

The *Hukou* system as one of the institutional barriers for the emergence of the middle class in China

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Abstract. The household registration system (*hukou*) in China has been created and maintained for deep political, economic and social reasons. The system was introduced by the PRC government in the 1950s and became the main mechanism for regulating relations between people and allocating resources. System assumes that every resident of China will study, work, receive social services only in the region in which was born. It made possible to ensure social and political stability and economic growth in China.

At the same time, the *hukou* system increased economic and social disparities between urban and rural areas. During the 1960s and the 1970s internal migration in China was practically absent because the *hukou* system tied the citizens to their place of residence. It also “frozen” the social structure of Chinese society for a long time, as the residents of rural areas were provided with much less free services than those who lived in cities, including limited access to education and medical care, which in turn influenced the quality of life and the possibility of transition to a higher social class.

In the 1980s due to the Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, China began to develop and enter the world market, a large number of special economic zones sprang up, which stimulated an increase in demand for labor in cities. The central government began to give relief in the *hukou* system, gave opportunities for labor migration. In modern China the *hukou* system plays the role of a “sieve”. It weeds out most of the population and passes through only a certain number of highly qualified personnel who will later become the new middle class of the country.

This article attempts to look at the evolution and the main stages of the *hukou* system, exploring how the system has changed throughout the modern history of China.

Keywords: China, Hukou system, registration in the PRC, middle class, migration, social stratification

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Система хукоу как один из институциональных барьеров появления среднего класса в КНР

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Резюме. Система регистрации домохозяйств (*хукоу*) в Китае была создана и поддерживается по политическим, экономическим и социальным причинам. Система была введена в КНР в 1950-е гг. и стала основным механизмом регулирования отношений между людьми и распределения ресурсов. В настоящее время система *хукоу* играет роль т.н. сита, которое отсеивает большую часть населения страны и пропускает только определенное количество высококвалифицированных кадров, которые станут новым средним классом КНР. В статье делается попытка взглянуть на эволюцию и основные этапы становления системы *хукоу*.

Ключевые слова: КНР, система *хукоу*, регистрация в КНР, средний класс, миграция, социальная стратификация

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout China's history, the state keeps trying to exercise strict control over the country's population. At various historical periods, special control systems and documents were introduced. Population registration as a system of control was introduced as early as the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Subsequently, it was actively used by the rulers of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) for the unification of China. After the Qin and Han dynasties (202 BC-220 AD), each subsequent dynasty tried to further strengthen the population registration system.

For example, the Song dynasty (960-1279) developed "*baojia*" system, which helped the state to control and manage the population. The system divided villages into "*bao*" (100 households) and the "*jia*" (1000 households). This system was used for the purpose of mutual responsibility, mutual surveillance, the fight against opposition authorities and the collection of taxes from the population.

Various war periods also witnessed the use of special documents to monitor the population. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Japanese army introduced so-called "Certificate of Reliability" in the occupied areas; the Kuomintang party (Chinese Nationalist Party), which was the dominant ruling party of the Republic of China on the mainland during 1928-1949, introduced identity cards in the regions it controlled; and in districts under the control of the Communist Party of China pass certificates and permit were used [1, p. 357].

FROM FREEDOM OF MIGRATION TO RESTRICTION OF THE BLIND FLOW, 1949-1978

The first stage of the *hukou* system (1949-1978) witnessed the institution emerged specifically for public security goals but developed into an omnipresent system for the population control. Its significance has been consolidated by the inner needs of the Planned Economy. The institutionalization of the *hukou* system in the period was also accompanied with the incrementally rigid restriction over the migration from rural areas to urban.

According to the *Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (adopted by the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's PCC on September 29th, 1949) working as a temporary constitution, citizens of the PRC were given the right of free residence and migration around the country. At the same time, the government began to introduce a household registration system for food supply and public security, which was not contradictory to the constitutional rights from the beginning.

In 1951, the Ministry of Public Security published *Temporary Administrative Rules for Urban Registration* (城市户口管理暂行条例) as the first part of the framework, which introduced the *hukou* system and indicated the need for urban household registration. In 1954, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and the National Bureau of Statistics jointly issued a "Directive" requiring a registration system for rural households. In 1955, the State Council issued *Instructions on the Establishment of a Permanent Registration System*, which introduced a single household registration system across the country [2, p. 91].

Since the mid-1950s, the household registration system and its supporting systems evolved into a policy tool serving the goal of developing heavy industry [3, p. 181]. Mao Zedong put forward the Great Leap and the Course of the Three Red Banners, which he believed would lead China to a socialist society in a short period. The main emphasis of industrialization was placed on the development of cities rather than villages. The standard of living of urban citizens began to rise much faster than in villages. In addition, urban development has stimulated the influx of labor from villages to cities and from marginal cities to major ones.

As a result, the urban population rose from 57.65 mln in 1949 (10.64% of the total population) to 82.85 mln in 1955 (13.48% of the total population)¹. Cities were overwhelmed to provide enough commodities and services to the sharply increasing population. The migration also led to a decrease of rural labors. The government needed to tie the peasants to the land, in order to make them stable suppliers of food and other agricultural products.

In 1953, the State Council published the *Directive on Keeping Peasants from "Blind" Migration to the Cities* (关于劝阻农民盲目流入城市的指示), demanding public security agencies to strengthen the population registration. Providing food to individuals who did not have city registration was forbidden. Village peasants who independently moved to the cities were sent back, as well as those temporarily employed by industrial and mining enterprises. The same year witnessed the launch of the state's strict control on the purchases and sales of cereal. Migration would endanger the state plans of food production and distribution.

Since 1956, permission became necessary for resettlement. Registration certificates were issued as proof. In 1956 and 1957, the State Council enacted the *Directive on Preventing "Blind" Outflow from the Rural Areas* ("制止农村人口盲目外流的指示") and its supplements, which demanded to strictly restrict the movement of the rural population to the cities [2, p. 91]. The government thus tried to regulate internal migration and prevent rural areas

¹ China Statistical Yearbook 2017. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2017/indexeh.htm> (accessed 15.09.2020)

from desolating. But it should be mentioned that, at the same time, rural laborers were welcomed in some smaller factories in pursuit of larger production, due to the conflicts between the low-level industrialization and the ambitious Great Leap.

The year of 1958 turned out key for the Chinese population. In this year was issued the *Household Registration Act* (中华人民共和国户口登记条例), which formally introduced the registration system, *hukou*, in the People's Republic of China. It divided the whole population into rural registration (农业户口) and non-rural registration (非农业户口). In addition to this division, it also indicated the locations where the registration was issued and to which a person or an entire family was attached. The PRC citizens of rural registration were assigned to a particular village and could only do agricultural work, they had no right to move to or work in cities.

Citizens with a non-rural registration usually lived and worked in cities. Each family was given a household book (户口本), which contained information about place of residence, number of family members, ethnicity, age, etc. The household book was used as proof to accept state-distributed products.

The household registration system was associated with at least 14 specific social systems such as food supply, fuel supply, housing, education, employment, medical care, and pension etc. It proved a system that separates rural areas and cities (see *Table*). Rural-registered citizens were deprived of any state supports, while city-registered citizens were protected by the social welfares. The government also guaranteed the later with employment, as well as food stamps and other basic necessities.

Table. Differences in service distribution between citizens with non-rural and rural registration

	Non-rural registration	Rural registration
Food	State unified supply and provide non-staple food subsidies	Eat self-produced food without subsidies
Education	Can apply for colleges and technical schools	Generally, only allowed to apply for secondary school, and only with high scores
Employment	Many opportunities, state-owned enterprises generally only recruit urban hukou	Few opportunities, only 4 state-owned industries recruit agricultural hukou
Medical Service	Medical reimbursement in some industries and regions	All medical services are all at your own expense

Source: [3, p. 186].

In the 1960s, the relations between the PRC and the USSR began to deteriorate. The USSR, which for a long time provided financial and technical support to China, stopped its investment since the late 1950s. The interruption resulted in the closure of a large number of enterprises and factories in cities. Previously, during 1952-1957, more than 20 million rural workers had quietly moved to the cities, in which the government acquiesce due to a shortage of labor. In 1959 and 1960, with the strategy of economic development changed, most of these peasant workers had to return to rural areas from cities [4, p. 21]. In June 1961, *Nine Measures on Reducing Urban Population and Urban Grain Sales* (关于减少城镇人口和压缩城镇粮销量的九条办法) required that urban population must be reduced by more than 20 million within 3 years. This opened the "Counter urbanization" movement under administrative orders [5, p. 76].

Hukou was actually a measure to *plan* migration rather than to *preclude* it. Under its assistance, the 1960s and the 1970s highlighted massive planned migrations from more developed regions to underdeveloped, from urban areas to rural. Since 1964, the "Third Front Project" (三线建设), aiming at strengthening national defense forces, launched thousands of large programs including mining, transportation, plants, factories, higher education, etc., in 13 continental provinces and regions of the country. More than 4 mln formal workers (intellectuals and military personnel) and about 10 mln agricultural workers migrated to construct the projects [6, p. 437]. Also, "Down to The Countryside Movement", formally launched in 1968, mobilized or forced about 20 mln young people to work in remote rural regions. According to statistics from 1960-1976, the quantity of urban population in percentage decreased from 19.75% to 17.44%².

The Constitution of 1975 canceled the provision of "the freedom of migration". In 1977, for the first time, the State Council officially declared strict control over the change of rural registration to the city registration. In the same year, the Ministry of Public Security of the PRC issued *Rules of the Regulation of Registration Change* ("关于处理户口迁移的规定"), which urged urban residents without a city registration return to the village. Local governments annually planned the quotas of legal migrants from village to city [2, p. 92]. The Ministry of Public Security

² Ibidem.

kept tracking the number of people who changed their registration, which should not exceed 1.5% of the non-rural population in a year [4, p. 21].

REFORMS AND OPENNES, 1978-1992

The second stage of the residence system (1978-1992) suffered from a dual policy goal. On the one hand, the state tried to reform the residence system and relax the rural labors to satisfy the rapid industrialization. On the other hand, the system was still needed, therefore in many ways maintained, as a policy tool to address the expansion of the urban population and the following social problems.

Since 1978, significant changes began to occur in all areas of Chinese society. The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping were designed to accelerate the development of China, as well as to improve the standard of living of the Chinese people. With the economy coming to life after the Cultural Revolution, the demands of urban residence were restored. In the beginning, those demands were from people who migrated during the Cultural Revolution, including cadres sent to their original places and educated young people to the rural regions.

Later in 1980, the family members of urban specialists from rural areas required to obtain a city residency under a simplified application process [6, p. 443]. In rural areas, the introduction of the "Household Responsibility System" freed much rural labor. In cities, the recovered public enterprises and newly-opened "mixed-owned" enterprises demanded more manpower. All these forced the Chinese government to revise the rules of granting registration in order to keep pace with the country's economic development.

In 1984, the State Council published *Notice Concerning Farmers' Permanent Residence in Townships* (关于农民进入集镇落户问题的通知). The notice suggested to support the rural population who wished to work in enterprises and possessed technical abilities to be allowed a non-rural residence permit. The main requirements for them to achieve the residency were a permanent address of residence and a stable, legal income. This sort of residents was issued a new type of registration with self-sufficiency [6, p. 444].

In addition to the self-sufficiency of rations, they enjoyed the same rights and performed the same obligations with other residents in the same township. This was the first policy to loose China's household registration system, breaking a gap in the dual household registration system in the previous 30 years [5, p. 78]. Although these migrants were not allocated with food stamp, the possibility to change *hukou* had already become a significant shift.

In 1985, the State Council published *Temporary Provisions on the Urban Population Regulation* (城镇人口管理的暂行规定), which provided migrants with a "temporary residence permit" and "work residence permit", allowing rural migrants legally reside in cities without an urban *hukou*. However, Residents who received a temporary residence permit or work residence permit were not eligible to the same benefits as city residents with permanent residence permit [2, pp. 92-93]. With the restriction on migration toward cities relaxed, the population flow rose too fast.

The State Council had to check it by a notice titled *Preventing the Transformation from Rural to Non-Rural Residence from Increasing too fast* (关于严格控制“农转非”过快增长的通知) in the same year.

A change occurred in the late 1980s when the local authorities started selectively sell urban *hukou* to migrants from villages. The original reason to allow the sale was to increase the number of workers in cities. Migrants who wanted to change registration to urban had to pay a fee for "increasing the capacity of the city". Also, there could be additional requirements in different cities for changing registration (e.g., housing). However, local authorities seized this opportunity for speculation and corruptive activities [7, p. 88]. The marketization of *hukou* was soon prohibited by the State Council [8].

Another factor hampering the reform was the family planning policy best known as "one-child policy", which allowed urban citizens to have only one child, but at the same time the government provide for free most part of the social services for families, including free medical care, kindergarten, school etc. Such kind of social services were not allowed for children from urban areas.

Started since 1979, the rigorous policy received bitter opposition from both local authorities and the mass. The policy was relaxed after 1984 to allow the residents in rural areas to have the "one-and-a-half child policy", which permit the couples with girls for their first births to have a second child. The relaxation also added flexibilities allowing a variety of nuances across provinces and ethnic groups. The complex policy of family planning was deeply relied on the system of residence to record where a couple are from, what type of policy was eligible, and whether they had already given a birth.

THE CONTINUATION OF THE REFORM AND ITS OBSTACLE, 1992-2019

During the 1990s, the pattern of migration significantly changed. Earlier in the 1980s, migration mainly took place within a county or a province. A decade later, the rural population became much more likely to migrate from

one province to another, especially from inner provinces to the more marketized coastal areas. At the same time, many migrants did not seek to change registration. According to the 5th National Population Census (2000), more than 144 mln Chinese dwellers were registered at their original place while resided in another city [9, p. 44].

In October 1992, the CPC's 14th National Congress declared to build a socialist market economy as the main goal of the economic reforms. As a tool of the planned economy, the *Hukou* system was not suitable for the new economy.

For the economic development the PRC needed to develop tertiary sector, which can employ more people and contribute more to GDP. It also could help to reduce poverty and enlarge the quantity of the Chinese middle class, which could be additional driver for the Chinese economy. But growth of the tertiary sector relies on urbanization, which was dependent on the *Hukou system*.

Government started slow modernization of the registration system which led to increase in urban share of employment from under 30% in late 1970s to almost 40% in 2008. Also, these measures led to the increase in quantity of middle class, which share of total population increased from 3,1% in 2000 to 50,8% in 2018³. But the reform of the *hukou* system was difficult because it was not only an institution for resource redistribution but the basis of almost all social policies.

In 1992, a new city residence registration system, known as so called "blue stamp", was introduced into some cities, especially the Special Economic Zones (SEZ). Its main purpose was to attract investors from other regions, encouraging them to purchase commercial real estate and to invest in the housing fund of China [6, p. 444].

Since 1990, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Xiamen successfully implemented the "blue stamp" to attract investors. To obtain a "blue stamp", migrants should meet several requirements: high educational level, scientific and technological achievements, and certain investment amounts. Those who hold "blue stamp" registration and their families enjoyed the same rights as urban *hukou* holders: the enrollment of their children in kindergartens and schools of compulsory education, the qualification for a business license, the installation of gas and telephone, etc. However, the issue of "blue stamps" was limited by a quota across different regions [10, p. 16].

At the same time, "temporary residence permit" became even more significant in metropolitan cities (i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen) as they expanded into national economic centers. People living there were not qualified to enjoy most social benefits, protecting the limited resources from overused. In some large cities, some industries were explicitly closed to migrative workers. Most migrants work on factories as manual labor, textile and garment factory workers, service workers etc. Mainly occupy jobs that local residents disdain.

In 1997, the State Council launched a number of projects aimed at easing restrictions on registration, for example, the *Pilot Program for Reforming Household Residence System in Small Cities* (小城镇户籍管理制度改革 试点方案). This program was supposed to facilitate the movement of the rural population to small cities. Within the following two years, the new residence policy was experimented in more than 382 cities and affected more than 540,000 people. By 2001, this program already covered the whole country and since then had started the active reform of the *Hukou* system. Gradually, this trend spread to medium and large cities [2, pp. 90-96].

In 2003, the State Council repealed an infamous act known as *Confine and Dispatch Urban Solicitors Act* ("城市流浪乞讨人员收容遣送办法), allowing sheriffs to detain urban solicitors and send back them to their original places of residency. The law was replaced by *Help the Urban Homeless Act* (城市生活无着的流浪乞讨人员救助管理办法). According to the new law, if they did not violate public order, commit a crime, or sleep on the street, migrants who did not have a local *hukou* or local temporary residence permit should not be expelled from cities [11, p. 178].

The relax of household registration largely facilitated the agricultural population to migrate to small cities. But it still has not stopped the flows to metropolitan cities (see *Figure*), and even small city residents also rush to cities.

In the pre-reform period, when the mobility was low, the place of birth was usually consistent with the *hukou* place. Migrants who left the place of registration and lived in a different area for more than 6 months were no more than 2 mln in 1983, accounting for only 0.2% of the country's population. By 2014, this number had increased to 253 mln, or 18.5% of the whole population. In practice, the registrations of children were issued according to their mothers until 2003. A high percentage of mobility enlarged the population living in a cities with a non-local residence permit [12, pp. 11-12].

The 6th National Census conducted in 2010 reported 260.94 mln illegal migrants (approximately 19.6% of the population). Among them, about 175 mln people were registered within the province of actual residence, and 85.87 mln were registered outside the province of residence⁴.

³ How Well-off is China's Middle Class? China Power web-site. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-middle-class/> (accessed 13.03.2022)

⁴ Tabulation on the 2010 population census of the PRC 2010. (In Chin.). <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm> (accessed 10.08.2019)

The rise of migrant population increased the public callings on repealing the registration system. Before the opening of the National People’s Congress annual conference of 2010, 13 local newspapers unusually published a joint editorial calling for abolishing the registration system in China. The authors emphasized to the government that the *Hukou system* violated human rights and required a reform⁵. In spite of the relax of the registration system, it was still a barrier for many Chinese to improving the standard of living, getting a new job, as well as upper moving in social status.

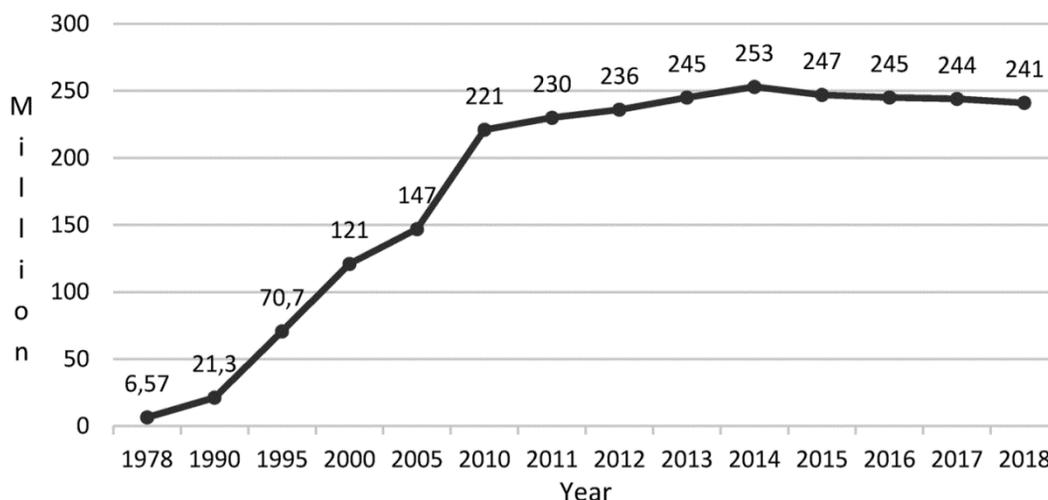


Figure. Migration of rural population (mln) to the cities after the Reforms and Opening up.

Note: the latest data from 2018 is not available.

Source: [5, p. 78].

During 2012-2013, a new wave of *hukou* reform was launched. Prime Minister Li Keqiang called for an increase in urbanization to 80%, reaching the level of developed countries. As a result, more than 25 million people in rural areas were supposed to get an urban registration within the following three years. The proportion of the urban population was predicted to reach 70% by 2030.

However, many members of the NPC Standing Committee opposed the “National Plan for Urbanization” and called for a slowdown of urbanization in China [11, pp. 167-190]. In 2014, the government changed the strategy and adopted a program of “new urbanization”, which planned to cancel the division between rural and urban registrations. In July 2014, the State Council published *The Views on Further Reforming the Registration System* (关于进一步推进户籍制度改革的意见), planning to further relax the migration policy, level the rural and urban registration system, and consolidate the system of residence permit. The document stated that, by 2020, it was necessary to create a new model of household registration, to help more than 100 million rural residents to get a city registration [2, p. 95].

In January 2016, the permanent residence permit was introduced with the launch of *The Temporary Provisions of Permanent Residence Permit* (居住证暂行条例). Different from its predecessors like temporary residence permit or work residence permit, the new permit allowed migrants to gain access to basic social services (compulsory education, labor exchange, health care, etc.). With any of three conditions (namely having a permanent residence, working for a full-time job, or being a full-time student), migrants leaving their *hukou* places and living in another city for more than half a year were eligible to a permanent residence permit.

The system of permanent residence permit worked as a part of household residence system. With a permanent permit, a migrant might apply for a local *hukou* meeting certain requirements. The requirements changed depending on the city sizes. For cities with less than 500 thousand people, the only requirement was to have a permanent residence in the city. In larger cities with 1-5 million people, the requirements included a permanent residence, a full-time job, and paying for social insurance successively for certain years (no more than 5 years). Metropolitans were encouraged to introduce a score system for evaluating a migrant’s qualification. People with higher education usually enjoyed a bonus in obtaining a local *hukou*.

⁵ Александр Габуев. Китай проверяет прописку. *Коммерсант*. 03.03.2010. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1330704> (accessed 20.08.2019)

The *Hukou* system has undergone great changes over years. It has become more flexible and allowed parts of the Chinese population (especially the privileged classes) to move freely throughout the country. It also reduced the "isolation" of the rural population from the urban population. At the same time, the basic framework, mechanisms, and functions remained the same. The *Hukou system* was still of tremendous political, social and economic importance. It contributes to economic stability and allows the formation and maintain of a new middle class. However, studies by many Chinese sociologists suggest that the *hukou* system is not only reproducing the differences between the rural and the urban areas, but hampering the further marketization of the China economy in many ways [13; 14].

In recent years many Chinese migrants who work in cities and do not have a city registration are not ready to change their rural registration for the opportunity to become full-fledged residents of cities.

First of all, the villagers seek to preserve the land, which is allocated to them due to the possession of a rural residence permit. According to Chinese laws, land in cities belongs to the state, while land in rural regions belongs to the village as a collective. Rural residents have the right to receive land in the village either for the construction of their own home or for agricultural activities. With the expansion of urbanization, the collective ownership also means huge cash compensation once the land is expropriated by the state. Change of residence registration automatically entails the loss of land and the potential revenues.

Secondly, the urban registration has already lost much of its value. The infrastructure in the rural areas gradually develops to a similar level of many cities. The central government tries to improve rural life. In 2006, the agricultural tax was abolished, which improved the financial condition of rural residents, as well as improved the situation in the field of education, health, etc.

Thirdly, many residents are frightened by the high cost of housing in cities, and not everyone is ready to change their housing in the countryside for a rented apartment in the city. Fourth, many rural residents believe that life in the city is more complex and can bring more stressful situations. In addition, many are scared by the complicated bureaucratic process of changing registration [12, p. 16].

All these indicate that the household registration system in China is still awaiting a long way of reform. In order to increase the middle class, the Chinese government should create simpler conditions for migrating to the cities and gaining the opportunity to find better paying jobs and increase living standards. Nowadays the *hukou* system represents a barrier for many Chinese.

CONCLUSION

In modern China the *Hukou system* influence development of urban and rural society, and is one of the reason of differences in level of life in urban and rural areas. It also creates an institutional barrier which affects the development process of modernization in China, make difficult social migration from one to another social strata. As a consequence of the system implementation is the lower income of migrant workers comparing to the local workers in urban areas.

In our opinion, reforms of *hukou* could provide the young generation of Chinese with the opportunity to get higher education in universities, better medical service and standards of living, as well as the opportunity to become the middle class. The reform of household registration system is a very difficult systematic project. The social welfare system, public service system, rural land system, central and local fiscal system, as well as the division of different administrative regions' management are nested and intertwined with each other [15, p. 65]. The reform of household registration system could improve the China's urbanization process, and expand China's middle class.

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