A Study of the Impact of China's Hukou Policy on Students-Based on the Perspective of Their Parents

Siying Huang *

BA Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

* Corresponding Author Email: Sxh1421@student.bham.ac.uk

Abstract. This paper investigates the development of the hukou policy in China. Moreover, the cascading effects on children become one of the crucial factors of identity. In it, children will be divided into mobile and local groups, and the disparities between the groups will be discussed and analyzed. The article is conducted through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. It analyses the impact of specific policies and regulations on children's education, mental health, and social discrimination. The analysis is also combined with a section of data, explicitly presenting the differences in data on mental health. Through comparative and critical thinking, it was found that the hukou policy's major negative impact on students is social discrimination. The role of the hukou policy is to exacerbate the differences between the different hukou groups and to create a hierarchy of differences, thus increasing inequality. It leads to the conclusion that although there is some validity to the hukou policy, the impact of the social inequalities it creates is profound.

Keywords: Hukou Policy, Social Equality, Children Education.

1. Introduction

The hukou system was launched in 1951 in the cities, and in 1958, its coverage was extended to the countryside [1]. The hukou system classified China's population by region and type [2]. Since then, every Chinese citizen has been allocated an urban or rural hukou, which has become a significant part of their self-identity.

Launching the hukou policy was introduced to stimulate the country's planned economy, give urban dwellers support to provide facilities for heavy industrial development, and use the peasants to sustain agricultural development. In the hukou policy, the central government delegated authority to the urban and rural levels of government. Thus, the hukou policy had different versions in different regions [1]. Non-local hukou citizens had to comply with local policies when entering a new residence to access essential benefits. For this reason, the hukou policy also had the effect of limiting the regional mobility of citizens. To a large extent, hukou status affected individual socioeconomic benefits and privileges. Having a local hukou was essentially the basis for eligibility for unemployment and retirement benefits, medical care, local schooling, and public housing [1]. Thus, because of this policy attribute, it paved the way for its later development as an obstructive policy that constrained social equality.

The theme of the article's discussion would revolve around social equality and, in particular, equality in education. The impact of the hukou policy on social equality will be discussed from the perspective of parents and students. The main body will describe some of the policy elements and focus on analyzing the reactions of parents and students.

2. Discriminatory Policy and Its Influencer

In China, hukou was an essential source of social inequality [2]. Alternatively, instead, among the several factors that shape social inequality, hukou became, and was, one of the most critical factors. Additionally, it has been mentioned in many texts that the hukou policy created a 'barrier' and that it created a barrier, and the segregation it brought was the source of social inequality today [3].

One of the reasons for showing the negative impact was that hukou had long maintained and exacerbated the urban-rural divide [2]. The main disparity was in the amount and availability of

benefits, with the government investing heavily in the urban hukou and its associated social benefits, which were rarely available to rural residents by comparison. The discriminatory institutional setup had created deep-rooted social inequalities. That is, rural hukou holders were at a structural disadvantage.

In applying for occupational and social benefits, rural hukou holders were more likely to experience discrimination when denied jobs in the public sector. So, the range of social benefits and guarantees linked to public sector positions were unavailable to them. Therefore, the non-public sector jobs, with longer working hours, worse working conditions, and lower wages, were the only options for these discriminated rural hukou holders [1].

While social discrimination, such as workplace discrimination, was not only present in the migrant worker population, migrant workers did not only experience workplace discrimination, but they also experienced wage discrimination [4]. In other words, migrant workers often lived on lower wages than the local population. The economic disparity resulting from this discrimination could also limit their ability to provide for the next generation, including access to education and health services, which ultimately led to their children lagging local children in other areas.

With the emergence of this attribute of the hukou policy limiting social mobility, one of the groups most affected was the migrant population. China's migrant population referred to those migrants who did not have a local household registration and had moved to urban areas, mainly from rural areas. Their numbers were huge, reaching 244 million in 2017, or about 1/6 of the population, and some data showed that the growth trend of these migrants was continuous from 2011 to 2014, with a slow decline starting in 2015. This trend indicated that some of them had been transformed into new citizens of their destination, i.e., permanent residents [5]. However, there was still an enormous amount of migrant population who lacked social security and welfare.

Considering why this type of people existed, and with such a considerable amount, there were two main reasons. It was not only because of the inequality of resources caused by the substantial urban-rural gap in China, which led to the flow of people from areas with scarce social resources to areas with better social welfare, i.e., rural to urban areas. Another reason was that as China's urbanization grew, the national government's demand for cheap rural labor continued to rise. Therefore, to attract more mobile people into cities to improve urban infrastructure, the state had also changed its original regulations full of restrictions in order to attract people from outside the cities. In other words, the combination of urban welfare policies attracting a large influx of rural migrants and the equally high need for rural labor for China's development goals resulted in a trend of population movement [6]. Furthermore, guided by this trend, the differences between the mobile and local populations were seen by society, and the inequalities within them were valued.

In recent years, an increasing number of mobile people had been bringing their families, including some school-age children, to the cities in which they had chosen to develop [4]. Therefore, the problem was not about migrant workers, but their children in school-age.

3. Children's education

One of the points mentioned in the article, one of the decisive factors in whether a person received a comparable state-subsidized benefit and that the more educated an individual was, the more subsidized benefits the state provides, at least at the housing level [1]. According to this, educational attainment was another critical cause of unequal access to welfare for citizens. Thus, one possible idea was whether the future of these children of migrant workers could be changed by raising the level of education, starting with the factor of educational attainment so that in the future, they had a higher possibility of receiving access to benefits, thus achieving relative social equality. In other words, placing hope in the longer term, that is, in the second generation of migrants.

Nevertheless, the fulfillment of this expectation was complex. Considering the access to education, it back to the issue of discrimination. People without a local household were discriminated against regarding public education; citizens not locally registered were denied the right to attend school

locally and were required to pay a 'high-class seat student' fee if they wished to attend. Those who could not afford the tuition fee were sent to migrant schools in slum areas where the quality of teaching was low [1,7]. As a result, the educational opportunities of these migrant children were negatively affected.

Furthermore, this situation was exacerbated by the inherited nature of the hukou policy. That is, newborns could only choose to inherit their mother's or father's hukou type and location [1,4]. Regarding individual educational attainment factors, their future would have a slim chance of accessing state benefits. That is, upward social mobility is difficult for mobile population groups. Thus, these causes and effects combined to put these migrant children who had not been granted a local hukou into a vicious circle of educational and welfare disadvantage.

Regarding the education of migrant children, although a vital policy document issued by the State Council in 2001 stipulated that local governments would be responsible for providing nine years of compulsory education for migrant children in the public school system, there were still significant problems with the implementation of this scheme [8]. Added to Sun, the benefits provided by the government only reached the younger children of migrants, and many students would instead leave school at the end of their primary education [7]. In Shanghai, for example, it was found that 40% of the children of migrants were denied access to public schools due to the lack of formal employment contracts for their parents. However, as mentioned above, immigrants were discriminated against in the labor market, so the fact that they could not obtain a formal employment contract also meant that they could not secure education for their children.

Furthermore, even if migrant children succeed in enrolling in school during the nine years of compulsory education, the exclusion of upper secondary and university education becomes another problem for them [8]. Access to higher education also puts them at an inherent disadvantage when competing in the future labor market. Thus, all the problems faced by migrant students seem to form a closed loop that affects generation after generation, making it difficult for them to break out of it.

Furthermore, another issue involved in the influx of immigrants, when considered from the perspective of the local population, concerns the competition for educational resources [9]. From the viewpoint of native residents, they were concerned about the most, not the opportunity to receive education, as this item was included in their rights. The government would adopt discriminatory policies to guarantee local students the privilege of accessing education locally [9]. The point of this statement was why the government should guarantee educational privileges to local students. From the perception, an influential urban trait that attracts in-migrants was whether having a household registration here gave people' privileges.

Moreover, with this privilege came the consequent climbing inequality among the population. So, from the government's point of view, they needed to use the 'class difference' to attract quality people from outside; on the other hand, the local population was more likely to develop into a quality population because of the privilege of swimming in this higher priority. Therefore, it was not easy to realistically ask or expect local authorities to fundamentally improve the discriminatory preferential policies based on hukou if this was the aim.

Although the hukou policy was a policy to control and regulate the movement of people, the various territorial policies derived from this policy tend to be more of a welfare policy for the public. Therefore, when the public receives this policy, their concern must be based on benefits, and residents are only concerned with how much benefit and privilege they can obtain from it. Returning to the impact of the hukou policy on education, the relaxation of the hukou policy had, on the one hand, weakened educational inequality. For local parents, however, this weakening of inequality would weaken their previous educational privileges and lead to more low-quality students destroying the otherwise superior educational environment. As a result, their attitude was opposed and antagonistic.

Moreover, group-based resource competition led to educational inequality [9]. Moreover, the influx of mobile people into cities could make this competition for resources even more intense. It could be another reason for existing discrimination or perspective against migrant students receiving a public education.

However, implementing a quickly curtailed policy was unlikely to affect the competition. A dialectical perspective is that whatever policy emerges may not make a difference to the inherently unequal distribution of educational resources, a problem not only in the hukou policy itself.

4. Social Welfare: Medical Service

As mentioned above, the provisions of the hukou policy included some discriminatory discourse, which was also enhanced by Sun [7]. Because of this, the mental health issues that arose for immigrant students in this discriminatory environment were discussed.

There was evidence that the hukou system undermined the health of rural-to-urban migrants [7]. Furthermore, this impact was reflected in their psychological condition. For example, a Beijing study reported that psychological symptoms such as sleep disorders and substance abuse were prevalent among the migrant population, especially younger age groups. Added to Sun, the tetanus infection rate among migrant children in Suzhou was 38 times higher than that of urban resident children [7]. Additionally, rural-to-urban migrant children reported significantly lower scores than native children on indices such as positive emotions and pro-social behavior; they also scored higher on many of the psychological questionnaires for negative emotions [4]. All this data showed that the psychological situation of migrant children in the city was poor, especially when compared with native children; there was a considerable gap.

The reasons for this were complex, and they might include discrimination experienced by children or their separation anxiety about leaving their familiar surroundings and parental company. Nevertheless, first, the hukou policy's role in it will be discussed.

Sun mentioned that the rural-to-urban migrant population was excluded from public health services included in the hukou policy [7]. Accessing public health services comparable to locals is too much work for the mobile population. Faced with this lack of benefits, they must access services from private healthcare providers. Thus, higher financial costs were demanded. Once again, they were disadvantaged due to the policy implications.

At the same time, the differences in status and identity created by the hukou policy also led to different perceptions of illness by different hukou holders [7]. This difference was not based on individual differences but on their ability to cope with such unexpected 'large expenses.' Urban hukou holders who could cope with the unexpected and had easy access to services were more concerned and interested in their health. However, rural hukou holders needed more funds for such emergencies and could not afford the additional costs. On the other hand, the basic needs of the migrant worker community were not met in such a way that they could think any further, including their physical condition. Moreover, this indifference to their condition was not only found in their parents; they also passed on this similar perception to their children.

In conclusion, the mental health gap between native and migrant children was not necessarily solely due to the availability of public health services. However, it was inevitable that the lack of access to public health services for mobile children deepened the gap and put them in an unequal position in terms of health.

5. The Widening of the Hukou Policy

The migrant population has affected China's economic and social development [5].

The industrial reforms of 1978 gave Chinese society the need for more large-scale urban construction and industrial development. Historic reform changed the dynamics of urban-rural relations and triggered a massive migration from the countryside to the especially in big cities like Shanghai. As a result of this massive internal migration, the local government in Shanghai introduced a series of policies to allow migrants to obtain permanent local hukou, intending to promote investment, attract skilled workers, and enhance the real estate market [2].

What was certain, however, was that the opportunities for such migration were unevenly distributed [2]. The flip side of the system was that migrant workers who work in large cities without a local hukou must pay extra to receive the same benefits as residents, regardless of the length of their stay [6]. Additionally, raised by Qian et al. stated that those with higher education, better family conditions, and specific political backgrounds tended to be in another immigrant population, and they were more likely to obtain a permanent hukou in Shanghai and other similar kinds of big cities in China [2]. In summary, the most significant cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangdong, still had restrictive hukou policies and set upper lines for permanent residents [6]. There were barriers to entry to the urban hukou, as it set out the socioeconomic values expected by the government [10]. As such, it was also selective in the policy, aiming to select residents who were more beneficial to cities growing faster in urban development.

As a result, those migrants with skills, knowledge, and wealth were retained. Additionally, to meet the demand for a larger scale of urban construction and faster industrial development, the Hukou policy's trait of restricting regional mobility also slowly diminished from 1984 onwards, and rural labor was gradually allowed to flow into the cities in search of better job opportunities [1].

All these kinds of policies, which helped migrants, did not alleviate the social inequalities that existed, however, as they remained meritocratic and did not help the disadvantaged migrant workers and their children—or give a better solution to ease their fundamental problems. Therefore, non-local and rural hukou status remained a deep-rooted barrier to upward mobility for non-local citizens. In other words, regional mobility goals remained the same and have not improved with the relaxation of the hukou policy. Social inequality remained a vital problem in China [1].

Moreover, according to the above, another negative aspect of the hukou policy was that it naturally divided urban and rural areas, local and immigrant, into two opposing sides. The development of one side must come at the expense of the other. Therefore, achieving equality in education in this context was complicated.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the impact of the hukou policy was a very complex outcome. The first was its impact on children's education, in which it limited the possibilities of upward mobility of migrant children through education, and the other is its negative impact on children's physical health. These effects were partly directed toward the children and partly acted on their parents, indirectly harming them. All these effects led to eventual social inequalities, especially in education.

The Chinese government had made some salvage to ease the problem caused by the hukou policy, such as Diminished social mobility and persistently rising social inequalities. One of the most critical factors the government noticed in studying the migrant population was their willingness to settle. Therefore, the Chinese government's aim in issuing 100 million new urban hukou from 2015 to 2020 was to help the migrant population integrate into the country's urbanization process. These new policies, including the relaxation of the hukou system and the issuance of new urban hukou, aim to significantly increase the willingness of the migrant population to move. Furthermore, migration is an investment in social investment and human capital. Younger, highly educated migrants are, therefore, more likely to settle at their destination, i.e., permanently migrate. Therefore, the target group could be placed on young people.

Additionally, people tended to be willing to move to cities that were more inclusive and attractive. This motivation could form some inspiration for improving the hukou system and enhancing social mobility in the future.

References

[1] Hung, J. Hukou System Influencing the Structural, Institutional Inequalities in China: The Multifaceted Disadvantages Rural Hukou Holders Face. Social Sciences, 2022, 11(5), 194.

[2] Qian, Z., Cheng, Y., & Qian, Y. Hukou, marriage, and access to wealth in Shanghai. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2019, 46(18), 3920–3936.

[3] Zhou, J., Lin, L., Tang, S., & Zhang, S. To settle but not convert hukou among rural migrants in urban China: How does family-level eligibility for citizenship benefits matter? Habitat International, 2022, 120, 102511.

[4] Wang, J., Gu, S., Ye, B., Gao, J., Wang, F., Dai, J., & Fu, H. The effect of migration and the hukou registration system on psychosocial domains and family functioning of children in Shanghai, China. International Health, 2019, 11(Supplement_1), S24–S32.

[5] Lao, X., & Gu, H. Unveiling various spatial patterns of determinants of hukou transfer intentions in China: A multi-scale geographically weighted regression approach. Growth and Change. 2020.

[6] Lu, J., Jiang, M., Li, L., & Hesketh, T. Relaxation in the Chinese Hukou System: Effects on Psychosocial Wellbeing of Children Affected by Migration. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019, 16(19), 3744.

[7] Sun, M. The Potential Causal Effect of Hukou on Health Among Rural-to-Urban Migrants in China. Journal of Family and Economic Issues. 2020.

[8] Song, Y. What should economists know about the current Chinese hukou system? China Economic Review, 2014, 29, 200–212.

[9] Xu, D., & Wu, X. Separate and unequal: hukou, school segregation, and educational inequality in urban China. Chinese Sociological Review, 2022, 1–25.

[10] Zhang, L., & Tao, L. Barriers to the Acquisition of Urban Hukou in Chinese Cities. Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 2012, 44(12), 2883–2900.