay children’s education or used in case of medical emergencies.

With the distinct economic inequality between local residents and migrant workers in mind, the new leadership has called for an epochal change, presenting the people of China to a renewed and goal-oriented agenda. Besides from the previous focus on developing initiatives strengthening the country socially and politically, the new top leaders have at their inauguration emphasized the importance of maintaining the country’s economic growth. At a panel discussion of the World Economic Forum in January, vice-chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission of China, Zhang Xiaoqiang stated that the prime focus of the government’s economic agenda would concern a shift in the country’s growth model particularly focusing on and ensuring efficiency and quality.[[69]](#footnote-69)

However, a such radical change in the country’s economic growth model will mean a reconsideration of the role that the gargantuan group of migrant workers has played until now. Throughout the last decades this group of people have been one of the country’s most valuable economic assets, but obtaining an urban residency permit means being entitled to benefit from social welfare goods and public services. If migrant workers were to be conferred an urban *hukou* it would result in a drastic increase in the local government’s expenditures to social services as China’s current 2.3 million urban-residing migrants then would obtain access to cost-intensive social services, such as medical treatment and education to the children.

Furthermore, the Compulsory Education Law, for instance, suggests that the central government and local governments cooperatively undertake the educational expenditures.[[70]](#footnote-70) But, as finances concerning welfare goods related to one’s *hukou* are being handled at the local level,[[71]](#footnote-71) a reformation necessitates a close cooperation between central and local institutions.

In order to carry out the governmental objective aiming at continuing economic growth, Xi Jinping, not long after his inauguration, therefore launched the government plan of replacing the original *hukou* with a national resident’s permit[[72]](#footnote-72) gradually accepting more of China’s approximately 800 million rural *hukou* holders to reside in the cities.

A reform of the *hukou* could give a major boost to domestic consumption owing to the fact that migrant workers tend to not integrate into the societies in which they live and work and, as earlier noticed, safe most of their income in case of a need for social services, such as medical care and children’s education.

With that said, to reach the goal of achieving efficiency and quality through structural reforms, all aspects must be taken into consideration, including education as a necessity to foster and ensure sustainable development[[73]](#footnote-73)

**S**ociologically, the fact that the *hukou* challenges the initiation of interaction and cooperation among China’s institutions threatens the development of the country as a united nation.

On the one hand, the central government pledges that development of a stable and more equal society can be brought about by focusing on the values within Deng Xiaoping’s *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.* On the other hand, the *hukou* has created a sharp division within the people of the country, particularly noticeable in the cities. The inequality has giving rise to several cases of social turmoil and an increase in high-profile campaigns carried out by urban-residing migrant parents calling for justice in the question of equal rights to obtain an education. The institutional respond is an increased effort into suppressing the social unrest.

Simultaneously however, in the process of carrying out *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* Xi has called for the practice of fair justice and drawn attention to the critical matter of corruption – especially evident among higher social strata. A future strategy to hinder corruption is to establish a society ruled fairly by the law in which, Xi emphasized, *“not only the individual but also organized groups and institutions has to obey the law, without exception.”*[[74]](#footnote-74)

**S**ocietally, the *hukou* constitutes a hindrance to further development of the country as a whole - socially, politically and economically. The consequential effects of the system pose a threat to the establishment of a stabile society and the generation of sustainable growth. China’s unprecedented growth has brought about a prosperous set of circumstances through which the change into a society reflecting wealth and more equality can be carried out. However, if the neglect of social concerns continues, the potential to change the country by fostering development risks turning into a potential of creating even greater inequality bringing about further social tension.

From a policy viewpoint, reconsidering the continuation of the *hukou* must necessarily be one of the subject matters of greatest concern to the new Chinese government.

**5. ANALYSIS, Part 2**

**One Country, Two Systems**

It is internationally recognized that international migration, if properly managed, can be a beneficial source to alleviate poverty and foster development. Despite the fact that the number of internal migrants actually exceeds that of the international,[[75]](#footnote-75) this group has up until now generally been referred to as ‘population distribution’ or ‘urbanization’.[[76]](#footnote-76) In recent years, though, more attention has been paid to the vast number of internal migrants. In 2004, the total amount of international migrants numbered approximately 200 million while internal migrants in China alone counted roughly 126 million.[[77]](#footnote-77)

For years, China’s millions of migrant workers have dealt with a system categorizing them as rural citizens with no right to benefit from social services in the urban cities in which they live and work. For years, critics have called for change of this system noticeably neglecting the social concern of integrating the migrants into the urban societies by exercising consistent exclusion; a social neglect said to comprise one of the principal restraints to generate sustainable development. For years, however, the Chinese government has evaded critical questions emphasizing the importance of economic growth as an answer to national development. And then, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang stepped out into the spotlight and introduced a new political agenda.

**From Central to Local**

As well as his predecessors, Xi Jinping has adopted and presented a personal slogan serving to reflect the vision of the new inaugurated government. Earlier, slogans have been characterized by their political agenda, such as the foregoing Reform and Opening Up by Deng Xiaoping and the latest scientific-development concept Harmonious Society by Hu Jintao. Xi’s slogan, however, seem to be designed to generate hopes and aspirations among the population.[[78]](#footnote-78)

November the 29th last year, standing in front of the “Road to Revival” exhibition at The National Museum in Beijing, the at that time general secretary of the party, Xi launched the new political initiative *The Chinese Dream* presented as the “great revival of the Chinese nation”.[[79]](#footnote-79) As a comment to a small attendance of press personnel, Xi stated that the great revival of the nation is to be seen as “the greatest Chinese dream”; a new rhetoric that throughout the last months undoubtedly has won great sympathy among the people.

Not long after the “Road to Revival”-scenery at the National Museum in Beijing constituted as the surroundings of the launch of China’s new vision in November 2012, the Chinese character 梦 (*meng*) meaning “dream” was voted “character of the year” in an online poll of 50,000 people.[[80]](#footnote-80) Since the launch, national English-language newspapers have experienced a remarkable increase in terms intimately linked with the “China dream”, the ballad “Chinese Dream” has been a hit topping the folk-song charts, and ‘model dreamers’ have been selected to go on tours arranged by party officials with the purpose of inspiring the people.[[81]](#footnote-81) The vision of the Chinese Dream has unquestionably generated a wave of reactions among the people of China.

Unambiguous explanation further describing the exact thought behind the dream has been rather hard to determine. However, the Chinese newspaper *Sanxiang City Express* have by following an editorial put out in the official Xinhua news agency interpreted the notion behind the Chinese Dream to be “a stable society ruled fairly by the law” in which not only individuals but also organized groups and institutions are to obey the law. Adding to that localization is also the comment on justice stating that *“no-one will be accused wrongly and evil-doers will not be tolerated”*.[[82]](#footnote-82)

However, critics of the vision have been questioning the actual agenda behind the prosperous title raising two main concerns; firstly, the fear of nationalistic emotions associated with the scenery of the “Road to Revival” as a reference to the “century of humiliation” throughout the years of a land dominated by colonial powers. Secondly, critics reveal their concern on the question whether the Chinese Dream will actually meet the aspirations of the people or in reality foster a feeling of nationalism that will only hand more power to the party.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Whether the concerns pose an actual threat to the carrying out of the Chinese Dream shall be revealed in the time to come. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has approved the internationally recognized notion of urbanization as a part of generating development. Therefore, an important step of the undertaking of achieving the Chinese Dream is the focus on urbanization. As China within the last years has entered the urban age meaning that more than half of its population resides in towns and cities, the central government now carries a great responsibility to mobilize the ongoing demographic shift in a way that will benefit the country, socially as well as economically.

In March 2013, head of the National Development and Reform Commission, China’s main economic planning agency, Zhang Ping stated, *"Urbanization is the biggest potential force driving China's domestic demand in the years ahead,"*[[84]](#footnote-84) and followed the statement by announcing that a guideline program would be presented within these first 6 months of 2013. Nevertheless, the vision of a country with a progressively robust economy supported mainly by domestic consumption supported by a decrease in corruption and official excess as means to reduce the yawning gap between the people’s aspiration for a better life and the critical reality also deeply depends on the actors’ engagement in interaction and willingness to cooperate.

One of the main barriers to collaboration between the central government and China’s many local governments, however, is the presence of uncertainty regarding the financing of required reforms. Local governments simply hesitate to implement reforms loosening up the restrictions within the *hukou* as the concern that a rapid influx of movement to the cities will harm both the citizens and the local economy still exceeds possible advantages.[[85]](#footnote-85)

In his short time as China’s president, Xi Jinping has already put forward a political agenda that to a great extent varies from former presidents’ agendas. On the one hand, the new government has acted on internally as well as internationally raised critics of the *hukou* system and China’s development strategy in general, for instance displayed in cases such as changes to the *hukou*. Nonetheless, on the other hand, official statements from the Chinese government are continuously characterized as “indefinite” and even “nebulous”.

Despite frequent critics on the official formulation of future national visions, China, in its position as a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is obliged to abide the UN article on Freedom of Movement allowing the people to move freely within the national territory.[[86]](#footnote-86) Nevertheless, current circumstances still force rural residents to make extensive sacrifices when they decide to relocate in the search of employment, among other factors by reason of the precariousness that unquestionably has a negative impact on possible joint actions between the central government and the local municipalities.

The general lack of interaction among institutions from different social strata from time to time barring understanding and appreciation of the other part undertaking can constitute a hindrance to cooperation and joint actions. Blau’s concept of *mutual attraction* provides a suggestion to what it takes to bring about interaction through mutual understanding.

Mutual attraction opens the door to interaction between two actors. Successful interaction can lead to establishment of an exchange relationship, which symbolizes that mutual trust is achieved. When mutual attraction facilitating interaction and interchange between actors brings about mutual trust, the performance of exchanging can overtime become a cultural norm based on reciprocity to which engaged participants are committed. Such a situation will though, according to Blau**,** only present itself if the benefits of interacting will exceed the costs.

Regrettably, the interaction between the central government and China’s municipalities is characterized by uncertainty affecting the pace of streamlining centrally passed *hukou-*reforming bills.[[87]](#footnote-87) Factors such as the lack of interaction and further discussion of benefits and costs of the reforms centrally carried out and, hence, the uncertainty about social and economic costs that reigns among local governments only underline the influence social stratification when it comes to display authority and power. To a great extent, the relation across the stratified status level in the case of China’s political institutions can be illuminated in the light of Blau’s focus on power differentials as playing an important role in exchange processes. The status difference especially becomes visible when power constitutes a means to benefitting only the one part and thereby hinders a performance of exchanging build on mutual attraction and trust from taking place.

**Urbanization And Implementation of More Equal Rights**

Since the “Reform and Opening Up” policy boosted the encouragement among rural farmers to leave the countryside in search of employment in urban China, migrant workers have been regarded as economic laborers - an economic stratum contributing to the rapid development of China’s big cities. Continued urban development has meant continued employment to already urban residing migrant workers along with a continued increase in new settlers. But since the urbanization, both on the national and the regional level, primarily has been viewed through an economic lens of development and modernization, China’s important labor force has suffered under the neglect of social concerns. Consequently, the label as an economic apparatus to advance societal development also generally reflects the urban governments’ handling of migrant workers’ working and living conditions.[[88]](#footnote-88)

The principal motivation by migrant workers for abandoning family and home soil is the fundamental aspiration of higher living standards, jobs and education for their children. Regrettably, the classification of migrants as an economic stratum contributing to urban development has given rise to urban societies comprising two socially diverse classes. Moreover, the homogenization has engendered vulnerabilities for the migrants, as reflected in for instance labor market discrimination and social exclusion, still preventing individual development and successful integration.

Because of a system categorizing China’s migrant workers as rural citizens with no rights to basic social services, serious deprivation has characterized their urban living conditions. Yet, the requirements contributory to these circumstances are these years facing a new level of challenges along with the new generation of the migrant workers, the migrant children.

Urbanization is one step in the foundation of a developed society - a step also embedded in the process of coming closer to realizing the Chinese dream. Another step is the establishment of social equality generating social stability and human capital. Unfortunately, the overshadowing tendency of seeing modernization and societal development through an economic lens has to a large extent been the driving force in polices carried out by the central government. But not only the central government shows an interest in maintenance and continuation of economic development, so do also local governments.

In order to obey the centrally implemented reforms, urban governments have over the last years initiated reforming policies allowing some non-locals to apply for permanent residency. The fact is, that with a temporary residency certificate migrant workers are only allowed to stay and work in the cities but not entitled to the full spectrum of social services and welfare rights. Until now, first-generation migrants have not shown much interest in obtaining an urban *hukou* – a rather unexpected tendency revealing that they for some reason prefer to maintain their rural one*.*

The reason for this tendency is though, as noticed in the theory,[[89]](#footnote-89) primarily found within the legal requirement stipulating that rural *hukou* holders in exchange for an urban one must give up their right to use their farmlands for agricultural purposes. Furthermore, if the government, may that be the central or the local, decides to seize their land, they have no right to claim economic compensation.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Nonetheless, those non-locals actually trying to obtain permanent residency are met with an extensive set of requirement. Not only are the requirements hard to meet, they also differs across municipalities not particularly making the obtainment process any easier and clearer. For instance, a common requirement is that the applicant has held a temporary residency permit for several years. Applicants can likewise be asked to show documents proving that they have been in the city’s social insurance program throughout there time as a resident in the city, just as proof of employment and tax payment often are prerequisites counting in the assessment process.[[91]](#footnote-91) Regrettably, the entitlement to benefit from urban cities’ social services does not only comprise first-generation migrants. The *hukou* takes it a step further.

The, as earlier noticed, inheritance of the *hukou* has given rise to extra high requirements and fees posed on second-generation migrants when obtaining education and attending national exams. Prerequisites as extensive documentation and further fees have over time become salient because the children of migrant workers excluded from taken the national *gaokao* number about 20 million.[[92]](#footnote-92) Underpinning the unjustifiability within the requirements, a Beijing-residing mother of a migrant child expresses her discontent by stating, *“It shouldn’t be based on what parents can prove”*.[[93]](#footnote-93) Dissatisfaction has led to social unrest among migrant parents, putting further pressure on the local governments to implement a more equal system of access to social services and welfare benefits.

The currently highly debated educational system has given rise to campaigns and visits at local education commissions for the purpose of petitioning for less strict requirements because it forces migrant children residing and studying in urban cities to go back to their “*hukou-*home” to take entrance exams to higher education, such as the *gaokao*. But despite high-profile campaigns initiated by the migrant parents, urban governments are not keen to implement the centrally implemented reforms to the *hukou.* The responsibility of generating a stabile society though, goes far beyond what local governments can carry out independently.

**From Theory to Practice**

Improvements and implementation of more equal opportunities for China’s many migrant children within the educational system is only one out of many reforms to the *hukou* that the new Chinese government has been expected to address after their inauguration. Besides from the aforementioned 2006-amended version of the National Compulsory Law emphasizing the necessary undertaking of letting migrant children resident in urban districts enjoy the same educational rights as their peers holding an urban-*hukou*,[[94]](#footnote-94) China has also signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). According to the covenant’s Article 13, China is obligated to provide “compulsory and available primary education, the general availability of secondary education, and equal access to higher education”.[[95]](#footnote-95)

The time perspective from the point of implementing reforms and regulations to the actual practice of these can though, as displayed throughout more selected cases, have far reaching perspectives highly due to the lack of interaction and functional cooperation among institutions from different social strata.

Reformation on a number of thorny issues was discussed at a Political and Legal Conference in Beijing in January 2013. At the meeting Xi called for justice by stating, *“In every single legal case in China, we should work hard to ensure that the mass of the public feel they have received fair justice, so that the undertaking of socialism with Chinese characteristics can be guaranteed to progress smoothly.”[[96]](#footnote-96)* Alongside with discussions on reformation to the *hukou* was also the mechanism of lodging public complaints via petitioning, which for most currently seen cases ends up with dissidents being fined or sentenced to prison, as seen in the case of Zhan Haite and her fathers attempt to call for justice.

In theory, national constitutional guarantees ensuring the people of China access to state-subsidized social services, such as education, health care and pensions alongside with international conventions guaranteeing the undertaking that these particular policies are being respected makes the aspiration of a developed country based on the notion of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream creating a stable society ruled fairly by the law *look* realizable.

In praxis, however, the signing of national constitutional guarantees as well as international conventions has not yet proven to be successful. Initiatives to loosening up barriers to education are primarily carried out on the central level. This has meant an immense pressure on China’s local governments who are caught between the centrally implemented reforms, the urban-residing migrant workers gaining increasing support in their vocal protest against the barriers to education for their children, and last but not least the local urban *hukou* holders.

Until now, local governments have preserved original *hukou-*policies ensuring local urban dwellers certain rights and privileges, among other benefits securing their children easier to access good schools. In their position as the superior actor, local governments have by referring to original *hukou-*policies, carried out a political agenda systematically segregating the people of the cities by dividing them into two groups.

The less prioritized, the non-locals, have had to accept their placement in the social strata and abide by local policies in the hope that their offspring one day would be able to enjoy a modern society’s welfare benefits. Unfortunately, local governments have so far only emphasized their position as a higher power in the societal strata by conferring migrant children with necessary enrollment papers in order to educate in exchange for extensive fees from migrant families oftentimes already suffering from economic deprivation.

Not only are migrant children opposed to a system that requires extensive prerequisites and practice an enrollment system build on unequal terms, they are also required to sit the *gaokao* in the place where their *hukou* is issued. With a *gaokao* syllabus varying from province to province, and a disproportionate allocation of seats in the urban universities in mind, migrant children face uncompromising, fierce internal competition when leaving their home in the city to go back to a place, to which many do not feel any relation, in order to practice for the university entrance exam.[[97]](#footnote-97)

The internal controversies reigning between local governments and their residing migrants to a great extent display the actors’ predominating focus on self-interests. This attention to benefits as supposed to exceed costs brings about a lack of interaction and reluctance to cooperate. The fact that the disagreements have evolved into now also comprising local urban *hukou* holders, who by use of different means also engage in the debate, does not ease the establishment of interaction across the social strata.

As Blau describes, interaction between two actors appears when mutual attraction exists and a possible exchange process benefitting both parts presents itself. Though Blau, as earlier noticed, throughout his work mainly focused on the exchange process between individuals, his theory has later been applied as a means to also illuminate the impact of social stratification in social exchange processes on the community level. As well as the existence of an unequal power relation to some extent is present in exchange processes between individuals, so do also power differentials shine through in exchange processes at the community level. This relation becomes particularly evident in the exchange process between urban local governments and their migrant residents when higher positioned institutions adopt further prerequisites and require economic payment in exchange for social goods from migrant parents, as if migrant children were a burden to urban school and the extra fee were representing an economic compensation.

The exchange of social benefits on the community level displays the presence of status differences in contemporary China. It explains the reason for unequal distribution of resources and demonstrates the influence and consequence of power differentials in a given exchange process. The processes of exchanging social benefits that after all do take place across the social strata within the Chinese society are, according to Blau, an example of a high-status class providing a lower stratum with collective services other institutions cannot provide and thus, maintaining its higher position as the dominant actor in the social strata.[[98]](#footnote-98)

**One Dream, Two Strategies, an Abundance of Reactions**

The violation of social justice in contemporary China has in recent time intensified occasions reflecting social unrest among urban cities’ first-generation migrants. In search of a sense of humanity, migrant parents have initiated a number of demonstrations and campaigns as an appeal to local governments. So far, unfortunately, the migrant parents’ passionate call for social justification has not awoken much sympathy from the institutions of higher social strata. In fear of loosening their privileges, the campaigns for equality have though brought about deep resentment among urban dwellers. The clear presence of prejudice among the urban residents towards migrant workers and their children is based on the preferential advantages within the *hukou* system currently, among other benefits, securing urban children higher college admission rates.[[99]](#footnote-99)

While first-generation migrants express themselves vocally through high-profile campaigns and petitions, their offspring master a media that has become particularly useful in the debate on unequal rights to education - the social media. Today’s widespread utilization of social media as a platform for uttering an individual or collective opinion has become a fast, yet forceful way to convey a message, just as described in the case of Zhan Haite.

Perchance in continuation of current internal disputes, articles discussing the constraints on population mobility and the inequality of opportunities embedded in the *hukou* have become a frequently debated topic in different Chinese media. In that way, a TV series with the name “*Where Do You Belong?”[[100]](#footnote-100)* already in 2011 presented the viewer to real life cases of urban-residing migrants shot in one of China’s most popular municipalities, Beijing. In the series, the casts all emphasize the advantages of holding a Beijing *hukou* giving them access to medical and educational facilities.

In an article introducing the series, factual information such as numbers on ethnic groups, provinces and municipalities is being enumerated. The interesting part following the factual information states that Chinese people when meeting each other usually introduce themselves by also mentioning their place of origin, especially if that means holding an urban *hukou*.

As the article states, despite the fact that all Chinese people have *“yellow skin and black eyes”,*[[101]](#footnote-101) holding a certain *hukou* is without doubt a crucial factor of one’s identity and an indicator of one’s status level. The author’s considerations of the impact of the *hukou-*policy consequently stratifying the people into distinct social classes are clearly emphasized in his comment, *“But we have forgotten, we are all Chinese.”[[102]](#footnote-102)*

Social exchange processes and social integration as phenomena explaining the circle of social life are some of the underlying features Blau applies when demonstrating the presence and influence of social differentiation within populations in a given society. As Blau points out, the awareness of one’s status level in the social strata to which an individual or an institution belongs is a crucial factor that to a large extent decides whether mutual attraction can lead to interaction.

At the individual level, an ingrained prejudice against migrant workers and their children still reigns among urban residents. Although the *hukou* related saying “Where your *hukou* is issued, that is where you belong”[[103]](#footnote-103) in its original meaning serves to frame the essence of the household registration system, it is still a used phrase among urban dwellers; a symbolizing quote through which the self-image as a more important subject in the societal structure can be expressed. Simultaneously however, the claims to certain privileges and references to obsolete policies behind which urban residents hide, reveals a deep fear of loosing current advantageous privileges of holding a *hukou* that is not obtainable to everybody.

At the collective level, the prejudice is expressed in the urban resident’s defense reactions against social inclusion of migrants. Examples as for instance the violent backlash against Zhan Haite in her attempt to call for equality, demonstrate the exercising of benefitting from a higher ranked position in the society. The clashes between the local urban residents and the migrants do not only reflect the awareness of the actors’ social strata, it also confirm that the status level is utilized as a means to achieve a goal. Thus, as Knottnerus and Jian Guan describe it in their examination of the fundamental features of Blau’s exchange theory: *“When competition arises over the distribution of resources in social exchange, the differentiation of power is most evident.”[[104]](#footnote-104)*

**Maintenance or Abolition of the System**

For years critics have called for reformation of the Chinese household registration system. Experts have, nevertheless, uttered their worry that national reformation if not met with obeisance can lead to social and political instability. In a recent article, population expert at the University of Washington, Kam Wing Chang emphasizes in a comment to Reuters on the possible outcome of an incomplete development strategy that *“(…) instead of growing a middle class, they are going to grow a huge underclass in the city, and that's very scary".*[[105]](#footnote-105)

Over the years, initiatives to loosening up the system have been implemented at a national as well as at the local level. However, not until in the instatement of the new Chinese government an original campaign different from anything was presented to the people of China.

Already some time before its takeover, the government was showing clear signs of considering reformation of the predominant *hukou* system. And as a part of the national development plan simultaneously monitoring urbanization and striving towards continued economic growth, thus, a national residence permit system to replace the current *hukou* was shortly after its inauguration being introduced.[[106]](#footnote-106)

According to a news update from Biz Wire - the business and financial news on China – researchers expect that benefits and entitlements under this new system will be basically equal though emphasizing that it will take time to achieve this stage as the changes are to be eased in slowly. As a part of a 10-year urbanization plan, the unified national residence permit system constitute as a means to *“drive an urbanization effort that will underpin the economic development”*.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Moves to reform the system are likewise these years seen in more municipalities. Allowing citizens with rural *hukou* to obtain an urban one has attracted attention all over the country. However, the launch of national as well as local initiatives has been received very differently among the people of China.

On the one hand, there is a clear tendency among today’s young generation of migrant workers suggesting that they wish to give up their rural *hukou* in exchange for an urban one. An example of that is 18-year old Wang Baiqiang who has no right to obtain an education at one of China’s many good, urban located universities. He has left his village in Henan province to work in an Adidas factory in Jiangsu, 14 hours away. Because the entitlement to benefit from social services is decided by one’s *hukou,* the little red book is an essential factor determining one’s future opportunities, *"It's just better if you have a city hukou (if you live in a city),"*[[108]](#footnote-108) Wang states.

On the other hand however, an example from the municipality of Chongqing reports the opposite case. Already in 2010, colleges within the municipality supposedly tried to force the students to change their rural *hukou* into an urban one. As a part of the city’s urbanization plan the local government has adopted a policy change aiming at issuing 10 million urban *hukous* in exchange for rural ones by 2020. But despite the beneficial access to urban social services that comes with the urban household registration, many of the students rejected the offer, claiming their right to receive an economic compensation if the local government should choose to seize their land.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The case from Chongqing exemplifies the previously mentioned issue of giving up the land rights in exchange for an urban *hukou.* By the first impression, giving up the rural *hukou* seems like an ideal solution because that, among other benefits, includes higher colleges admission rates. A student at the time majoring in safety engineering told the English-language Chinese Newspaper, Global Times: *"Starting last month, our tutor began pressurizing us to give up our rural hukou.  Those who refused were told that they would have no chance of applying for fellowships or scholarships, and may even have trouble getting their diplomas".[[110]](#footnote-110)*

Furthermore, the article reveals that authorities are pressuring colleges in Chongqing to persuade students to accept the switch. If the institutions fail to do so, they will not only be “openly criticized”, they will most likely also be reduced in the size of their institutional funding. In spite of the dilemma forcing the students to make a difficult choice between accepting an urban *hukou* and thereby obtaining full access to urban welfare benefits or maintaining their rural identity enabling them to be self-supporting, seem to be highly affected by the fact that urban residents compared with their rural counterparts might encounter more difficulties in the process of finding a job or buying an apartment. In a survey of 120,000 migrant workers carried out by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, these consequences of giving up one’s rural *hukou* seem to also highly reflect the result stating that close on 80 percent do not wish to “switch status”.[[111]](#footnote-111)

To a great extent, the above noticed examples display Blau’s interest in the stratified dimensions of social life affecting status differences, the distribution of resources, and power differentials in the exchange processes. Furthermore, the examples reflect the interpersonal relation among individuals as well as institutions from different social classes.

The main concern within the performance of cooperating across the social strata in China is the necessity of interaction among actors from the noticed different classes. Moreover, social exchange is immeasurable. The lack of an exact price means that only an approximate ratio change of the benefits and costs can be estimated; an estimation that in all probability will illustrate a system of actors with dominating superiority.

In his *Exchange & Power in Social Life* Blau uses an example of a superior chief maintaining his position despite simultaneously indebtedness to actors from higher social strata performing exchanges enabling his current power position and dependency on contributors continuously supporting it.[[112]](#footnote-112)

Evidently, the chief’s ability to attain status to a large extent depends on exchange performances incorporating factors such as interaction and reciprocity among different social classes. Unfortunately, the profits that interaction across social strata can bring about seem to be a neglected factor. In processes of carrying out developmental policies there seem to be little interaction and understanding of mutual trust. This is clearly demonstrated in the case from Chongqing showing how high-status institutions abuse their power in order to make colleges persuade their students to give up their rural *hukou* instead of an urban one.

Within many of the noticed cases, the understanding of social exchange could possibly bring about mutual attraction regarded as a pre-stage to future joint actions. Regrettably, the dominating culture of performing according to self-interest to a high degree seems to hinder the establishment of mutual trust. Because reciprocity often is expected though rarely guaranteed, precariousness can furthermore hinder the establishment of a culture of reciprocity that over time can become an integrated part of the cultural norms.

**Sum Up**

For years, experts have claimed that reform of the *hukou* is essential in order to maintain social stability and continue economic growth and for years, previous governments have made attempts to loosen up policies to the system by gradually entitling more people access to urban welfare benefits, such as health care services, retirement pension, and education. They have nevertheless, not been able to overhaul the system practicing policies that date back to 1958.

Yet, since the installment of the new Chinese government, reformation of the system criticized for being *“increasingly out of touch with the country’s current sociopolitical structure”[[113]](#footnote-113)* has been one of the main focuses of the political agenda. The purpose behind the newly launched national residence permits system to replace the *hukou* is to accelerate an urbanization effort that will support continued economic growth. One of the main reasons why reformation of the *hukou* plays an essential role in continued national economic growth is because China is transforming its economy from being based on export to being based on domestic consumption.[[114]](#footnote-114) Moves to entitle more of the many migrant workers in the cities to benefit from social services on equal terms with the urban residents could potentially generate an increase in domestic spending, as savings currently securing education for children and necessary medical treatment will then be freed up.

However, reforms as a means to drive continued urbanization require internal interaction and cooperation among the social strata within the Chinese society. Furthermore, it presupposes that benefits of engaging in development initiatives will surpass the costs put into the action by actors implicit in the process.

The prime focus on economic concerns that for years have dominated internal political talks on continued growth and development is, as shown in more of the above-noticed cases, met with critique from experts drawing attention to the overshadowed yet crucial neglect of social concerns. In her contribution to *Labour Migration and Social Development in Contemporary China*, Murphy emphasizes the problematic of dominating economic concerns by stressing: *“Social Development and Economic Development are Two Sides of the Same Coin”*[[115]](#footnote-115)*.*

Fortunately, the view to social concerns as an essential part of generating economic development is gaining increased recognition in Chinese policy-making circles. By implementing a unified residence permits system gradually empowering more and more people by making a greater middle-class, the Chinese government now shows signs of recognizing that social change brought about by political initiatives, as for instance promoting the well-being of the people by meeting their social needs, providing social opportunities such as education and healthcare, and encouraging social inclusion, contributes to economic development.[[116]](#footnote-116)

**6. CONCLUSION**

Upon gaining insight into the highly debated process of maintaining social control by performing public administration in contemporary China, there seem to be no doubt that the *hukou* constituting a hindrance to social, political and economic development has awakened a forceful call for change.

One of the very strong arguments that the consistently segregating system needs to be reformed comes from China’s millions of urban-residing migrant workers. Throughout their time in the cities, they have not only at the local level been subject to discrimination and prejudice against their origin. Also among institutions from higher social classes the existence and presence of migrant workers in the cities have been regarded through an economic lens of development and modernization fostering the perception of them as “economic laborers”. The neglect of seeing them as actual human beings have forced the first-generation migrants to accept their lower status level in the social strata and comply with regulations and prerequisites due to their origin - only revealed in their rural *hukou.*

Despite limited governmental attention to their social concerns, many of the first-generation migrants chose to stay and built a family in the city where they were working. However, at the time of becoming parents, the migrant workers were soon confronted with the consequences of the inheritance policy within the *hukou.*

Inheritance of the *hukou* has not only meant an indirect designation of the rural migrants’ status level in the urban societies, it has also meant a direct effect on every individual’s ability to produce human capital through engaging in interaction and association with other individuals as well as social capital brought about by the establishment of networks reflecting a shared set of human values.

Human capital and social capital are interconnected factors contributing to the establishment of a cohesive society. Nonetheless, good individual performance and outcomes do to a great extent seem to depend on a positive reception in the society of settlement. But, as long as a different set of rules - excluding migrant children from obtaining an education and taking national entrance exams on equal terms with their local peers *only* on the basis of their parent’s origin –continues to limit the children’s accessibility to social services and hence, requires them to make certain economic reservations, it also prevents them from contributing to societal development.

One of the main reason why reforming of the *hukou* therefore is crucial to urban-residing second-generation migrant children is because it is a hindrance to adaption, integration and social inclusion.

By allowing the migrants to develop from being residing *in* the society to becoming *of* it by entitling them more social rights the government will not only generate a more equal society, it will also empower a vast group of people enabling them to contribute to the society in which they reside, socially as well as economically. Therefore, a following strong argument for the pressing need for reform could be because migration and urbanization go hand in hand.

Another strong argument, and the reason why the Chinese government has been under sharp public scrutiny to reform the social welfare system lately, is because of the general concern regarding the severe internal social inequality, pledging that reform is a necessity in order to achieve true urbanization. The new central government has responded to the critic by presenting a new vision along with contemporary reforms to gradually reduce the inequality and accommodate social needs among migrant workers and their families.

However, while centrally decided reforms on the one hand are being presented and slowly implemented, and migrant workers on the other hand continuously require abolition of the system, a fear of impactful economic costs of loosening up *hukou* policies still reigns among China’s local governments. The handling of the societal challenges and social consequences of the *hukou* to a large extent reflects the lack of well functioning interaction and cooperation among institutions from different social strata; a condition that seem to pose a threat to the chief priorities of the contemporary political agenda focusing on maintenance of social and political stability as well as continuation of economic development.

Throughout the thesis, exchange processes across social strata in the Chinese society have been illustrated to elucidate social, political and economic consequences of the *hukou*. To a wide extent, the examples reflect the awareness and exploitation of an individual’s or an institution’s status level. In contemporary China, an actor’s status level in the social strata and the possibility to attain status to a predominant extent plays an essential role in the process of exchanging social benefits. Consequently this means, that the *hukou* and the power differentials ingrained in the system if not extensively reformed can prevent successful interaction and cooperation across social strata, which means that migrants remain a part of the lower class with no right to interfere neither integrate into the society in which they reside.

With a view to the new political agenda and the recent political initiatives it could however be suggested that the newly installed government has adopted the notion that economic development is only one side of the coin in the process of generating economic growth; the other one is social development.

**F**irst of all, reforming of the *hukou* deals with allowing the migrants, particularly the second-generation migrant children, to integrate into and become a part of the urban societies.

**S**econdly, reforming of the *hukou* is concerned with allowing the migrant children to break with the social inheritance. Literally, this means abolition of a system that on the basis of their rural background only consistently segregates them from the urban residents. On a more abstract level however, it means elimination of the perception of them as belonging to a lower class in the social strata without any ability to attain status.

**F**inally, implementing a system that allows adaptation, integration and social inclusion and embraces the thought of a more equal society in which individuals on equal terms can attain status and interact across social strata must therefore be highlighted as one of the most crucial factors enabling valuable contributions to the future of the Chinese society and culture, socially, politically and economically.

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