



## Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** How household registration in China continues to divide society
- Description:** China's household registration - or hukou - system identifies citizens by their urban or rural origins and follows them wherever they may live or work, determining their lifelong access to healthcare, education and other services. Yet in an economically transformed China, hukou is increasingly seen as reinforcing inequality, unfairly cleaving society in two. So what is China doing about it? China sociologist Professor Martin Whyte and Asia historian Lewis Mayo join Ali Moore to pick apart the complexities and contradictions of the hukou system.
- Listen:** <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode/?id=376528>
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.
- Martin Whyte:** China constructed a system in the reform period that made use of this very perverse system of household control, and produced this huge outflux of migrant labor that served them very well to make China this economic powerhouse. But now it serves them very poorly because there's an actual decline in the availability of migrant labor.
- Lewis Mayo:** If I were a Marxist and starting from the viewpoint that the Chinese system at the moment is basically a form of capitalism, then one of the observations that I would make is that the systems of hukou equip the Chinese capitalist class with exceptional control over labor, and exceptional capacities to eliminate forms of organized labor.
- Ali Moore:** In this episode, how China's household registration system, continues to divide society. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.
- If you're familiar with contemporary China, you've probably heard the term, *hukou* (户口). It refers to the national registration system of individuals and families, which every Chinese citizen is entered into at birth. But hukou, is more than administrative data collection for the government. Indeed, as we'll hear, household registration and its associated policies, have effectively kept China split into two distinct camps, urban and rural, leaving little room to maneuver. While the hukou is a pervasive part of life in China, determining and individual's access to key services like education and



healthcare, what was it originally created to do? And why is it still in place? And how does its inherent discrimination and division, sit with the soaring egalitarian rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party.

In the studio, to pick apart the complexities and contradictions of the hukou system, is long time China sociologist Martin Whyte. Who is John Zwaanstra Professor of International Studies and Sociology, Emeritus at Harvard University. And, University of Melbourne Asia scholar. Also, joining the discussion, is Asia historian, D Lewis Mayo of Asia Institute. Welcome Martin and Lewis.

Martin Whyte: Thank you very much.

Lewis Mayo: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Let's start with the very basic question of what exactly is the hukou system? Martin, it's so much more than just a registration system, isn't it?

Martin Whyte: Absolutely, and the current form is just a modification of one that was really introduced in the 1950s under Mao, and that's one of the supreme ironies of the Chinese revolution that, Mao was, of course, from a rural area himself, he led a peasant army to victory in the revolution. But, after they established control in China during the 1950s, they followed the Soviet model to a considerable extent, they wanted to collectivize the agriculture, and they also wanted to create a system that would regulate and allow them to control rural to urban migration. And the regulations that they finally developed to do this, in 1958, reinforced later on, and they're still with us today. Although, in the reform era, people started being able to move again. But, for a period of time under Mao, basically, there was virtually no rural to urban migration, which had never happened in Chinese history before.

Ali Moore: Indeed, it never happened before, as you say. But, Lewis, China had, had a sort of hukou system right back into Imperial times, hadn't it?

Lewis Mayo: I might just explain that, what the whole ecosystem does at present, is to classify people as being either urban or rural. People can move between city and countryside, but their entitlements to various kinds of goods and services, if you like, land being one of them. Supposedly, if you have a rural hukou, ultimately, you have some land that's attached to you and your family. And if you have urban hukou, then, in theory, you have rights to permanent residence in the city, and to the welfare services that are associated with that city. So, China, of course, its industrialization in the post Mao era, was based heavily on a labor force drawn from rural areas, working in urban factories, but without urban entitlements. And the fact that, the



factory owners who were in some form of what you might call moderate private enterprise or semi private enterprise, did not have to provide rural migrant workers with the same welfare entitlements that urban permanent residents were entitled to, such as pension and things like that.

So, urban workers in the post Mao era, are essentially differentiated between those with entitlements – permanent entitlements – to welfare, if they were in a state owned enterprise, and those without.

Ali Moore: Which is fascinating for a party that began in rural areas. But, tell me about in Imperial times, what did Mao take?

Lewis Mayo: So, the system as a land based Imperial structure, dynastic China was dependent for its economic survival on grain production. And so, ensuring that you had peasants who would pay tax in grain and provide services, government services, military service, when called upon was an imperative for the Imperial state. And because, the Imperial system worked through, certainly, from the, probably, 12th or 13th century later through a system of provinces, essentially what you had, was, everyone in the country, registered at a particular location, in a particular provincial system. Now, two concerns, I think, are important to note here. One is that, even though as Martin said, urban to rural migration was not restricted in Imperial times, in the way that essentially it was, during the Great Leap Forward and after in Mao years. It's important to remember, when I went as a 20 year old to study in China in 1984, that was the first year, when you could go from city to city, and get rice in a restaurant, without getting the grain tickets that were necessary for urban residents to actually get rice in a public restaurant.

In other words, a system of grain rationing, which meant that, if you were in a city, and you had a government work unit, the rice that you would use, came through the system of grain tickets. Now, that meant, of course, that, if you came from the countryside and you got into a city somehow or other, unless you had access to these ration tickets, and we're talking about the system up until the 1970s, you literally couldn't eat anywhere.

Ali Moore: But, why was that in Mao's interests?

Martin Whyte: Part of it goes back to the Soviet Union. So, the Soviet Union established the original version of this system. They collectivized agriculture and they expected that collectivized agriculture would actually produce bumper harvests. But, it never did in the Soviet Union, and it never did in China. Nonetheless, what it did do, was, to give the state control over the crop output and being able to enforce procurement targets at state set low prices. So, the state could control, how much grain and other crops it would take from the countryside, and use those to feed the cities, and they could



do that even if there wasn't enough left for people to eat. And of course, in the Soviet Union, there was a massive famine, particularly in the Ukraine in the early 1930s. China had a much bigger version in 1959 to 1961. So, the original idea was to organize peasants and make sure that they're doing their job of producing the grain, but the Soviet Union also introduced a system of internal passports. But, the irony is, in the Soviet Union, because of the demography was different and the economic trend was different, there was pretty constantly urbanization.

So, it never really rigidly restricted people to stay in the village-

Ali Moore: Like it did in China.

Martin Whyte: But, in China, it really did. That system in China, under Mao, not lightly, I would refer to it as socialist serfdom. Because, in fact, we're talking about the mass majority of the population. 80% or more of the population, had rural origins lived in rural areas, even in 1978, they were bound to the soil.

Ali Moore: And was that about, as you just explained, ensuring that they could produce what they wanted to produce? That they had the people to produce it, where they wanted them to be?

Martin Whyte: I wasn't sitting in with Mao in the politburo meetings and discussing how they came up with these regulations in the 1950s. But, again, the irony of ironies, is that, Mao and his colleagues, took their ability to control the countryside for granted. But, the cities, they only began to control large cities in 1948, just before they won the Civil War. Cities had been the center for nationalist power under foreign influence and missionary activity and so forth. So, I think, then, and even up to the present, they're much more worried about urban disorders. And, of course, in 1989, we saw a very large scale disorder. So, I think, part of that thing was that, they wanted to make sure that Chinese large cities didn't end up like a Calcutta or whatever. Large numbers of people streaming in that didn't have jobs, that were unemployed, that might be making trouble.

Ali Moore: A lot of people in one place, not happy, is not good for the regime. Lewis, do you agree with that? That there's an element, a real element of control?

Lewis Mayo: It certainly is. And, if I were a Marxist, and starting from the viewpoint that the Chinese system at the moment is basically a form of capitalism. Then, one of the observations that I would make, is that, the systems of hukou, equip the Chinese capitalist class with exceptional control over labor, and exceptional capacities to eliminate forms of organized labor. By simply saying, "Well, okay, we'll just come around and we'll round up all of the people who don't have proper urban hukou, and we'll ship you out." So, that



gives Chinese factory owners, allied with the state, enormous power over workers. It's interesting, Marty referred to the disturbances in 1989, I spent the 1989 period in the city of Chengdu, and that was the second most violent city after Beijing. Now, what happened when the state forces retreated after the Tiananmen crackdown occurred, the police left the city. Large numbers of what people referred to as street babies, they're basically local rural youth rioted in the middle of the city.

And then, there was a crackdown, and ultimately, I think, order was restored, with the urban forces saying, "Okay, well, the government protects us from the danger of rural violence." Now, this is interesting in the long term, because, the theory of history that Maoism came to power with, was one that, China's history was characterized by a series of recurrent peasant rebellions, which overthrew state power. And you could argue that, even though the Chinese state has, I think, its senior leaders have long since deserted Marxism, they fear or have feared the possibility of another rural revolt. But, effectively, I think, the social and political basis for traditional rural rebellion, has been completely eliminated. And there is no chance of a traditional style rural revolt, challenging the system presently.

Martin Whyte:

Let me give a footnote to go back to the Mao period again, though, because this is when all of this originated and I think we should also discuss, why it wasn't eliminated after 1978. But, during the Mao period, it's not just that the system effectively made it very difficult and mostly prevented people from migrating from village to city, but, people could lose their urban hukou. And large numbers of people were forcibly sent down to live in the countryside, the most famous example being, so called, urban educated youth who in the post Cultural Revolution period, 17 or 18 million of them, including Xi Jinping and the other Chinese top leaders, and many of the professors that I collaborate with on the surveys I do in China, and many others spent a period of time in the countryside. And, initially, they didn't know whether they would ever be able to get back into the city.

Ali Moore:

But, it was a form of punishment, wasn't it?

Martin Whyte:

Well, it was portrayed as if, this was a valiant nation building thing and better educated urbanites were going to familiarize themselves with rural conditions and help and so forth. But, underneath the surface, everybody understood, there was no place for them in the urban job scene, and they were troublemakers leftover from the Cultural Revolution and you had to get them out of the city, so they wouldn't cause more trouble.

Ali Moore:

But, isn't the irony here that, and you've spoken of ironies, but the irony that, post 78, with Deng Xiaoping, in the introduction of more market



oriented reforms, it didn't keep people where they were meant to be. I mean, it didn't stop floods of people into the cities.

Martin Whyte: Well, there was clearly a decision made in the early 1980s, to maintain the hukou system and the differentiated citizenship that Lewis talked about. But, to now allow relatively much freer migration, but, you still, of course, had to register when you went into a city. But, now, with market reforms, you could get jobs, you could, as Lewis said, after a certain period, you could buy ... and by the way, it wasn't just grain that was rationed.

Lewis Mayo: Clothing.

Martin Whyte: Clothing, bicycles.

Ali Moore: But, even with that, you still never got access to some of those core services, healthcare, for example.

Lewis Mayo: As I say, if I return to my Marxist analysis, one of the things that that offered, of course, was an extremely exploitable labor force. An ideal labor force, actually, from the point of view that it was, poor, willing to work hard, highly educated, and completely unable to organize to protect its rights.

Martin Whyte: Okay, although, I would qualify the highly educated, in fact, it was designed up until quite recently, maybe 2005, afterwards, to try to keep people from the countryside, making very difficult for them to get more than lower middle school education, nine years of education. So, going on to high school, or going on to college, became much more almost an urban entitlement, not completely.

Ali Moore: Well, before those reforms, what happened to the children of these workers? If they had gone from the rural areas, into the cities, what happened to their children? Were they able to access education, Or?

Martin Whyte: No, until relatively recently. Again, after 2005, in the largest cities, migrant children were not entitled to attend urban public schools, unless they paid special high fees. Despite the fact that, the one child policy and the sharp drop in fertility, meant, fewer and fewer urban kids attending those schools.

Ali Moore: So, there was space.

Martin Whyte: So, there should have been space. But, in fact, there was a rigid control. So migrant families faced two unattractive alternatives. Private migrant run schools, sprung up on the outskirts of cities, that they could pay fees to enroll their kids in these school. But, the quality of schooling was uncertain,



and the educational authorities of the big cities had oversight still, so they could decide to close these down at a moment's notice, and leave the kids with no place to attend. So many of them – many of the families decided it was best to send their child or children back to the native village, and have them go to rural schools.

Ali Moore: Because, even if they did attend a school in the city, they would have to return home for the crucial exams, wouldn't they? Entry level exams had to be held back in your home village.

Lewis Mayo: That's true. And, I think, this is an issue of the utmost importance. Having a university education is fundamental to elite status in China, legitimate elite status. And which University you go to, sets where your status is. Up to the present, to take university entrance examinations, you must do it in the place where your registration is.

Ali Moore: This is the gaokao, which is just hundreds of thousands of kids taking every year.

Lewis Mayo: Yes. Now, looking into this question on the internet this morning, I found a justification issued being, "Well, if we didn't have that, there would be people flooding in from all over China to take exams in Beijing." And, well, from a meritocratic point of view, you'd say, "Well, wouldn't you just get the best, filling up the university positions?" Which is what the University of Melbourne has, a score based entry system with no reference to where the exam candidate came from.

Ali Moore: So, in China today, if you live in Hebei Providence, for example, do you have to get a higher score, than if you lived in Beijing or Shanghai?

Lewis Mayo: You do, to get into the top universities. Effectively, what they have, is that, the major universities in China are on the east coast, and your chances of getting into a good university if you are from Beijing or Shanghai, are high. Interestingly, in poor provinces in the West, chances of getting into a local university are actually quite high as well. Now, what this essentially does, is as situation perhaps in the United States, you might find that in a place that was not particularly distinguished like West Virginia, state university education was available to people who were quite poor. But, the prestige of that education would be significantly lower than at Stanford or at Harvard.

Ali Moore: So, you see that as enforced.

Martin Whyte: [crosstalk] go back to referring to the United States as a comparison. Again, another irony here is, in my country, despite the fact that we have a



president now, who is very upset about illegal immigrants, every illegal immigrant child has a legal right to attend their local public school, as long as they have an address in the neighborhood. In China, the migrants' children are full citizens, but they have not been able to attend public schools until recently. And in the rural areas, this system of unhappy choices, there's a big literature now about the estimated more than 60 million left behind children. So, thinking about trying to get ahead in education through the rural side of the track-

Ali Moore: So, the hukou is reinforcing this divide?

Martin Whyte: Absolutely.

Lewis Mayo: The United States comparison is very illuminating there. Because, you could argue that, the support base for Trump are people who feel themselves to be fully American, but, put at a disadvantage in relationship to people who they don't consider fully American, in terms of competition for things like University places. And so, the desire of those people to emphasize their Americanness, as a criterion for access to education and other resources, would be similar to, say, working class people in Beijing and Shanghai, wanting to see a system that emphasized their urban resident's right. So, this is how the poor working people in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, who might not be doing very well, would say, "Okay, well, if we continue to emphasize this system, we can differentiate ourselves from the competition that we have with people coming in from outside." And similarly you could argue that, people at the top level, facing competition from a huge pool of highly educated people, can say, "Okay, I've got more chance of going to the university that my mother or father went to, if I can support a system of restriction of competition, than, if that thing is open slather."

Ali Moore: Martin, do you see that extraordinary self interest? There's a huge self interest in preservation.

Martin Whyte: Among urbanites, there's conflicting views. And, I had run these surveys in China, in which, we asked people about the fairness or unfairness of various kinds of hukou discrimination. And by large majority, even among urban respondents in these surveys, they say, "No, that's unfair." So, you would think it would be relatively easy to eliminate the system, because, there's very little popular support for the principle. It is supposed to be a more meritocratic system than it was under Mao, and in many ways, I think, it is a more meritocratic system than it was under Mao, but not in regard to this rural lack of full citizenship but in terms of actual daily life and practice. Nonetheless, there's still a lot of prejudice among urbanites, against people from the countryside.



- Ali Moore: And I want to explore that divide in Chinese society a little bit more, in a minute. You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by China sociologist, Professor Martin Whyte, and Asia historian, Dr. Lewis Mayo. We're talking about the lingering legacy of the hukou system on Chinese society. You mentioned, Lewis, you can go to the same university as your mother or your father, why is hukou matrilineal? It follows the mother, Why?
- Lewis Mayo: I would defer to Marty on that question, but I would say that, if you think about a lot of matrilineal systems, one thing you can observe about them, is that, you pretty much know whether a mother has given birth to a child or not. Whereas, paternity may be harder to establish. In the One Child Family Policy, women, particularly rural women became the central target of the government's concern. Targeting the women, I think, has implications for a broader strategy for keeping society under control.
- Martin Whyte: But, the other part of it, was that, in the Mao period, when this matrilineal inheritance of the hukou was established, men are more likely to have opportunities to move across the divide and to get urban hukou, through college entrance. There were three times as many college students at the end of the Mao era as there were female college students. They were more likely to serve in the military, and maybe be demobilized into an urban job and so forth. So, if there was a marriage across the rural urban divide, you wanted to keep the children on the rural side of the divide. So, there was not many, but, some rural women able to marry men with urban hukou, but, almost never would there be a urban woman marrying a man with a rural hukou.
- Ali Moore: And if a rural woman married an urban hukou man, could she get the right to live in the city?
- Martin Whyte: No.
- Ali Moore: So, marriage does not assist?
- Martin Whyte: Not in the Mao period.
- Ali Moore: And today?
- Martin Whyte: But, there's a historical footnote that in, I believe was 1998, they introduced the change that said, the parents could choose to have the hukou follow either the father or the mother.



- Lewis Mayo: Marriage is a very, very interesting way to look at this question, because, people's choices in marriage are very much associated with perceptions of the level of cultivation and culture of their potential partner. Now, as a result of the demographic imbalance, the gender imbalance in the Chinese population, women have potentially more choices for husbands. This means that, rural women who are single, they will certainly have more chances to marry a poor urban man and transfer to the cities through marriage, than even a wealthy rural man will have to transfer to the city through marriage, by marrying an urban woman. The intensity with which these issues are discussed, and the preoccupation with what in Chinese is referred to as *suzhi* (素质) or personal cultivation or quality, is one of the great organizing principles of socio cultural division in contemporary China.
- Martin Whyte: Of course, in the post 1980s, being on a different hukou as your spouse, doesn't prevent you from living together anymore, but it doesn't give you rights to change your hukou status. So, by marrying a urban hukou man, you don't automatically change to his hukou status, you still keep your rural hukou.
- Lewis Mayo: I should add here, that, you can, of course, effectively migrate to cities like Shanghai and Beijing. There's, in a sense, a process not dissimilar to migrating to a country like Australia. But, the criterion for acquiring, say, Shanghai residency, would be more demanding, far more demanding than for a business or skilled migrant coming into Australia.
- Ali Moore: Before we pursue some of those issues that you've just raised, we've talked a lot about education. How does hukou affect health care in China? Healthcare in China, of course, was a subject of an earlier Ear to Asia podcast. But, specifically on health care, one of those vital services, how does hukou affect that?
- Martin Whyte: It's a complicated story, because, it's changed dramatically during the course of the reform period. In the Mao period, there were various kinds of basic medical insurance system, there were the famous barefoot doctors in the countryside, rural cooperative medical insurance. But in the early reform period, basically that system collapsed. And large numbers of people, most of the people in China lost any health insurance coverage, whatsoever. About 90% of the people in rural China went from having some kind of health insurance, however basic to having none at all. And even among people, urban workers, some of them, for instance, they had been able to cover their dependents, they were not covered anymore. So, you had a drastic shrinkage, and migrants had the poorest coverage of all. But, since 2003, roughly, there's been a national drive, there was a sense of crisis about the whole healthcare system. Basically, there's been an extraordinary



rise for all groups, and now, including even migrants, in having, at least, some basic health care coverage, but there are different types of health care coverage.

If you have an urban hukou, and you're working within a stable urban job, you're in part of one plan that has much better coverage and reimbursement and so forth. Rural people have a new system of village cooperative medical insurance systems. And urbanites, who are not part of a work unit, also have a system that they're supposed to pay into, that provides some minimal insurance. But for the migrants, in particular, one of the big catches is, they're covered not by the organization they're working for, they're covered by the plan back in the village, because, that's where their hukou is.

Ali Moore: So, these migrants can seek medical attention in an urban area, but they have to pay for it, and then, seek reimbursement back in their home village. Is that-

Lewis Mayo: As we discussed in a previous podcast, the demand for top quality medical attention, means that, public hospitals that are considered to be top tier, are flooded with people seeking medical care in those institutions. And that results in riots, essentially. But, it's an interesting dimension of that, I think, is that, it's not simply people trying to get to the best medical care, just for medical reasons, like we all would. We all go to the top medical institution, but, I think, underlying that is, much of the kind of sense of humiliation that I think continues to attach to rural background people, and their own sense of self, I think, is constantly subject to threat by the hukou, in a sense, caste distinction between urban and rural. Rural hukou has something of the quality of what the sociologists and psychologists will call stigma.

Ali Moore: So, what does that mean for the health of the migrant population?

Martin Whyte: It's difficult to say, because, on balance, the migrants are younger and healthier than the people that are left behind in the village, and sometimes, than the urbanites. But, it's certainly the case that, even when they're covered and have to go back to the village to gain reimbursement, their coverage is less adequate than people in these big state units and major companies in the city. So, there's still a burden of out-of-pocket expenditures, particularly for medical crises. So, it should result in lots more health problems and lots more financial problems. There has been in the past, there's less now but still some, people avoiding treatment, because, they're worried about the cost that's going to be incurred, even if they have insurance.



Ali Moore: You talked earlier, Lewis, about the ability to move from rural to urban hukou, and potentially in the other direction. In 2013, there were changes to the system, that essentially made it easier for people with rural registration to obtain registration in a tier three city. What exactly is a tier three city? And, why wasn't that particularly successful?

Lewis Mayo: Chinese cities are classified in terms of their economic level and their size. And, I guess you could say, the level of prestige and dignity that attaches to them.

Ali Moore: But, is a tier three city an attractive proposition from an employment point of view? From a lifestyle point of view?

Lewis Mayo: Well, the attempt has been to try and encourage people to move to some of these cities, to avoid particularly pollution and the large centers. But, I would say, also, because people have such a strong sense of cultural dignity attached to the city, in which they're living, or, to which they wish to move, this is not entirely successful. And it's important to note that, this was one factor in the Tiananmen protests. At the time, in the 1980s, the top universities in Beijing, were recruiting on a nationwide basis. That meant that, a large number of top undergraduates in these top tier universities, were faced on graduation with the prospect of having to go home. And, they didn't want to do that. And so, this actually produced a significant kind of backlash against the government, because at that stage, graduates had assigned occupations. And what had happened, I suppose, from the opening of the examination system, after the Cultural Revolution in 1978, was essentially that well, that, the most talented people from all over the country, would go to top tier universities. And they would be given specialist higher level training, and then, supposedly, sent back to develop their own places, which they didn't want to do.

Ali Moore: But, Marty, in the same way that Lewis talks about the attachment to one's urban center or to one's city, does it also work from a rural perspective as well? So that, the option of a tier three city, versus, having a plot of land, having an ability to benefit from that plot of land. Is that also part of the equation?

Martin Whyte: The Chinese authorities have been trying to encourage this throughout the reform period. To try to keep them out of the biggest, most attractive cities, and give them various inducements to go to the lower level cities. You referred to this post 2013, and the next year, a national urbanization program was announced and given a lot of publicity. And that did include a pledge to have a drive to convert a quota of 100 million people from rural hukou to urban hukou, by 2020, by next year. But, that was out of a total of 270 million estimated rural urban migrants. So, it's only one portion, a little



over a third of the total number, and there're two prong to this. One is at the lowest level cities, as you indicated, it's easier without qualifications. But, these larger cities had already been developing and now have introduced in a much more formalized way, point systems.

You have to have a certain number of points, if you have a college degree, if you bought an apartment, if you've started and owned a business, if you've had a stable urban job, and have paid into the social insurance fund, for, at least, five years and so forth. Earlier, before the one-child policy was eliminated, you got points for not violating by having an extra baby. I assume, that's gone away by now. It's an interesting idea, it's part of a government pledge, actually, to eventually eliminate the hukou system and these discriminations. But, I think, in China, one of the things that makes it difficult to get people to go to these small towns and cities, is in some sense, Mao's legacy, again, coming back to bite the current regime, because, essentially, what happened was, decades of everybody understanding a system where if you could get to and stay in the largest cities, you were privileged in everywhere there was a clear status ranking, all the way down the line. So, now, there's a mindset that, it's still much better if you can get yourself up to the next highest rung in the urban ladder.

Ali Moore: So, how many people would actually manage to go from holding a rural hukou, into a tier one city?

Martin Whyte: Well, that's not clear. There's a hundred million target that I mentioned, over six years, which is quite demanding. But, people in the largest cities that I've talked to, and I have a doctoral student at Harvard, who has been doing research in Chongqing, which is one of the four national level cities. And, she says, it's now perceived as becoming easier. But, again, it ties back to this question about suzhi. You can't just because you're there, and you have a job, and you're renting an apartment and whatever, you don't get full citizenship [crosstalk].

Ali Moore: [crosstalk] Is it up to each city to dictate its terms?

Martin Whyte: Each city has its own regulations that have to be in accord with national regulations. But, there will be minor differences from city to city, and Chongqing is seen as, for instance, is making a little better treatment of migrants than Beijing. But I can't say to the specific differences.

Lewis Mayo: I'd like to go back a little and say that, yes, Martin is absolutely right about the equal opportunity questions. But, we could think about the meaning of hukou in the urban rural divide in China, as being something like what race means in the United States. That, in other words, you may ascend to the top of society, educationally, economically, in terms of your achievements, but



your skin color will still be a crucial determinant in your social experience. And so, in a sense, that might be the easiest way for us to understand, how this cleavage is conceptualized in socio cultural terms. The American government is, of course, devoted to trying to eliminate racial discrimination and racial prejudices and racial disadvantage, and there are numerous programs, to try and do something about it. They failed. And one might argue that, perhaps, there's a certain parallel, with the situation with hukou reform, and it's inability to solve these problems in China.

Martin Whyte: Because, Martin, that's a really obvious question, isn't it? And, perhaps, it's just been answered by Lewis, why doesn't the government just abolish hukou? I mean, they've said that they will, why don't they just do it?

Martin Whyte: All along, they've been concerned about, again, the overtaxing of urban public facilities and its urban public order, and so forth. And those still seem to be very prominent. The strange thing, is that, they have been, for a couple of decades now, talking about the need to eventually eliminate this clearly non meritocratic cast like system. And the strange thing is, in the reform period, there were two systems of inherited status, and the other one was based upon your class origin. And people not only had a household registration status, they had a class label that went in all of your personal documents and in your household-

Ali Moore: And that came from, essentially, your work, wasn't it? Really, or the work of your parent.

Martin Whyte: No, it came from your family history, from before 1949. So, you could have a-

Ali Moore: Whether they were teachers or professors.

Martin Whyte: But you could have a landlord label that stigmatized you in the 1970s, even though, your grandfather lost his land, and maybe, lost his life in the early 1950s, but you still bore that label. In 1978, 79, the reformers said, "This system is obviously out of date, non meritocratic. It doesn't consider people based upon their talent, their contributions," They eliminated it. But the hukou system, they eliminated the restriction on migration, but they didn't eliminate the status discrimination, which still stigmatizes people of rural origins.

Ali Moore: But it seems somewhat contradictory, that on the one hand, the government says that its intention is to get rid of it. And at the same time, it is introducing changes to make some things easier. And on the other hand, it's in their interest to keep it. So, why even change it?



Lewis Mayo:

It's interesting to think about what Martin was just saying in terms of the way that a lot of Chinese people, who discuss these questions and discuss the long term history of the Chinese Communist Party, tend to talk in dynastic terms. It's as if, the incoming communists were a new dynasty, in the same way that, say, for instance, the Qing Dynasty came in, as a conquering dynasty from Manchuria, from what's now the northeastern provinces of China. And, as a result of its conquest, entrenched its own people as a ruling elite. The peasant revolutionaries, who came to power in 1948, wanted to ensure that their redness, if you like, was something they could pass on to their children, and the people that they had conquered – the urbanites in the cities, could not use up those positions. And, some of the sociologies of the conflicts in high schools, in particular, in Beijing, in particular, in the Cultural Revolution, emphasize this conflict between those who were the children of top schools, coming from these peasant revolutionary backgrounds, and therefore, wanting to emphasize the peasant class background.

And, the talented people, the people who had gotten into those institutions, usually on the basis of coming from a highly educated family. And these two split into warring factions, essentially. With one arguing, "It's the bloodline, the revolutionary heritage that's important." Then, the other arguing, "No, it's your commitment to revolution. Even though, I have a bad class background, I'm as devoted to Chairman Mao and to revolutionary change, and to egalitarianism, as you, who are actually becoming part of a new elite." So, those conflicts, of course, played out in extremely violent terms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And, the consequences of them were to, largely, destroy belief in Mao's ideology. So that, when Mao died, his ideology had very, very few supporters. And, to an extent, a lot of the thinking about hukou, reflects those complex experiences of members of the revolutionary elites, who were children, dealing with the countryside through the experience of being sent there.

Lewis Mayo:

And many of those people were shocked by the fact that the countryside was so backward. And their sense of cultural difference from the rural world, shaped their ideologies into the present. So, their experiences in the countryside, were, "Those people are in a world that I don't understand and I am not part of." And that, I think, helps to explain, when you think that the people that are policymakers in China, had that kind of background, then, that mindset, you can argue, is perpetuated basically into the present.

Martin Whyte:

I think that's true, but, that's one of the real problems for whether China will progress economically, educationally, culturally. That they constructed a system in the reform period, that made use of this Maoist, very perverse system of household control. And produced this huge outflux of migrant labor of mostly lower middle school educated youths, that served them very



well in the reform period, to make China this economic powerhouse up to a middle level of economic development. But, now, it serves them very poorly, because, there's an actual decline in the availability of migrant labor. Partly due to lower fertility, and the fact that, so many had already left. There's something like a 30% decline of new entrants of the labor force, after 2010. So, China can't rely anymore on this, and they have to upgrade the human capital, in other words, the educational background, but they built this system that takes a majority of young people, close to 60% of Chinese are now classified as living in cities. But, two thirds or so, of young people, actually have rural hukou.

So, the question is, how can you get more and more of them going to upper middle school and going on to university? They need to do that, in order for China to progress into the future and become a rich country. And all of the rules of the game, up until 2005 or so, were structured to keep most rural people from going beyond lower middle schooling in education. You mentioned much earlier, that they had changed the rules. So, now, urban public schools are supposed to admit students, who are migrant children, without paying special fees. But, the problem is, as Lewis mentioned earlier, they still can't go all the way up through the system in the cities.

Ali Moore: It's a fascinating debate and one that we could probably continue to discuss, I would imagine, and indeed, we no doubt will revisit this on Ear to Asia. Thank you so much, Marty, and Lewis, for your time today.

Martin Whyte: My pleasure.

Lewis Mayo: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been sociologist Martin Whyte, who was the John Zwaanstra Professor of International Studies and Sociology, Emeritus at Harvard University, and also, a University of Melbourne Asia Scholar. And Asia historian, Dr Lewis Mayo, of Asia Institute. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes, at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia, by following us on the apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud. And, if you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review, helps new listeners find the show. And, of course, let your friends know about us on social media.

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