

Identity and Politics: the Change of Migrant Workers' Identity in the Process of Urbanization in China

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Abstract: In the early days of the founding of People's Republic of China, the state used political and administrative means to establish a new social structure with workers, peasants and intellectuals as basic structural elements. According to people's historical background and actual professions, the system of identity separation is constructed in the whole society. Through the household registration system, we established a dual social and spatial hierarchy system with urban-rural opposition and with the interest inclining to urban population. It hindered the urbanization of agricultural population. China's urbanization rate was far lower than the degree of industrialization; the household registration system became a barrier to restrict the citizenization of migrant workers. On the road of urbanization, migrant workers have experienced the changes of identity from “vagrants”, “migrant workers”, “migrant labors” to “new workers”. But only the reform of household registration system is unable to satisfy the multiple demands of migrant workers in urbanization. The central government puts forward two strategies of new urbanization and rural revitalization, deeply implements the comprehensive reform of the household registration system, coordinates the balanced development of urban and rural society, tries to realize the universality and equalization of public services, promotes the identity transformation from “migrant workers to new workers”, and accelerates the urbanization of migrant workers.

1. Introduction

The dispute about the identity of migrant workers is actually an issue of identity politics. The so-called “identity politics” means, “taking the difference of a certain form as a particularly important identity sign to analyze the basic contradictions and oppressive relations of co-owners of this identity, so as to determine their basic interests, to simplify and restore the complexity and diversity of their actual survival relations.” To clarify the identity of “migrant workers”, we should not only analyze questions like “who we are or where are we from”, but also need to deeply explore issues like “what we may become, and how we have been performing”.^[1]

2. The Identity of “Vagrants” in the Process of Population Urbanization Before Reform and Opening Up

At the beginning of the founding of new China, most of the economic resources were in the hands of the state. The state and the government directly controlled and managed economic production and distribution; the political power was highly centralized. At the same time, the whole society and peoples' cultural lives were also highly controlled from top to bottom. In *Political Science*, Andrew Heywood defined “politics” as politics of government art, politics of public affairs, politics of compromise and consensus, as well as politics of rights and resource allocation. In the process of exercising political rights, the government often restricts the public through the distribution of interests, rewards or punishments to achieve the goal.^[2]

From 1949 to 1956, China reconstructed the social class structure and established a new social structure with workers, peasants and intellectuals as basic structural elements. According to people's historical background and actual professions, two kinds of political and administrative stratification

systems were constructed in the whole society, which were not only interrelated but also different from each other. The former can be called as “the political hierarchical system of identity”; the latter can be called as “the household registration and occupation hierarchical system of identity”.^[3] Economically, the Chinese government decided to take the path of capital intensive and take the priority of developing heavy industry in accordance with the Soviet model, and started the large-scale industrial construction. In the first five-year plan, 11 new cities and a number of industrial bases were established; a large number of labors were recruited to supplement the team of promoting socialist industrialization. Through the channels of urban enterprises' recruitment, some farmers entered the industrial sectors of cities and realized the non-agricultural transfer in their occupation and identity. In June 1955, the State Council issued *Instruction on the Establishment of a Regular Household Registration System* to master the situation of national population changes conveniently. The household registration management system was implemented throughout the country. During this period, the free migration of farmers was allowed at the systemic and economic levels, resulting in a large number of farmers flowing into cities and the sharp increase in the number of unemployed persons in the city. The social security situation in cities deteriorated seriously. Therefore, in 1953-1957, the government successively issued 8 measures like *Instruction on Preventing Rural Vagrants to Flow in Cities*, and strictly forbid enterprises to recruit workers from the countryside. The government set up receiving stations in the city, and repatriated farmers to the countryside. Under that situation, farmers who moved from rural regions to urban areas were called as “vagrants”.

In January 1958, *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Household Registration* was promulgated. Under the joint action of the household registration system, the people's commune system and the system of unified purchasing and marketing of agricultural products, a social and spatial hierarchy system was formed, which caused opposition between urban and rural areas and distributed more interest to urban population; it hindered the urbanization of agricultural population.^[4] From 1961 to 1963, due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward Movement and the impact of natural disasters on national economy, the state began to reduce urban population on a large scale and mobilize urban population to return to countryside. In June 1961, *Nine Measures on Reducing Urban Population and Reducing Urban Grain Sales* required that urban population must be reduced by more than 20 million within three years, during which 37 cities should be cancelled, thus started the “anti urbanization” movement dominated by administrative orders. In August 1964, the State Council approved and transmitted *Regulations of the Ministry of Public Security on Handling Household Registration Transfer (Draft)*, which stressed the basic spirit of strict restrictions on the migration from rural areas to cities and market towns and from market towns to cities, thus blocking the path of rural population to migrate to cities. In 1975, the second constitution directly abolished the freedom of people in movement. Later, in November 1977, the State Council formally put forward the strict control over “agricultural to non-agricultural transformation”, clearly stipulating that the rate of “agricultural to non-agricultural transformation” should not exceed 1.5%. In a word, from 1958 to 1977, the urbanization of agricultural population entered the period of “strict control”. By 1977, the level of industrialization in China raised to 44%, while the level of population urbanization was only 17.55%. The process of population urbanization lagged behind the speed of industrialization; a large number of surplus labor force overstocked in rural areas.

3. “Migrant Workers” Flooding into Cities after Reform and Opening Up

After the reform and opening up in 1978, China's population migration from urban and rural areas was firstly driven by government policies, and then gradually turned to be driven by market factors of economic development. The migration mode changed from “household registration migration” in the early stage to “non household registration migration” after the reform and opening up; “urban-rural relations began to move from a rigid state to a flexible one”.^[5] More and more farmers had the opportunity to work in cities; the urbanization of agricultural population developed rapidly. The original function of household registration system of preventing the flow of rural and

urban labor was gradually weakening, so it was imperative to adjust the household registration system accordingly.

The establishment and adjustment of systems can be regarded as the result of interest conflicts, and the efforts of group members to change the interest conflicts into interest coordination as well as symmetric powers and responsibilities.^[6] In January 1982, the first document on rural work in the history of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China clearly stipulated the implementation of a contract system with remuneration linked to output in rural areas, which enabled farmers to obtain the autonomy of agricultural production and management. The policy liberate rural productivity; a large number of surplus labor began to appear. In October 1984, the state promulgated *Notice on Issues of Farmers Entering Market Towns to Settle Down*, which stipulates that farmers and their families who apply to work, do business and run service industry in market towns are allowed to settle down as permanent residents as long as they have fixed residence in the town, have the ability to run business or can work in township enterprises and institutions for long-term. Thus, the policy of “agricultural to non-agricultural transformation” changed; the object of “agricultural to non-agricultural transformation” gradually expanded. At the same time, industries and township enterprises sprung up, which also needed a large number of labor force. Therefore, migrant workers were included in the strategic plan of the urbanization of market towns and rural areas. Farmers in township enterprises “do not leave their hometown”; they “work in factories but do not enter the city”. The special social groups of “migrant workers” appeared. This national policy, in essence, provides legitimacy for the urbanization of rural migrant workers, and indirectly demonstrates that rural urbanization is essentially the continuation and solidification of migrant workers' political identity. The proposal of this plan, in essence, solves the problem of migrant workers' mobility, and the core of this problem is to continue the identity of migrant workers in the previous decade, which leads to the social problem of migrant workers.

In the middle and late 1990s, the transition of the national economic system prompted rural surplus labor force to rapidly transfer to cities in a large scale. The “tide of migrant workers” was a normal social phenomenon at that stage. It was a progressive manifestation of the loosening household registration system; the process from “farmers to migrant workers” was basically smooth. However, due to the lag of reforming the household registration system, the employment system and the social security system, migrant workers did not leave the land completely. They “entered the factory but left the city; they left the land and the countryside”. The loosening household registration system was actually a kind of semi freedom; migrant workers could not really “settle down”.

4. “Migrant Labors” Who Cannot Take Roots in Cities under the Semi Urbanization

Compared with terms like “vagrants” and “migrant workers”, “migrant labors” can be regarded as a professional identity rather than a household registration identity. As a brand-new social identity different from peasants or employees in state-owned enterprises, the connotation of “migrant labors” is very clear. They are employed workers, and proletariats. In 2004, the No.1 document of the State Council, *Opinions on Some Policies Promoting the Increase of Farmers' Income* proposed for the first time that “migrant workers entering the city for employment have become an important part of industrial workers”. But in fact, under the market economy system, “migrant labors” cannot enjoy the status of “masters” of traditional socialist workers. Yongming Zeng and Liguang Zhang found that compared with authorized workers, the wage rate of local migrant workers was reduced by 6.4% due to the discrimination of household registration; the wage rate of nonlocal migrant workers was reduced by 9.3% due to the “double discrimination of household and region”.^[7] Feng Chen found that the migrant workers who came to work in the city were floating on the edge of the city. The separation of occupation and social identity, as well as the lack of urban identity and the sense of belonging showed that they were not really integrated into the city; the “semi urbanization” phenomenon occurred. The main reason was that migrant workers could not get the support and protection from the household registration system or social security policies. They were unable to change their own identity and social status of farmers, leading to exclusion of

urban citizens. They can only wander between the countryside and the city.^[8] The core problem was that under the market economy, workers could not become “masters” without the support of the household registration system, which was a social resource distribution system. “Labors” were only temporary reference, which was not included in the framework of the original social identity system.

The healthy development of urbanization should be a kind of social integration of rural population in the city; it is the mutual embeddedness of economic activities, the society, systems and culture. From 2000 to 2012, the national policy reformed, hoping that the development of small towns can absorb agricultural population and undertake the task of transfer farmers to non-agricultural population. In May 2001, *Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Household Registration Management System in Small Towns* was issued. It was pointed out that those who have legal and fixed residence, stable occupations or living source in county-level cities, towns with county-level people's government and other towns, as well as their immediate relatives living together, can apply for permanent residence in towns... They shall enjoy same rights and perform same obligations with local urban residents in terms of enrollment, joining the military and employment; the government shall not implement discriminatory policies against them. This indicates that the fences separating urban and rural areas removed in small towns; some places even encouraged farmers to live and start businesses in small towns. However, due to the unequal “gold content” of household registration in different cities, the national will of household registration reform conflicts with the development logic of some local governments; there is still discrimination of welfare and rights based on “identity” in big cities. The willingness of ordinary migrant workers to settle down is related to the rights and treatment behind the agricultural household registration and whether they can enjoy local welfare treatment equally after migration. According to the survey, 20.15% of migrant workers born before 1980s are willing to settle down in cities, while 24.66% of the post-80s migrant workers are willing to settle down.^[9] According to the survey in Hubei, although 66.8% of migrant workers like urban life, only 7.3% of them are willing to settle down in cities and towns. According to the survey in Sichuan, only 10.7% of the migrant workers are definitely willing to transfer their hukou (registered permanent residence) to urban hukou.^[10] The deregulation of household registration in small towns has attracted many rural migrants. But it cannot stop people from moving to big cities. The reform of household registration system alone cannot meet the multiple demands of migrant workers to settle down and solve the problem of urbanization of more than 200 million migrant workers.

5. New Workers of China after Deepening the Household Registration Reform

In November 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to “accelerate the reform of household registration system, orderly promote the citizenization of agricultural population, and strive to achieve the full coverage of basic public services for permanent urban residents.” Then, the strategy of “new urbanization”, which is characterized by urban-rural integration, industrial interaction, conservation and intensive, ecological and liveable, as well as harmonious development, came into being. In July 2014, *Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of Household Registration System* put forward 11 specific policies and measures in three aspects, among which “cancelling agricultural and non-agricultural household registration and establishing a unified household registration system in urban and rural areas” was regarded as a new starting point to break the dual structure in urban and rural areas and promote new urbanization. In November 2015, the *Interim Regulations on Residence Permit* was issued to provide a platform for supplying social welfare and public services to localized permanent residents; the gap between the rights and interests of people with residence permit and local urban residents is becoming smaller. Like industrial workers, migrant workers who work in cities are urban workers with their wages as main source of income. They have no relation with the land in labour and income. In the process of entering the city to work, migrant workers are directly related to the socialized production. They learn and master corresponding production skills, and gradually break the concept of small-scale peasant economy through the long-term grinding of market economy. On the whole, migrant workers and industrial workers are gradually approaching in terms of ideology and behaviours; they

have basic characteristics of industrial workers. Now the state vigorously implements the new urbanization and rural revitalization strategies, while the local governments carry out comprehensive reform of the household registration system. Under that situation, migrant workers should seize the opportunity to grow into high-quality new industrial workers who can shoulder China's modernization construction.

6. Conclusion

In the process of China's urbanization, a large number of farmers come into cities to work and live, forming a special identity group: "migrant workers". Because of the long-term dual household registration system in urban and rural areas, migrant workers become a social fact that farmers are not only a profession, but also an "identity imposed by the system and guaranteed by the state power". In the past 70 years, the formation and development of household registration system is closely related to the development of China's political and economic situation and the Party's ruling concept, which also determines the status of migrant workers. Since the reform and opening up, migrant workers have grown into a new type of labor force. Relying on the large number of agricultural population, they have become a new working class in China. Most of them are engaged in light industry. They have ideals and beliefs; they know how to innovate; they are dare to take on responsibilities and make contributions. Migrant workers are the backbone of creating social wealth, the backbone of innovation driven development, and the power of implementing the strategy of building a manufacturing power.

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