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HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION AND THE CASTE-LIKE QUALITY OF PEASANT LIFE¹

GONG XIKUI

For the vast majority of people in China, the household register is of the utmost importance. One cannot avoid a close relationship with the register, it is there at births and at deaths, it helps in the arrangement of food, clothing and housing, it is there for the registration of marriages or funerals, it is there in the selection of work and in work transfers, and it is referred to when attempting to establish the status and identity of people. Hence, there is much to be gained from a deeper analysis of the household registration system in China.

Special Characteristics and Function of the Household Registration System

The so-called household register is a volume within which each resident registers on the basis of their household. In traditional China it was known as the 'male register' (*dingji*), the 'yellow register' (*huangji*) or the 'record of accounts' (*jizhang*). Over time, it has had various types of investigative functions, such as checking on the population, levying taxes and arranging corvée. After 1932 and during the rule of Guomindang or Nationalist Party, the household register constituted part of the *baojia* system and was of use as a procedure by which to levy able-bodied men for military service, control the population and oppress the people. After the communist victory in 1949 the household record constituted the statistical basis upon which the population became known for it contained names, ages, nationality, work skills and so forth.

The contemporary system of household registration in China came into being after liberation in 1949. It was established along with each level of government organisation and the general tendency was that, as each area became secure, this system would be established. In the beginning, the functions of the household register were quite simple. It provided the Public Security Ministry or the local level governmental agencies (such as the village governments) with a means by

1 Gong Xikui, 'One perspective on the current household registration system in China', *Social Science*, Feb. (1989), 32-6. [宫希魁, '中国现行户籍制度透视', 《社会科学》。]

which to administer, through the administrative region or the local work unit, those who were to be in charge of the registration books. They would provide documentation to these localities and the record would thereby prove useful in supplying population statistics, in helping with providing security for the region, in providing evidence on the citizenry and so forth. At this time, the register was closely related to residency and provided evidence of who lived in what administrative district, which local level government was responsible for them, when they could buy their grain, and other issues relating to the supply of goods. Shortly after liberation, it wasn't the transfer of the household register that determined population movement but population movement which directed migration and reregistration of households. So, wherever one worked was also where one lived, and this was where one was registered.

Over time, however, the function of the register began to change. The nature of that change can be seen in the shifting function of the register from the time of its establishment through to its emergence as a structure by which to classify social stratum. In the immediate aftermath of the 1949 revolution, there was no idea that benefits could be derived from this structure. There was no conception of peasant household registers being somehow lower down on the pecking order than city-based registers. People at that stage didn't care where one lived or what one did for a living for everyone was a resident in the new People's Republic.

Later on, however, due to the fact that different places of residency produced different benefits, new social stratum and groups emerged and the allocating function of a household register brought with it certain 'inflationary effects'. Hence, as the registration structure was gradually established, it took on the form of a pagoda (*baotashi*) in that it cemented social status. Within this pagoda structure it was the household registers of the peasants which were at the base of the social structure and, as one progressed up the pagoda, one moved on to the non-peasant households, the township households, the city households, the big city households and the centrally administered city households.² The lower one went down this pyramid of rights, the more widespread and numerous were the number and type of households.

2 Within this structural form, movement between areas of equal value proves to be relatively easy. For example, movement from one rural region to another, from one town to another, from one middle-sized city to another, are all acceptable forms of movement. Yet, comparatively speaking, even with this form of movement there are quite a few problems. The other type of migration, which we can call vertical migration, is of two types: there are those who wish to migrate from the bottom up, but this is a little like the old saying, the road from Shanxi to Sichuan is even tougher to travel than the pathway to heaven (*shudao zhi nan, nanyu shang qingtian*). It is nigh on impossible for a peasant to transfer the household register to a non-rural or urban area without abundant reasons and some

2 The centrally administered cities are Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai.

very special contacts. It is very hard indeed to jump up the ladder between each stratum. A much easier form of transfer to arrange is for those higher up on the ladder to migrate to places lower down on the social scale, but how many would be willing to leave the big cities to go and live in small towns or in border regions?

The ideological, cultural, political and economic sources of this form of stratification, made effective through the register, run deep. From an economic perspective, the concentration and level of development of the big cities is invariably higher than that of the medium-sized cities, which, in turn, are in a better position than the smaller cities, which are better off than villages. Villages bordering cities are themselves usually more developed than those distant villages which exist out in the provinces. This ladder of economic development is also reflected in the level of economic benefits available. From a political point of view, each level of government authority is divided in order of importance into those of the city, the town and the central villages (village government centres). This political structure leads to a protection of local interests and, taking into consideration political factors, means that these authorities cannot but give benefits to their own areas. From a social perspective, the bigger a city is, the higher the concentration of population. This, in turn, means that it will have higher levels of organisation and the residents will be more politically informed and their benefits more ably defended. In relation to ideological and cultural factors, it can be said that the biggest concentration of intellectuals is to be found in the central cities. The general cultural level of the residents in these areas is invariably higher than elsewhere and the intellectual superiority of the area is quite apparent. It is these factors that guide the differential benefits given and impel cities of different levels to act as mechanisms to protect and guard what they have. With different levels set up to block change and protect self-interests, and to strengthen and tighten the household registration system, the natural consequence is the development of a logic that will interpret transfers from lower levels to higher levels to be against their own interests.

Now that this type of pagoda structure has become stabilised, it forms a protective screen to consolidate social difference. After a person is born, the type of household register they will end up with is completely determined by that which has been given to their parents. The only hope of any change rests with rare opportunities or favourable circumstances. The reproduction of the household register is the reproduction of difference.

At the time of the completion of the household registration system, its purpose was to register the natural appearance of the people and families, but this changed so that it became a means by which people's social standing could be differentiated and standardised. The household register was originally the outcome of people's social activity, but it quickly changed to become a precondition for social activity. Originally, one was classified as a peasant household because one lived in a rural region and worked in agricultural activities. Today, this situation has been turned on its head. That is to say, it is because they have a peasant household registration that they can now only live in rural areas and therefore have no

choice but to work in the agricultural sector. The household registration system has produced a contrary result to what was expected. It has become a means by which the people's freedoms are limited and, as a result, the problem of alienation has already reached amazing levels. At the present time, the household registration system carries within it many selfish, biased and discriminatory elements. This human-made system is simply an opportunity to increase unfairness and social inequality for the benefit, and in the service, of a few.

As the cities are already extremely crowded, isn't it appropriate to tighten the household registration regulations so as to limit the vertical migration of people? But to address the question in this way is to avoid confronting what is, in reality, the truly crucial problem. To strengthen the household registration system so as to control the deployment of human resources is not only irrational, but it will prove ineffective and won't get to the root of the problem. Behind the household registration system lies the large differences that exist in the distribution of benefits so that whoever attains registration in one area enjoys the benefits of registration in that area. If the government were to strengthen the household registration management system, then the other side of that decision would be a strengthening of the disparity in wealth between city and country. It is the solidification of this very inequitable structure which will be the nett result of this type of household registration system. Naturally, once the people realise this, they will try to destroy this system which acts as a fetter upon them. As the desire for equality rises among them, so they will be strengthened and their actions become more resolute. Hence, the only thing to do is to rectify the household registration system. Without any rectification of this system, which reinforces disparities in benefits, all the labour exerted on reforming the system will be wasted. This is because every time the system is strengthened, it gives birth to a new round of attempts to circumvent it.

Naturally, there are complex social and historical causes for the form that social inequality takes. To assume that these can be overcome by relying upon subjective will is quite unrealistic. Nevertheless, to recognise that these inequalities take on this form because of historical factors certainly is not the same as saying that it is reasonable for people to protect and extend such inequalities. Hence, one should not use the historical causes of the various forms of social inequalities as an excuse by which to paper over contemporary causes which really can be put down to policy error. If no action is undertaken to adjust the errors of this policy, but instead it is allowed to continue to grow at its own pace, then this will not only prove to be a major headache for the household registration system, but also possibly produce new reverberations in the economic, political and other arenas.

A number of points in conclusion:

1. The contemporary household registration system in China is covered by a thick feudal cloud. The policy leads directly to tying people to the land. The

fact that differences in land lead to differences in benefits quickly forms the reality of differentiation of status in the household registration system. More than this, this differentiation of status has been turned around so that it is the household registration system which offers different benefits. Hence, it is because the household registration system's population registration books function as a means by which benefits are distributed that there is alienation with the system.

2. A key component of personal liberation is the freedom of choice in work and place of abode. The rhythm of social life has continuously accelerated. Consequently, the need for movement by people of different work stations and different places has also arisen. Moreover, the attempt by the household registration system to have a situation whereby places of residence and work are stable, runs counter to the main tendencies in contemporary society.
3. It is imperative that, year by year, the original features and function of the household registration system be restored so that the household register is no longer linked to questions of benefit and so that the register can face a situation whereby all people are equal. The household registration system cannot be allowed to decide who gets big and who gets small benefits, for this must be based upon skill and success in enterprise. In a similar way, household migration registration should not determine the flow of the population. On the contrary, it is the flow of population which should determine the registration of migration.
4. Gradually, the household registration management system must be turned around so that in place of rigidity, there is a certain amount of elasticity. With the creation of a competitive environment and limitations placed upon the register's role in the allocation of benefits, all the various limitations imposed upon those migrating within the existing household registration system can be gradually made more flexible. The system of checks imposed upon those migrating can be simplified so that the greatest of all restrictions brought into effect by this system can be turned into a new respect for the rights of people to choose where they want to live. This, of course, is a long-term aim. Before such a long-term aim can be realised, however, a series of provisional measures should be instituted, such as making the temporary registration of households function in a way that is decided by science and so forth.

FROM CASTE TO CLASS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO A *THIRD EYE*

The following excerpt is drawn from the highly controversial book, *A Third Eye on China*. This book became infamous in intellectual circles in 1994 both because of the leftist argument it proffered (which led to it being banned shortly after its release), and because the author of the work claimed only to be its 'translator'.