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Journal

The China Journal, 81(81)

ISSN

1324-9347

Authors

Chan, Alexsia T

O'Brien, Kevin J

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.1086/699215

Peer reviewed

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Alexsia T. Chan
198 College Hill Road
Department of Government
Hamilton College
Clinton, NY 13323
axchan@hamilton.edu

Kevin J. O'Brien
210 Barrows Hall
Department of Political Science
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720
kobrien@berkeley.edu

Published in *The China Journal*, no. 81 (January 2019): 103-122

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January 14, 2019

Phantom Services: Deflecting Migrant Workers in China

Alexsia T. Chan and Kevin J. O'Brien*

Abstract

As China urbanizes, more migrants need and expect public services. Many municipalities, however, resist and undermine elements of the central government's urbanization strategy by deflecting demands for benefits instead of accepting or denying them outright. Urban authorities sometimes do so by establishing nearly impossible eligibility requirements or requiring paperwork that outsiders struggle to obtain. At times they also nudge migrants to seek healthcare or education elsewhere by enforcing dormant rules or by shutting down a locally available service provider. Limiting access to public services saves cities a vast amount of money and isolates and disempowers migrants. Phantom services are a consequence of the localization of the household registration system (*hukou* 户口) and a sign that new axes of inequality and gradations of second-class citizenship have emerged.

Acknowledgements

*We would like to thank Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger, William Hurst, Chloe Froissart, Ben Read, Lei Guang, and the journal's reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. We are also grateful for research support by Hamilton College and the University of California, Berkeley.

Since the early 1980s, a desire for a better life has enticed more than 280 million people to move to China's cities. But after the migrants secure jobs, other needs and wants emerge one by one. Newcomers who are not assigned beds in company dormitories must quickly find a place to live. Workers require medical care when they get sick. Migrants out of work cannot count on unemployment benefits. Parents need affordable schooling for their children. Aging workers often lack portable pensions or any social security at all. As migrants put down roots in cities and the years go by, they tend to expect more and the demand for public services grows.

When faced with pressure to offer migrants benefits, municipal governments have three main options: provide them with services, deny them services, or deflect them. The first choice brings migrants into a city's social welfare system, at least to an extent.¹ For example, Shanghai announced it would accept migrant children into public primary and secondary schools (though implementing this was another matter),² while Chongqing and Xiamen now let recent arrivals apply for low-income housing.³ And in neighborhoods where there is inadequate public education and medical care, many cities turn a blind eye to private schools and health clinics that go into business to cater to migrants.⁴ Overall, though, migrant workers' access to social services

¹ Enrollment in social insurance programs increased nationwide in the 2000s and into the 2010s. For more on social insurance and, in particular, health insurance policies, see Heather Xiaoquan Zhang, "Protecting Mobile Livelihoods: Actors' Responses to the Emerging Health Challenges in Beijing and Tianjin," *Modern China* 38, no. 4 (2012): 446–78; Xian Huang, "Expansion of Chinese Social Health Insurance: Who Gets What, When and How?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 89 (2014): 923–51.

² On public schools in Shanghai accepting migrant children but also instituting other forms of discrimination, see Pei-chia Lan, "Segmented Incorporation: The Second Generation of Rural Migrants in Shanghai," *The China Quarterly* no. 217 (2014): 243–65.

³ Youqin Huang, "Low-Income Housing in Chinese Cities: Policies and Practices," *The China Quarterly* 212 (2012): 953. On different kinds of low-cost housing, see Weiping Wu, "Migrant Housing in Urban China: Choices and Constraints," *Urban Affairs Review* 38, no. 1 (2002): 90–119; Huang, "Low-Income Housing in Chinese Cities."

⁴ Privately-run schools, known as "people-run schools" (*minban xuexiao*), provide education to migrant children who cannot attend public schools. See Julia Kwong, "Educating Migrant

remains spotty in most cities and generally depends on the locality in which they live and work.

A second approach is refuse to give them services. This strategy typically relies on “household registration” (*hukou*, 户口) regulations to keep migrants out of the urban public goods regime.⁵ In Beijing, for instance, migrant children who do not have local registrations are often blocked from attending public schools. Most cities require high school students to return to their parents’ hometowns to take the college entrance exam. And few urban governments grant

Children: Negotiations between the State and Civil Society,” *The China Quarterly* no. 180 (2004): 1073-88; Raymond K.H. Chan and Ying Wang, “Controlled Decentralization: Minban Education Reform in China,” *Journal of Comparative Social Welfare* 25, no. 1 (2009): 27–36; Jessica C. Teets, “Reforming Service Delivery in China: The Emergence of a Social Innovation Model,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2012): 15–32. Similarly, with regard to medical benefits, migrants often use illegal “black clinics” (*hei zhensuo*) for healthcare instead of participating in insurance programs or going to public hospitals. On other obstacles that block access to health services, see Yan Li and Shufang Wu, “Migration and Health Constraints in China: A Social Strata Analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 64 (2010): 335-58.

⁵ For more on how the *hukou* system perpetuates the rural-urban divide in China, see Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s Hukou System,” *The China Quarterly* no. 139 (1994): 644–68; Kam Wing Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kam Wing Chan, “Urbanization and Rural-Urban Migration in China since 1982: A New Baseline,” *Modern China* 20, no. 3 (1994): 243-81; Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes,” *The China Quarterly* no. 160 (1999): 818-55; C. Cindy Fan, “The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders: Migration and Labor Market Segmentation in Urban China,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 1 (2002): 103-124; Fei-ling Wang, *Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China’s Hukou System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham, “Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?” *The China Quarterly* no. 195 (2008): 582-606; Kam Wing Chan, “The Chinese Hukou System at 50,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50, no. 2 (2009): 197-221; Martin King Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jieh-Min Wu, “Rural Migrants Workers and China’s Differential Citizenship: A Comparative Institutional Analysis,” in *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*, ed. Martin King Whyte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2010); Kam Wing Chan, Fang Cai, Guanghua Wan, and Man Wang, *Urbanization with Chinese Characteristics: The Hukou System and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2018). On how China uses the *hukou* system to manage urbanization, see Jeremy L. Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

workers who have rural household registrations eligibility for medical insurance programs or welfare assistance.⁶ These and other forms of institutional discrimination systematically exclude migrants, keep them distinct from other urban residents, and turn them into second-class citizens.⁷

Beyond these two options, there is a third way to allocate public benefits, which deflects migrants. This strategy of providing phantom services is found in most cities to some extent. Cities or district governments selectively provide benefits to some migrants but exclude others by making it ferociously difficult for them to receive the services they are owed. Authorities may set eligibility requirements that at first glance appear to grant migrants access to public services, but actually do not. Dongguan and Shanghai, for instance, allow outsiders to change their *hukou* from rural to urban, but few migrants are qualified under a complicated points system.⁸ In addition, many municipalities, such as Beijing and Chengdu, ask for documents that most migrants are hard-pressed to obtain in order to prove their eligibility for a service. Or city authorities may force them to return home for medical care by refusing to accept their rural insurance in municipal hospitals. Even as urban governments expand access to healthcare, education, housing, and pensions for some migrants and their children, they deflect many others.

⁶ On migrant eligibility for the “Minimum Livelihood Guarantee” (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*) program, see Dorothy J. Solinger, “Streets as Suspect: State Skepticism and the Current Losers in Urban China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 3-26; Joe C. B. Leung and Meng Xiao, “The Institutionalization of Social Assistance,” in *China’s Social Policy: Transformation and Challenges*, ed. Kinglun Ngok and Chak Kwan Chan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 33–50.

⁷ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*.

⁸ See Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham, “Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?” on how *hukou* reform since the late 1990s has become increasingly localized. Many cities and towns now have discretion over the yearly quota and criteria for who can become a registered permanent resident.

Methodology

Our study examines the different ways that city leaders prevent migrants from receiving public services short of outright banning them across six cities in four regions, three sectors, and two types of services. Our findings are based on fieldwork in Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Dongguan between 2010 and 2017.⁹ We focus on large, top-tier municipalities rather than smaller cities, because many workers prefer more developed cities, where there are more job opportunities and higher wages, and it is usually in these desirable destinations that social services are most contested.¹⁰ Of the many public services, we focus on healthcare and education, both of which are crucial to human development and China's long-term growth prospects and are of key importance to migrant worker families.

The first author conducted 150 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with migrant workers, officials, doctors, teachers, and other professionals.¹¹ Because responsibility for migrants is spread across many bureaucracies and draws in several levels of government, this involved speaking with provincial, municipal, and district officials in health and family planning, education, human resources and social security, development, and public security. Conversations

⁹ The regional breakdown of interviews was Beijing (90), Chengdu (35), Shanghai (11), Guangzhou (7), Hangzhou (5), and Dongguan (2).

¹⁰ Interview with a public policy scholar in Beijing, 7 July 2017. This is consistent with the finding that more developed cities tend to impose higher barriers to entry for *hukou* (Li Zhang and Li Tao, "Barriers to the Acquisition of Urban Hukou in Chinese Cities." *Environment and Planning A* 44 (2012): 2883–900). Seventy percent of respondents in one survey who were willing to settle in cities hoped to put down roots in big cities (National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, "Summary of China's Migrant Population Report for 2013," 2013, http://en.nhfpc.gov.cn/2014-05/16/c_46667.htm).

¹¹ These included 63 migrant workers (with 41 from the informal sector, 16 construction workers, and 6 factory workers), 43 principals, teachers, and education scholars, 11 hospital administrators, doctors, and healthcare scholars, 10 government officials, and 23 other knowledgeable individuals, including 8 NGO staff members and 4 factory managers. Interviewees were mainly recruited through snowball sampling. All interview notes were coded to help identify patterns.

with doctors, hospital administrators, teachers, and school principals clarified how policies are implemented on the frontlines of healthcare and education. Migrant worker interviewees were drawn mainly from the construction, manufacturing, and informal sectors. In addition to interviews, ethnographic information was collected from migrant villages, construction sites, factories, dormitories, schools, and hospitals, and we also analyzed government documents and other archival materials. In all six cities, most of the respondents who are migrants were deflected, to varying degrees and in different ways. The few stories of ready access to public services were mostly second and third-hand accounts of atypical success by others. Although there were some differences among cities and regions, this article focuses on identifying and unpacking the phenomenon of deflection and largely leaves variations to future research.

Institutions of Inequality

The household responsibility system in agriculture has deepened a well-known and stubborn rural-urban divide.¹² After the first major wave of rural-to-urban work migration in the 1980s, members of this “floating population” (*liudong renkou*, 流动人口) became second-class citizens compared to registered urban residents.¹³ Migrants from the countryside were not able to

¹² See Cheng and Selden, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s Hukou System”; Kam Wing Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls*; Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*; Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China”; C. Cindy Fan, “The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders”; Fei-ling Wang, *Organizing through Division and Exclusion*; Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham, “Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?”; Kam Wing Chan, “The Chinese Hukou System at 50”; Martin King Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies*; Jieh-Min Wu, “Rural Migrants Workers and China’s Differential Citizenship”; Kam Wing Chan, Fang Cai, Guanghua Wan, and Man Wang, *Urbanization with Chinese Characteristics*.

¹³ Kam Wing Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls*; Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*; Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China”; C. Cindy Fan, “The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders”; Kam Wing Chan and Will

gain access to public services and other rights because they were registered in their home villages rather than in the cities where they worked. Although the *hukou* system has in recent years undergone changes in areas such as residence permits and points systems,¹⁴ these have been gradual and remain incomplete.

Decisions about policies that tether citizens' rights to their registrations are now increasingly left to provinces, counties, and municipalities.¹⁵ Localization of public services has led to the partial extension of rights and benefits in certain places to certain migrants. In contrast to the sharp distinction between rural migrants and urban residents that once existed, new gradations of second-class citizenship have emerged. Highly educated and skilled migrants, for example, usually receive better treatment than less-skilled migrants, and many cities see rural migrants with stable jobs and residences as more desirable than less well settled migrants. These local policies have created new axes of inequality.

Some of the new rules and distinctions are formal and explicit, while others are informal norms generated in the course of policy implementation. The treatment of migrants has become less about complete exclusion and more about partial inclusion for certain people and not others. As access becomes more contingent, claims of collective exclusion and discrimination are often supplanted by individual battles with a bureaucracy over eligibility. Intentionally or not, these new institutional practices have tended to isolate and disempower migrants.

Buckingham, "Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?"; Kam Wing Chan, "The Chinese Hukou System at 50."

¹⁴ See Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham, "Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?"; Kam Wing Chan, "The Chinese Hukou System at 50"; Kam Wing Chan, Fang Cai, Guanghua Wan, and Man Wang, *Urbanization with Chinese Characteristics*.

¹⁵ Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham, "Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?"; Zhonghua Guo and Tuo Liang, "Differentiating citizenship in urban China: A Case Study of Dongguan City," *Citizenship Studies* 21, no. 7 (2017) : 773-791.

Migrant Statistics and National Policy

By 2017, about one in five people in China was an internal migrant. Migrants, as in any country, are notoriously difficult to track,¹⁶ and the national census did not begin recording where people actually lived instead of where they were registered until 2010. According to the National Bureau of Statistics' annual survey of migrant workers, there were 281.7 million migrant workers (农民工, *nongmingong*) in 2016.¹⁷ By early 2018, approximately 57 percent of the entire Chinese population lived in urban areas.¹⁸ While the total number of migrant workers has increased every year over the last decade, there have been changes in their rate of growth (which declined from a 4.4 percent increase in 2011 to 1.5 percent in 2016)¹⁹ and patterns of movement. Although most migrants are still concentrated in coastal regions, the proportion in western provinces is on the rise (from 14.9% of the floating population in 2013 to 16.6% in

¹⁶ Officials in the planning department of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) even turned to the “pickle index.” They looked to see where sales of a staple dish for migrants, *zhacai*, were up or down each year. The country’s largest producer of this preserved vegetable saw its sales in southern China decrease drastically as sales went up in central China. Patrick Boehler, “‘Pickle index’ measures changing tide of Chinese migrant workers,” *South China Morning Post*, August 14, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1296315/pickle-index-measures-chinese-worker-migration>.

¹⁷ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2016 nian nongmin gong jiance diaocha baogao,” 2016, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201704/t20170428_1489334.html. That has more than doubled from 121 million in 2000. See National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2016 Zhongguo tongji nianjian,” 2016, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/nds/2016/indexch.htm>.

¹⁸ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2017 Zhongguo tongji nianjian,” 2017, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/nds/2017/indexch.htm>.

¹⁹ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2016 nian nongmin gong jiance diaocha baogao.” This is part of a general decline in the working-age population in China.

2015),²⁰ as more people are moving shorter distances within their home province rather than traveling farther across the country.²¹

The demographic makeup of the migrant population has also shifted. They are becoming older, are more educated, and are earning higher wages. More of them are coming to cities with their spouses and children rather than arriving solo. Over 60 percent of the new generation of migrants who are married are living with family members,²² and thus more than half of urban migrant households have three or more people living together.²³ The number of women giving birth away from their registered residence is increasing,²⁴ and the proportion of migrant children born where their parents currently live (not where their *hukou* is) more than doubled from 27.5% in 2010 to 56.6% in 2014.²⁵ About 10.1 million migrant students are enrolled in “regular” primary schools (*putong xiaoxue*, 普通小学), 4.6 million of whom are originally “from other provinces” and 5.5 million of whom are children whose parents are from counties in the same province.²⁶

Since the 1980s, the lives of migrants have improved in some meaningful ways. Their average monthly income in 2016 was 3,275 RMB, which was up 6.6 percent from the previous

²⁰ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “2016 nian 10 yue 19 ri zhuanti fabu hui cailiao: ‘Zhongguo liudong renkou fazhan baogao 2016’ neirong gaiyao,” 2016, <http://www.nhfpc.gov.cn/xcs/s3574/201610/58881fa502e5481082eb9b34331e3eb2.shtml>.

²¹ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “2016 nian 10 yue 19 ri zhuanti fabu hui cailiao.”

²² National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “Summary of China’s Migrant Population Report for 2013.” Seventy percent of them first move with their spouse and later bring their children along to their destination.

²³ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “2016 nian 10 yue 19 ri zhuanti fabu hui cailiao.”

²⁴ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “Summary of China’s Migrant Population Report for 2013.”

²⁵ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, “2016 nian 10 yue 19 ri zhuanti fabu hui cailiao.”

²⁶ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2016 Zhongguo tongji nianjian.”

year.²⁷ China achieved near universal health insurance coverage in 2011,²⁸ and according to official figures, 89.3% of migrants had at least one form of health insurance in 2015.²⁹ A circular of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Finance stated that the government subsidy for health insurance was pegged to increase by 30 RMB per person in 2017 to 450 RMB.³⁰ In another example of how the mobile population's medical care access has improved, there have been pressures and preliminary moves to integrate rural and urban insurance systems and to make them more portable between provinces.³¹ The National Health and Family Planning Commission, for instance, issued a circular ordering all provincial governments to launch an off-site health insurance system by the end of June 2017 through which patients could settle their medical expenses without having to return to the location where their insurance plan was issued, but these programs are still in their early days.³²

²⁷ National Bureau of Statistics of China, "2016: A Good Start for China's Economy during the 13th Five-Year Plan Period," 2017,

http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/pressrelease/201701/t20170120_1455922.html.

²⁸ Basic medical insurance coverage across the country increased from less than 50 percent in 2005 to 87 percent in 2008 to 95 percent in 2011 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Medical and Health Services in China," White Paper, 2012, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474982986476.htm; Hao Yu, "Universal health insurance coverage for 1.3 billion people: What accounts for China's success?" *Health Policy* 119, no. 9 (2015): 1145-52.

²⁹ National Health and Family Planning Commission of China, "2016 nian 10 yue 19 ri zhuan ti fa bu hui cailiao." In 2011, only 21% of migrants participated in a plan.

³⁰ State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Healthcare reform policies in first half of 2017," 2017,

http://english.gov.cn/policies/policy_watch/2017/08/12/content_281475785356366.htm. Total spending is expected to reach 1 trillion USD by 2020 (Bradley Gardner, *China's Great Migration: How the Poor Built a Prosperous Nation* (Oakland: Independent Institute, 2017)).

³¹ Interview with a doctor, Guangzhou, 16 July 2017. These initiatives (and studies of them) remain largely at the level of proposed institutional reforms and new policies yet to be seen in practice. For example, on the integration of pension and health schemes, see Armin Müller, "Functional Integration of China's Social Protection in Health and Pension Insurance," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 6 (2017): 1110-34.

³² State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Healthcare reform policies in first half of 2017."

Several policy initiatives in the 2010s made it clear that the central government would like cities to enhance benefits for newcomers.³³ In March 2014, the Party Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued a National New-Type Urbanization Plan (*guojia xinxing chengzhen hua guihua*, 国家新型城镇化规划) (2014-2020)³⁴ that among other things called for increased funding for public services. In July 2014, the State Council announced a goal of eliminating the distinction between rural and urban *hukou* and accommodating 100 million new residents in China's cities by 2020. National officials, then and since, have recognized the need to improve services for migrants and have frequently emphasized the importance of a "people-centered" (*yiren weiben*, 以人为本) approach to urbanization.

However, thus far the national government has provided few details about how these ambitious goals should be achieved. In order to promote "legal, stable employment and residence" (*hefa wending jiuye he hefa wending zhusuo*, 合法稳定就业和合法稳定住所), the plan allows cities to "implement different settlement policies" (*shishi chabie hua luohu zhengce*, 实施差别化落户政策). Large cities with more than 5 million people may "strictly control" (*yange kongzhi*, 严格控制) the size of the urban population and set their own requirements for migrants to participate in urban social insurance schemes. Although mega-cities have considerable leeway when deciding how they will integrate outsiders, the burden remains on them to extend services; but they have limited resources and minimal guidance about how to include migrants in their city's public goods regime.

³³ These initiatives include ones that touch on urbanization, *hukou* reform, fiscal transfers, and land policy.

³⁴ State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Guojia xinxing chengzhen hua guihua (National New-Type Urbanization Plan) (2014-2020)," 2014, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm.

Deflecting Migrants Within the City

The combination of central concern and local responsibility often leads to an unfunded mandate referred to by Chinese as “the center treats; local governments pay” (*zhongyang qingke, dangdi maidan*, 中央请客, 当地买单).³⁵ Because migrants are managed locally and support from above is minimal, cities get to choose who to incorporate and on what terms.

Taking advantage of this freedom, municipal authorities have developed many ways to deflect requests for services. At the district or city level, officials may make it difficult for migrants to send their children to school or to participate in medical insurance schemes by requiring minimum periods of employment and residency. For example, in late 2012 the Beijing Municipal Education Commission announced that migrant children would have access to secondary vocational school entrance exams if they met certain eligibility criteria. But the requirements the Education Commission set up were formidable. Parents were obligated to have had full-time jobs for three years and to have contributed to Beijing’s social insurance program for three consecutive years, while students must have completed all three years of middle school in Beijing. For higher-level vocational schools, parents were required to have had full-time jobs and made contributions to social insurance in Beijing for six consecutive years, and their children must have completed three years of high school in Beijing.³⁶ But migrants tend to move around; some go back to their home village for a time and others relocate from city to city.³⁷

³⁵ Interview with a social welfare scholar, Beijing, 20 March 2012; Interview with a former education official, Chengdu, May 2012; also interview with a migrant education NGO staff member, Shanghai, July 2017.

³⁶ “Easing Gaokao Restrictions: A New Year’s Gift?” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 2013.

³⁷ Interview with an informal worker, Beijing, September 2010; Interviews with construction workers, Beijing, December 2010; Interview with a migrant NGO leader, Guangzhou, December 2010; also interview with a migrant worker, Guangzhou, July 2017.

Requiring them to have stayed in one city for a number of years in a row has the same effect as excluding them from the urban benefits regime.

In addition to setting periods of employment and residence that few migrants can meet, a second eligibility requirement involves household registration. Even as it undergoes reform, the *hukou* system can be deployed to tie migrants up in bureaucratic knots and keep services out of reach. Several cities, including Chongqing and Shanghai, and Guangdong Province have introduced points systems for acquiring residence permits.³⁸ For instance, Guangdong replaced temporary residence permits with residence permits that would supposedly make it easier for non-locals to obtain services, but in reality did not.³⁹ Candidates' point totals are based on factors such as their skills, education, social security contributions, and criminal records.⁴⁰ High school degrees count for 20 points, university degrees for 80 points, and criminal records result in a deduction.⁴¹ Sixty points are needed to qualify to apply for urban household registration in the province, and the threshold is even higher (85 points) for a highly desired Guangzhou urban

³⁸ Many of these policies were intended to induce migrants to settle in small and medium-sized cities instead of the overcrowded provincial capital. Some cities within Guangdong Province, such as Shenzhen and Zhongshan, have set up their own points systems as well. See Zhonghua Guo and Tuo Liang, "Differentiating citizenship in urban China" on the points system in Dongguan.

³⁹ Guangdong Province Public Security, "*Mingnian 1 yue 1 ri qi juzhu zheng qudai zanzhuzheng liudong renkou ban juzhu zheng xiangshou geng duo quanyi*," 2009, http://www.gdga.gov.cn/ztbd/tjb/gddt/200912/t20091231_393075.html; Guangdong Province Public Security, "*Guangdong sheng yinjin rencai shixing 'Guangdong sheng juzhu zheng' de zhanxing banfa*," 2009, http://www.gdga.gov.cn/ztbd/tjb/qwfb/200912/t20091228_393063.html. Application materials include 1) degree certificates or certificates of professional qualification, 2) a valid form of identification, 3) proof of residence in Guangdong Province, 4) a marital status certificate, 5) a health certificate, and 6) an already-signed employment contract (Guangdong Province Public Security, "*Mingnian 1 yue 1 ri qi juzhu zheng qudai zanzhuzheng liudong renkou ban juzhu zheng xiangshou geng duo quanyi*").

⁴⁰ The system is similar to points systems used by some countries for immigrants (Interview with a Shanghai public administration scholar, Hong Kong, March 2012).

⁴¹ Yue Wang and Haoyuan Huang, "'Hukou' Scoring System Quickens China's Pace Towards Urbanization," *Xinhua News*, November 2010.

registration.⁴² One father reportedly went so far as to give blood three times one summer to try to accumulate enough points for him and his son to apply for a Guangzhou *hukou*.⁴³ Many migrants can earn some points, but far fewer are able to amass a sufficient number to change their household registration.

In short, the points system makes it appear that inclusion is possible and that clear rules exist to access services, but it continues to exclude most migrants.⁴⁴ Many migrants understand this. Interviewees in Guangdong were openly scornful about these kinds of residence permit reforms. A factory manager and government liaison who employed 160 migrant workers in Dongguan city explained in 2010, “The temporary residence permit and *hukou* reforms don’t mean anything. It’s still too hard to change your *hukou*. For example, you need to have permanent employment and buy a house.” Most of the employees at his factory were from Hunan, Henan, and Sichuan Provinces, and the workers there who were interviewed scoffed incredulously at the mention of *hukou* reform. Many had heard about it but said it would be impossible to rack up enough points. They said they could only afford to live in cheap rentals such as shared rooms and had no hope of being able to purchase a home. The requirement of continuous permanent employment also stood in the way of accumulating points. Many of the workers at this factory, like migrants elsewhere, switched jobs every few years in pursuit of higher wages or better working conditions. Most workers in the construction industry also

⁴² Yue Wang and Haoyuan Huang, “‘Hukou’ Scoring System.”

⁴³ Rahul Jacob, “Residency Reforms Favour China’s Wealthiest: Resentment Grows over Two-Tier System in Shenzhen and Guangzhou,” *Financial Times*, September 12, 2011.

⁴⁴ Shenzhen municipality opened up 10,000 permanent residency spots in 2017, but these are reserved for applicants with the most points and will only benefit a tiny fraction of the city’s millions of migrant workers (Huifeng He, “China’s Silicon Valley to migrant workers: No degree? No problem,” *South China Morning Post*, July 19, 2017). See Zhonghua Guo and Tuo Liang, “Differentiating citizenship in urban China” on Dongguan.

changed jobs often, because their jobs typically lasted only as long it took to complete a building. In most cities, those who have worked for a sufficiently long period in the informal service industry, such as housekeepers, are officially eligible for benefits, but they seldom are classified as permanent workers and so they too are effectively excluded from the public goods regime.

Shanghai announced a new points system in 2013.⁴⁵ Temporary residents are allowed to apply for a permanent residence permit after seven years if they have amassed 120 points.⁴⁶ A master's degree is worth 100 points and a doctoral degree 110 points,⁴⁷ credentials that are out of reach for most migrant workers. Another way to accrue points is to make a major investment in a Shanghai-based company that pays at least 100,000 RMB per year in taxes or has 10 or more employees.⁴⁸ In short, the points system makes it no easier for most migrants to obtain public services.⁴⁹

Besides creating near-impossible eligibility requirements for *hukou* transfers, the points system requires hard-to-secure paperwork. Even when migrants accumulate enough points, they

⁴⁵ There are three main differences between migrants holding Shanghai residence permits and residents with Shanghai *hukou*. For example, residence permit holders cannot get permanent residence for their parents, apply for the city's minimum livelihood (welfare) program, or apply for government-subsidized affordable housing (Shanghai Municipal Information Office, "Shanghai's New Regulations on Residence Permit Application and Management," 2013, <http://en.shio.gov.cn/presscon/2013/06/28/1152383.html>).

⁴⁶ Shanghai Municipal Government, "Notice of Shanghai Municipal People's Government on Printing and Distributing the Trial Procedures for Management of Shanghai Residence Card Points," 2013, <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node27118/node27386/node27408/n31241/n31279/u26ai38733.html>; Shanghai Daily, "Shanghai to Ease Residency Permits for Outsiders," June 20, 2013.

⁴⁷ Shanghai Municipal Government, "Notice of Shanghai Municipal People's Government."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Points systems are not the only way that some migrants are favored over others. Many highly-educated, better-off migrants can apply for an urban *hukou* during their years at university or obtain health insurance through their employers, and many can pay for their children to attend local schools. As an official said in Chengdu, "High-skilled senior personnel are encouraged to come and have no problem accessing services" (Interview with a municipal development cadre, May 2012).

often are unable to track down the documentation necessary to prove that they are entitled to a service. Municipal and district governments generally require “five documents” (*wuzheng*, 五证) for migrants to enroll in a public school or buy urban health insurance. Typically, these include a household registration booklet, proof of hometown permanent residency, a temporary residence permit, proof of local address, and proof of employment. Some cities, such as Chengdu, may require up to seven documents.⁵⁰

At least three of these documents can be difficult for most migrants to obtain: the temporary residence permit, proof of local address, and evidence of employment. Not everyone has a temporary residence permit because it necessitates registering with the public security bureau. Acquiring proof of local address is also problematic. As the shortage in affordable housing for migrants grows, migrants often share temporary housing and are not always offered leases with their names on them that they can present as proof of residence. Many migrants also do not have labor contracts that they can present as evidence of employment. Informal and low-skilled workers are among the least likely to be on contract. In many small businesses and much of the underground economy, written labor contracts are rare. For example, fruit and vegetable sellers, nannies, and repairmen usually do not have contracts. Even those who are formally employed may be hired as temporary workers despite the fact that their positions are permanent, and so they often do not have the full-fledged contracts that are required.⁵¹ Many other workers

⁵⁰ Interviews with a scholar in Chengdu, July 2012 and July 2017.

⁵¹ For example, although some Foxconn workers were told that they would receive benefits as soon as they started working and insurance could be purchased on a monthly basis, they reported that they were classified as temporary workers and would only become eligible to purchase insurance after four to six months (Interview with an informal worker, Chengdu, July 2012; Interview with an NGO leader, Chengdu, July 2012). For more on Foxconn workers, see Ngai Pun and Jenny Chan, “Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience,” *Modern China* 38, no. 4 (2012): 383-410.

who sought labor contracts when they began their jobs are never given them. One feisty migrant worker interviewed in Guangzhou took his boss to court for not complying with the Labor Contract Law. The court sided with the employer and ultimately blamed the worker for not signing a contract, even though the company refused to offer him one after he specifically asked for it when he was hired.⁵² A small shop owner summed up the situation well in 2017: “They ask for this certificate and that certificate: proof of housing, social insurance cards, and labor contracts. It’s almost impossible.”

Additional paperwork requirements have recently been added in some cities, making it harder to hunt down and present all the necessary documents. In Beijing, a new demand appeared in the mid-2010s: at least one parent must now provide physical proof of Beijing-issued social insurance in order to enroll a child in public school.

Even when migrants fulfill all the criteria and can provide every piece of paperwork needed to prove their eligibility for services, they may still be shuffled from office to office in a fruitless effort to get their pile of forms certified. For instance, some officials in Beijing started tightening enforcement of document-checking rules after 2007, and Shanghai did the same: “They always had these requirements. It’s just that it’s being enforced more strictly now.” Previously, the document review process had been more informal, and parents could simply bring their paperwork to a school for administrative clearance when they registered their children and paid their tuition and fees. But more migrants were trying to enroll their children in public schools after the mid-2000s.⁵³ Once tighter examination of paperwork began, local officials began to step in frequently and send migrants on wild goose chases. Some schools in Beijing

⁵² Interview with a migrant legal aid center director, Guangzhou, 29 December 2010.

⁵³ Interviews with school principals, Beijing, March 2012; also interview with a migrant education NGO staff member, Shanghai, July 2017.

now instruct parents to bring their full package of documents to the local government for inspection in order to get another certificate verifying that the documentation is complete. One migrant in Beijing said, “At the local government office, they told me to take the documents instead to the school. By the time they cleared up the document approval, it was too late. The school year had started and I was told to try enrolling my child again next year.” With both school leaders and local officials dodging parents and sending them to other offices, migrant students can be left in approval limbo and never make the leap from being technically eligible to actually enrolling in a school.

Deflecting migrants in these ways has two important consequences. First, they must fend for themselves in case-by-case battles over eligibility and documentation, in which responsibility for the provision of a service shifts away from the government and onto migrants themselves.⁵⁴ Second, when migrants fail to overcome all the obstacles to buy health insurance or enroll their children in school, they sometimes assume it is their own fault.⁵⁵ Individuals navigating their way through this complex and confusing system may not always be able to see that they, like many other migrants, are victims of deliberate local government policies.

Deflecting Migrants Away from the City

⁵⁴ On placing the onus on workers to figure out how to access services, see *Shanghai Daily*, “Shanghai to Ease Residency Permits for Outsiders.” At this press conference, Mao Dali, deputy director of the Shanghai Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, said that non-locals “can calculate the points themselves and know [in] which area they need to work hard to fill the gap.”

⁵⁵ Interviews with informal workers, Beijing, December 2011; Interviews with informal workers and construction workers, Chengdu, July 2012; also interview with a migrant worker, Beijing, July 2017.

By selectively enforcing rules or shutting a service down, urban officials often encourage migrants to seek services elsewhere. In doing so, they divert migrants from urban hospitals and public schools to clinics and schools in other cities or to their hometown in the countryside.

The first way to divert migrants' requests is to enforce dormant rules. There are many regulations that have been on the books for some time but have gone unenforced until city leaders, principals, or hospital administrators decide to apply them. For example, limits on the number of students allowed in each classroom have existed for as long as urban interviewees could remember, but were regularly ignored. In the past, as class sizes grew, most schools happily collected the additional tuition fees and crowded more desks into classrooms. In some places, migrants can still enroll if they pay tacked-on charges. For instance, a street sweeper from Anhui Province was told in 2017 that because she was an outsider her child could attend a Shanghai public school during the upcoming school year if she paid extra for it. But as more migrant students enrolled and anti-outsider sentiment grew in the mid-2000s, some local officials instead dusted off the classroom size restrictions and used them to exclude new migrant children. In Beijing in 2012, education bureaus, working with school principals, abruptly restricted class sizes to 30 students, while their counterparts in Chengdu shrunk classes to 45 students, even though classrooms had long held 55 to 65 children when the additional students were mainly registered urban residents. A former education official in Chengdu explained in 2012, "We're strictly enforcing the limit of 45 students per class, so we now require parents' *hukou* registration, because now there are too many migrant students."

In Shanghai, most schools first fill their classes with registered residents before allowing in any migrants, lest urban parents complain. Migrant students must get a number on a waiting list and maintain high-enough test grades in the meantime; when they move from elementary to

middle school, they must obtain another number and go to the bottom of a new list. In Chengdu, a staff member of a government-organized NGO who was working on a project to integrate migrant children with registered students explained that the waiting list avoided the awkwardness of excluding migrants formally by making their inability to enroll a consequence of classroom capacity, rather than outright discrimination. As one migrant parent in Beijing put it, the school “said it was full, instead of saying that they were not allowing my daughter to enroll.” Enforcing previously-unenforced rules forces families to send children to private migrant schools or to a school in the parents’ home village or city. Relying on existing but previously unenforced rules makes it difficult for migrants to allege discrimination since the rules long predate their claims.

Officials occasionally do not provide any justification at all for deflecting a child. One migrant parent interviewed in 2017 described her attempts to enroll her son in school in Shanghai earlier that year, “They didn’t even bother giving me a reason. They just said no; he’s not allowed. He should have started first grade already.” As outsiders share these stories of frustrating encounters and missed opportunities, and their experiences of being shut out of schools for one reason or another, others are deterred from bringing their children to the city at all. A vegetable seller from Fujian Province working in Beijing explained in 2017, “I heard they couldn’t go to school in Beijing, so I didn’t even consider bringing them here.”

Cities also sometimes shut down the private schools that migrant children attend, as has been common in Beijing, to encourage them and their families to move away, or to dampen opposition to urban redevelopment projects. As China’s cities grow and expand into suburban and rural areas, municipal authorities throughout the country are demolishing neighborhoods and evicting residents to make way for more profitable projects, such as luxury malls and residential

high-rise buildings.⁵⁶ Since the mid-2000s, dozens of migrant schools in Chengdu and various other cities have been torn down as neighborhoods underwent urban renewal.⁵⁷ Shanghai officials have been particularly adept at getting migrants to leave redevelopment zones with minimal fuss. In Shanghai's Fengtai District, for example, local officials put up barriers around four migrant schools and posted signs saying that demolition would begin in one year.⁵⁸ There were no other announcements or meetings about the land expropriation or plans for alternative schooling. Migrants did not have the option to send their children to a public school because there were none nearby. A large majority of migrant families in that part of Fengtai decided it would be best to make plans to relocate as soon as possible.⁵⁹ They realized that if they waited the full year and demolition began, they might lose out and be forced to move without having found new jobs, housing, or schools for their children.

Nor is education the only service that can be taken away. To encourage urban residents to move elsewhere, officials in some cities have cut off water, gas, and electricity to buildings that are slated for demolition. This pushes "nail households" (*dingzihu*, 钉子户) who are resisting demolition orders to vacate a neighborhood without having to directly confront them or forcibly remove them.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Fulong Wu, "State Dominance in Urban Redevelopment: Beyond Gentrification in Urban China," *Urban Affairs Review* 52, no. 5 (2016): 631-58.

⁵⁷ Interview with a scholar, Chengdu, May 2012.

⁵⁸ Interviews with a migrant activist, Beijing, November 2010 and January 2012.

⁵⁹ Elsewhere, land seizures have turned violent, especially when residents have faced off with hired thugs (Michael Wines and Jonathan Ansfield, "Trampled in a Land Rush, Chinese Resist," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2010; Lynette H. Ong, "Thugs and Outsourcing of State Repression in China," *The China Journal* no. 80 (July 2018).

⁶⁰ You-tien Hsing, "Urban Housing Mobilizations," in *Reclaiming Chinese Society: The New Social Activism*, ed. You-tien Hsing and Ching Kwan Lee (New York: Routledge, 2010), 17-41; "China's nail houses: the homeowners who refuse to make way," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2014.

Local authorities and the development companies they cooperate with prefer to avoid direct confrontation with the people they are displacing, since prolonged disputes can lead protesters to dig in, draw the attention of the media, and bring criticism from higher levels.⁶¹ As in Fengtai, urban officials hope to defuse conflict by encouraging migrants to move away on their own, after which they are hardly in a position to mobilize collectively. In addition to thwarting resistance by preventing a critical mass of protesters from forming, withdrawing services lends to the whole process an air of necessary inexorable urban development. As a retired education bureau official in Chengdu put it in 2012: “A migrant school would never be demolished per se. Rather, if there is an issue, it’s simply a question of land being bought for development.”

The authorities do not always resort to withdrawing services. Urban hospitals are almost always more expensive than rural ones, and differences in out-of-pocket expenses encourage migrants to seek healthcare outside the city where they work. A combination of lower medical insurance premiums, higher reimbursement rates, and simpler reimbursement procedures in the countryside and in less developed cities make going to a rural health clinic or smaller city a cost-effective choice for many migrants.⁶² A restaurant cook from rural Sichuan told us in Chengdu in 2017 that she could use her insurance in Chengdu, but never tried to because the reimbursement rate was so much lower than if she traveled to a hospital in her hometown, where it was 80%. At

⁶¹ Yongshun Cai, “Disruptive Collective Action in the Reform Era,” in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. Kevin J. O’Brien (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 163-78; Xi Chen. “The Power of ‘Troublemaking’: Protest Tactics and Their Efficacy in China,” *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 4 (2009): 451–71; Kevin J. O’Brien and Yanhua Deng, “Repression Backfires: Tactical Radicalization and Protest Spectacle in Rural China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 93 (2015): 457-70.

⁶² Interviews with migrant workers, Hangzhou, April 2012; Guangzhou, July 2017; and Chengdu, July 2017; and with a doctor, Guangzhou, July 2017.

a hospital in the city of Hangzhou, a doctor noted in 2012 that most migrants could only get 10% of their expenses reimbursed through their rural healthcare insurance. Owing to this low rate, a worker in Hangzhou from rural Zhejiang said he planned to wait until he returned to his hometown to have colorectal surgery. He could have received care in Hangzhou, but would not think of doing so unless it was life-threatening. Another migrant from Anhui Province who had been admitted to the same hospital was in great pain and urgently needed surgery that day. But she could not afford the 90% share of a 5,000 RMB bill, plus the cost of a hospital room, and she and her husband did not want to take time off from work to return to her home village to receive medical care. When the patient suggested she might undergo the procedure at a cheaper, less reputable facility, the doctor said she would likely have to spend more money later to get corrective work done. In the end, the woman left the hospital without scheduling the surgery and hoped her condition would not worsen.

Some migrants who have rural insurance find it impossible to use their coverage at all. Municipal officials sometimes do not work as conscientiously as they might to set up agreements between urban hospitals and rural insurance programs. Without these agreements, migrants have a hard time using urban hospital receipts to receive repayment from rural insurance providers. One migrant family who sold snacks and drinks from a cart had coverage in their hometown in Shandong Province, but, as they explained in 2017, they could not find a way to use that insurance in Shanghai. The mother said, “Everyone we know cannot use it, as it's not accepted here.” This conveniently lessens the burden on municipal hospitals.

Urban sprawl and higher healthcare costs in cities disguise the origins of why it is necessary to go home to receive medical care or to find a school willing to take their children. These factors generate feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty about where to turn. It often

seems, interviewees said, like no one in particular deprived them of services; it just happened. When faced with class size limits, development imperatives, and low reimbursement rates, it is hard for migrants to know which institution (the school, hospital, or one of the government departments), which level of government (district, municipal, provincial, or central), or even which person (the principal, hospital cashier, or an official from the bureau of education, human resources and social security, development, or public security) should be held responsible. Without a clear target for their ire, collective contention or even collective consciousness can be difficult to muster.⁶³

Why Do Cities Deflect Migrants?

Municipal officials deflect migrants for many reasons, of which the most obvious is cost. In 2013, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated it would require 650 billion RMB (US\$106 billion) each year to ensure that rural migrants enjoyed the same healthcare, housing, and school benefits as urban residents.⁶⁴ Given the municipal share of total government revenues, it is challenging for city officials to foot this bill largely on their own. In 2016, the central government collected 50.4% of total tax revenue while regional and local authorities received the remainder. But the central government accounted for only 8% of the spending on general public services, while regional and local governments had to pick up the other 92%. The story was even more lopsided for education expenditures (5% by the central government and 95% by local governments) and health spending (1% by the central government and 99% by

⁶³ The more specific people's attribution of blame, the more likely it is that they protest (Debra Javeline, "The Role of Blame in Collective Action: Evidence from Russia," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 107-21).

⁶⁴ Reuters, "China urbanization cost could top \$106 billion a year: think-tank," July 30, 2013.

local governments).⁶⁵ In 2016, the national public expenditures budget rose by 6% and reached 187.8 trillion RMB,⁶⁶ but this still was not nearly enough. In the absence of larger transfers, urban leaders often find themselves financially stretched when asked to pay for better services for migrants. Deflecting demands allows them to benefit from the contribution migrants make to the local economy without covering the full array of expenses associated with maintaining a labor force. Many city governments also face pushback from residents who have an urban registration and whose prejudice against rural migrants affects the integration of outsiders into communities and their ability to make a living.⁶⁷

But why do local governments not simply refuse to provide services? Deflecting migrants is more politically astute and less likely to cause trouble than denying them outright. When municipal authorities refuse to provide services outright, all non-locals are left out and the government can become a focal point for complaints about discrimination. But when urban officials erect barriers that can be used to refuse benefits selectively one-by-one amid lots of individual paperwork, it is less conspicuously discriminatory *en masse* and buys time to put off overhauling a city's public goods regime. For most migrants who are deflected, the source of

⁶⁵ Based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, “2017 *Zhongguo tongji nianjian*.” The numbers had been about the same five years earlier (Li Zhang and Meng Li, “Local Fiscal Capability and Liberalization of Urban Hukou,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 102 (2016): 893-907). For a study of education spending in Shanghai, see Yisu Zhou and Dan Wang, “Understanding the Constraints on the Supply of Public Education to the Migrant Population in China: Evidence from Shanghai,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 563–78.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, “2016 *nian caizheng shou zhi qingkuang* (Revenue and Expenditure Situation),” January 23, 2017, http://gks.mof.gov.cn/zhengfuxinxi/tongjishuju/201701/t20170123_2526014.html.

⁶⁷ Chun-wing Tse, “Urban Residents' Prejudice and Integration of Rural Migrants into Urban China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 579–95.

their exclusion is hard to pin down as they stumble from one obstacle or excuse to another, and from one previously-unknown regulation to another.

The central government has placed officials in mega-cities in a difficult spot and has left many feeling hamstrung.⁶⁸ Although national leaders are encouraging further urbanization, they do not want crowded first-tier cities to become much bigger.⁶⁹ Instead, their goal is to push migrants toward small and medium-sized cities. As a result, *hukou* liberalization is taking place mainly in cities with fewer than 5 million people. But wages are generally higher and most new jobs are being created in the 16 largest municipalities with populations over 5 million,⁷⁰ and those are the destinations where many migrants want to go. This clash between the central government's urbanization strategy and migrants' preference for bigger cities puts municipal leaders in places like Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu in a bind. Policies designed for third- and fourth-tier cities like Benxi and Datong are failing to lure migrants away from China's congested mega-cities. As new migrants appear every day and the national government urges the cities to provide more benefits to outsiders, the authorities in China's largest cities turn to deflection.

Beijing is a good example. In December 2015, Beijing released draft regulations on permanent residence permits that proposed harder-to-fulfill requirements: *hukou* applicants should already possess a non-permanent Beijing residential permit, should be less than 45 years old, and have paid social insurance premiums in Beijing for at least *seven* consecutive years.⁷¹ Even if they could satisfy these requirements, they would also have to jump the hurdles of a

⁶⁸ Interviews with a social welfare scholar in Beijing, March 2012; a political scientist in Shanghai, April 2012; and a public policy scholar in Beijing, July 2017.

⁶⁹ For example, Beijing municipality's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) calls for reducing the population of six central districts by 15 percent and limiting Beijing's total population to 23 million.

⁷⁰ "The Great Transition," *The Economist*, March 22, 2014.

⁷¹ Xinhua, "Beijing Mulls Credit Points for Registration of Nonresidents," December 10, 2015.

points system similar to Shanghai and Guangzhou and likely to have much the same effect. The vast majority of migrant families will continue to be effectively (if not formally) excluded from urban services despite high-sounding reforms that suggest there is a way for them to gain all the benefits of a Beijing *hukou*.

But the situation is not equally dire everywhere and there are mega-cities where the gap between migrants and officially-registered residents is smaller. In other words, even among large, attractive cities, some are more open to outsiders than others, and better treatment of migrants does not solely depend on a city's wealth. Chengdu, for example, has done a particularly good job of incorporating migrant children into local schools compared to Beijing and Shanghai. It has pioneered new ways to manage private migrant schools and allows far more non-local students to attend public schools.⁷² Intra-provincial migrants have also been granted substantial access to medical care, and their Chengdu hospital receipts can often be submitted to rural insurers for reimbursement, even while migrants hailing from provinces other than Sichuan continue to face difficulties doing so.⁷³

Conclusion

As China becomes less rural, more migrants need and expect urban services. Many municipalities, however, deflect demands for benefits instead of meeting them or denying them outright. City leaders often establish near-impossible eligibility requirements and require paperwork that outsiders struggle to obtain. Municipal authorities also nudge migrants to seek

⁷² Interview with a scholar in Chengdu, July 2017.

⁷³ See Alexsia T. Chan, "Control without Coercion: Public Service Provision for Migrant Workers and Social Control in China" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2015) for more on differences among various cities.

healthcare or education elsewhere by enforcing dormant rules, shutting down schools and clinics, and encouraging migrants to seek out cheaper options in another city or in the countryside.

Urban officials deflect migrants for practical and political reasons. Limiting access is both cost-effective and done in a way that isolates and disempowers migrants and makes it harder for them to protest collectively.

Phantom services change the locus of contention, aid "social management" (*shehui guanli*, 社会管理), and expose new axes of inequality. In today's China, the ladder of citizenship has many rungs and placing a migrant on a higher (or lower) step is a way to control her or him. Benefits are doled out to favored sub-groups or withheld behind a smokescreen of hard-to-contest excuses. The level of inclusion is adjustable and depends on financial considerations or even the personal inclinations of a municipal official or front-line service provider. In an era of phantom benefits, collective claims to benefits that the national government has endorsed are instead regularly supplanted by individual battles. Even when those battles are won, they only generate relief for a single family, while providing an effective lever for local authorities to divide and manage a potentially problematic group.

Migrants are not alone in being deflected. Other people seeking services may also be diverted by a tangle of rules and complications that discourage them from taking to the streets and leaves them with few options beyond negotiating face-to-face with bureaucrats.⁷⁴ For example, rural leaders have introduced additional guidelines about which homeowners may

⁷⁴ On "legal-bureaucratic absorption" and being forced to bargain with bureaucrats in their offices rather than taking to the streets to protest, see Ching-Kwan Lee and Yong Hong Zhang, "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China," *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 1-34; Julia Chuang, "China's Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance," *The China Quarterly* no. 219 (2014): 649-69.

receive low-income assistance, which establish new criteria and require evidence that some fail to meet.⁷⁵ Again and again, deflecting has proven to be a handy tool in the local government's toolkit.

The long-term effectiveness of deflecting remains to be seen. It does work in the short term to prevent migrants from getting healthcare, education, housing, a pension, or low-income assistance. But these are stopgap measures that may only be keeping an increasingly demanding migrant population at bay without truly addressing their problems. After years or even decades of waiting for a thoroughgoing transformation of the *hukou* system that would bring them more fully into the urban benefits regime, some migrants are losing patience. A number of activists are overcoming depoliticization and individualization and making their frustrations known. Popular action appears to be increasing the most in areas where the migrant population has grown rapidly.⁷⁶ Deflecting is not addressing the needs of China's huge migrant workforce; nor is it clearly serving social stability. It saves cities money, but may be pushing other problems down the road and making their ultimate resolution more difficult.

⁷⁵ Julia Chuang, "China's Rural Land Politics." In 2011, county welfare officials in Sichuan province introduced new rules for low-income social insurance (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*, or *dibao*) that, for instance, disqualified anyone living with employable adult children, which made many elderly evictees ineligible for this welfare assistance.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Becker, "The Knowledge to Act: Chinese Migrant Labor Protests in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 11 (2012): 1379-404.