

## Review: Migrant Workers and the City: Generation Now

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Huang, Chuanhui. *Migrant Workers and the City: Generation Now*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2016. 247 pages. Translated by Anna Beare. ISBN 978-1-55266-895-5

Huang Chuanhui's *Migrant Workers and the City: Generation Now* offers a rich portrayal of the experiences of rural to urban migrants. Huang argues that migrant workers in Beijing and other major cities provided the low-wage labour that fueled the expansion of market relations and made economic growth possible, yet they have borne the social costs of rapid urbanization and socioeconomic transformation. This connection between rural-urban migration and urbanization has played out in similar ways across the globe. What makes this case unique is China's *hukou* (household registration) system, which classifies the population as urban versus agricultural/rural (read: "peasant"). This classification ties people to their place of birth or that of their parents: rural migrants in Beijing and other cities are permanent outsiders. The *hukou* system determines people's lives, regulating where people can access state services, go to school, take university entrance exams, etc. It enables the extraction of value from migrant workers and entrenches their position as "second-class citizens" with limited opportunities for social or economic mobility. As someone interested in international migration, citizenship and precarious non-citizenship, I was struck by the parallels between being a rural "migrant" in Beijing and being an undocumented or illegalized resident, irregular migrant, or low-wage temporary migrant worker in Canada or just about anywhere else. Immigrant status configures the security of presence and access to public services for migrants, and in many cases, for their children.<sup>1</sup>

The book reads like a cross between a qualitative social science study and a journalist's first-person account. This makes sense, as Huang is a soldier and military writer with years of research and report-writing experience. This book offers an incisive study based on semi-structured interviews with migrant workers and their relatives, and interviews with other key actors, such as teachers, politicians, staff in companies that hire migrant workers, migrant worker activists and NGO leaders, and university professors and students. Huang's analysis also makes reference to available Chinese social science research. His writing style and the quality of the translation make the book easy to read and enjoyable.

Other analysts have identified the *hukou* system as a basis of social

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<sup>1</sup> See Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt (eds.). 2013. *Producing and Negotiating Noncitizenship*. University of Toronto Press.

inequality in China.<sup>2</sup> This system was established in 1955, well before market reforms, to manage the population and limit rural-to-urban migration. The first generation of migrant workers started leaving the countryside in the 1980s, soon after economic reforms began in the late 1970s. They “moved” but were not able to change their “rural” or agricultural status. The household registration system combines elements of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* citizenship rights: it provides access to state provisioning such as public education, health care and housing subsidies but ties them to “place,” thus rendering migrants as “out of place,” non-residents and virtual non-citizens when they are outside of their place of birth and registration. The problem is compounded for the children of non-registered urban dwellers whose registration and “citizenship” is based on their parents’ place of registration. They have no access to public education or healthcare in the cities where their parents work. Like undocumented and other noncitizens in other countries, Chinese migrant workers occupy a lower social and economic status, receive lower wages, experience dangerous and difficult work conditions, are often subjected to wage theft and discrimination, and enjoy no rights, protections or recourse.

*Migrant Workers and the City* contributes to research on the *hukou* system and to wider scholarship. Huang offers an analysis of China’s rapid transition to capitalism through the lens of the migrant worker experience. Huang also contributes to both Chinese focused and international research on migrant labour, precarious employment, citizenship, urbanization, the expansion of market relations, and precarious lives. Several aspects of the book stand out, particularly the powerful first-person narratives and the thematic breadth of the eight chapters, which provide an in-depth critique of migrant marginalization, limited rights and deplorable work conditions as well as several understudied topics.

Huang analyzes three generations of migrant workers. The first generation identified as rural and agricultural, with a strong connection to land. They knew how to farm, usually had access to land, and often had more than one child. They began to migrate in the early 80s, at later ages than the subsequent generations, leaving behind spouses and children. They left to make money for specific purposes, worked in the outskirts of Beijing or other cities, went home for annual festivals, and continued to orient their lives around family and the village. The extremely rapid pace of the post-reform social transformation and accompanying rural outmigration and urbanization in China, has meant that subsequent generations of migrant workers have distinct experiences. What Huang dubs

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<sup>2</sup> For example: Cheng, T., & Selden, M. (1994). “The origins and social consequences of China’s hukou system.” *The China Quarterly*, 139, 644-668; Wu, X., & Treiman, D. J. (2001). “The household registration system and social stratification in China: 1955-1996.” *Demography*, 41, 2, 363-384.

“Generation now” includes women and men born in the city to migrant parents, others who arrived as children with their parents, and young people who left the countryside since 2000. “Generation now” members do not identify as rural or tied to the land. They do not have farming skills, return “home” less and less frequently or not at all, and do not consider the village where they or their ancestors originated as “home.” “Generation now” members want to live permanently in the city, but many experience barriers because they lack an urban residence permit. As discrimination and isolation generate feelings of exclusion, some feel they belong in neither the city nor the countryside.

In a chapter on the construction sector, interviews offer visceral accounts of dangerous work and pervasive wage theft. The construction industry is organized so that workers are paid small amounts to cover maintenance, with wages to be paid in lump sums annually or after a job is completed. In practice, many of the workers were paid less than the amount promised, late, or not at all. Although the extent of the wage theft is not clear because of the lack of systematic data, Huang convincingly argues that Beijing’s urbanization has taken place through a system that extracts value from vulnerable migrant workers. Put differently, migrant workers are subsidizing the rise of Beijing as a global city and funneling profits to everyone else in the industry.

Migrant worker agency and advocacy are recurrent themes. Although these workers face tremendous adversity, Huang consistently presents examples grass-roots innovative responses to their systemic vulnerability. The chapter on the construction sector could have ended with the analysis of surplus extraction and urbanization, instead, Huang discusses organizing for better wages and recourse. University and NGO-based advocates play a crucial role providing legal advice. They also work creatively with migrant workers, using song and theater to promote awareness, and discussing strategies to improve wages and payment.

A chapter on migrant worker access to education offers further examples of efforts to mitigate *hukou*-related barriers. Huang interviews school directors and teachers in private schools for migrant workers’ children, as well as parents and the children themselves. The narratives demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of these schools. The schools are precarious, and not always sustainable because they operate outside of the state’s licensing system. Special college-level training programs offer a bridge to good jobs for the lucky few who are admitted. While well received in the short run, such programs do not solve the underlying problem. These paradoxical cases powerfully demonstrate how social inequality based on the *hukou* system can entrench inter-generational inequality.

How do migrant workers in the “now generation” find love, form families, and raise children given the challenges they face? Huang notes these issues throughout the book, and focuses on them in a chapter on “Bitter Love, Bitter Marriage.” First and second generation migration typically meant family separation and children growing up without fathers or both parents; for the “now

generation”, finding a marriage partner has become the challenge. Exploring the topic of unfulfilled sexual desire, and how migrant workers meet or try to meet their needs and find love adds an interesting layer to his analysis. A chapter on a rash of suicides at a particular company, Foxconn, adds a Durkheimian perspective. Huang argues that the social context, and Chinese society in general, are responsible for creating the conditions that led to the suicides. The new generation of migrant workers thus embodies a growing social problem.

The closing chapter, “May Their Future Not Just Be a Dream,” includes recommendations for eliminating the divide between urban citizens and migrant workers. In a sense, Huang is calling for an Arendtian recognition of “migrant workers” as having the right to have rights, regardless of their occupation, accent, or place of birth or residence. For Huang, the underlying problem is the *hukou* system itself. His closing discussion will sound familiar to those involved in discussions about reforming or eliminating temporary international migrant worker programs. One does not need to be a China specialist to appreciate this book. On the contrary, I recommend the book to any reader interested in social inequality, work and labor, rights, and migration and citizenship studies.