


Article

# Hukou Reform and the “Luohu” of Rural Migrants in Urban China

Ming Tian <sup>1,\*</sup>, Qingwen Xu <sup>2</sup>, Zhigang Li <sup>3</sup> and Yang Yu <sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Development and Public Policy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China

<sup>2</sup> Silver School of Social Work, New York University, New York, NY 10012, USA

<sup>3</sup> School of Urban Design, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430062, China

\* Correspondence: tianm@bnu.edu.cn

**Abstract:** Along with a series of reforms of the household registration, or the hukou system, there has been a sustained call for its reforms to further integrate rural migrants into cities and sustain the national strategy of urbanization. Nevertheless, does hukou still matter? Is it still a major obstacle to the inclusive development of post-reform urban China? Recently, the effect of the hukou system and its reforms has become a debatable topic. To address the question, in this article, we examine the “luohu” of rural migrants, i.e., rural people who work and/or live in the city obtaining urban hukou, to evaluate the effects of hukou reforms. We argue, along with the improvement of China’s social security system in both urban and rural areas, as well as the increased rights of rural migrants in cities, that the gap between the “value” of urban and rural hukou is decreasing: the boundaries set between urban and rural territories have been diminished; meanwhile, the intentions of rural migrants to luohu in the city have declined. This dilemma indicates that the impact of hukou system per se is fading, which is closely linked to the reforms of other social policies such as welfare and pension systems. As such, to promote the integration of rural migrants in Chinese cities, the focus of China’s hukou reforms should shift from the registration system to more inclusive social policies.

**Keywords:** household registration (hukou) system; rural migrants; urbanization; China



**Citation:** Tian, M.; Xu, Q.; Li, Z.; Yu, Y. Hukou Reform and the “Luohu” of Rural Migrants in Urban China. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 15683. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142315683>

Academic Editor: Gema Cárdenas

Received: 26 October 2022

Accepted: 23 November 2022

Published: 25 November 2022

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

China’s household registration system, or hukou in Mandarin, has long been one of the most important institutional arrangements to control population mobility. Chinese citizens are mandated to register their locations at birth and any subsequent changes of their locations when people move. The two categories of hukou assigned at birth—urban (non-agricultural) and rural (agricultural) hukou—not only provide ordinary Chinese people a unique urban/rural identity but also closely connect them to different social economic rights and opportunities, particularly the access to health care, welfare benefits, education, and urban housing and rural farmland. Such urban–rural disparities have been significant [1]. Migration-related hukou change within the category is fairly easy, for instance moving from a rural village to another village means the agricultural hukou is unchanged, which has been very common in rural–rural marriages [1]; however, migration-related hukou change across the urban–rural category was and continues to be extremely difficult if not absolutely impossible [2]. Thus, the unmatched hukou and people’s location, as well as the need of luohu (rural people who work and/or live in the city obtaining urban hukou) are essential to China’s urbanization and sustained socio-economic development.

Scholars have well examined the effects of this special institutional arrangement. The literature published in early 2000 shared the observation that the hukou system has created deep economic divides and social exclusions [3] and exerted sustained impacts on China’s social stratification and upward mobility [4]. It is clearly evidenced that rural migrants have experienced discrimination in employment and education in the city [5,6]. Recent scholarship focuses on hukou system reforms started in late 1970s and includes

evaluations of pilot programs and local practices [7,8]. However, in general, there is a lack of agreement on best policy practices and strategies. Chan and Buckingham [9] and other similar scholars [10,11] argued that the aim of hukou reform should be to transfer the responsibility for hukou policies to local governments, rather than abolishing the system, thus, to keep the system intact; the hukou system still plays an important and sustained role as the state tool to serve economic development goals, social stability, controlled migration, and urbanization. However, others argued that the reform of hukou system can barely touch on or shake the dual structure of Chinese society and China's economy, which was built upon and had been further perpetuated by this hukou system [12].

Indeed, the effects of the hukou system include not just a powerful tool for internal migration management but they also include the bordering effects alike those of the national territory [13]. In the field of international migration, accepting immigrants and granting a status to them so they can equally access resources that are usually available for citizens has always been influenced by a number of incoherent and disjointed theories. While the pull-push theory and network theory have been used widely to understand the decision making of migration, theories concerning borders have been around the discussions of national territoriality and cultural boundaries. In the case of undocumented/unauthorized immigrants, given the processes of globalization and the evolving modern border situations, new analyses are often formulated around theories of critical race, social exclusion, and social inequality [14]. Scholars have been advocating for the legalization of the undocumented/unauthorized people, which would allow immigrants greater labor market participation and geographic mobility, access to health and social services, and equal protection under the law [15].

During the last four decades, millions of rural residents in China entered into cities to work, live, and seek for their future. The amounts of rural migrants rose sharply, from 21 million in the early 1990s to 102 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010 [16]. Nevertheless, it is by no means easy for rural migrants to settle in cities, especially in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen [17–20]. The situation is often attributed to the lagged-behind reform of the hukou system that hinders the process of migrant integration into cities. The prolonged wait of an urban hukou due to the selective city entry criteria, as well as the restrictions on rural migrants' farmland rights discourage rural migrants to settle in cities [17]. However, the existing studies often focus on the hukou system or the government policies, little is known about the perception of rural migrants to relocate their hukou registration in cities, i.e., *luohu*. As such, this study is to examine the *luohu* of rural migrants and link it to the effects of the hukou system and its reforms. The questions are: what is the impact of hukou reform on the *luohu* of rural migrants? What is the process of hukou reforms and the impacts on the life of rural migrants? What are the relations between hukou system reform, the reforms of other institutional arrangements, and their jointed impacts on rural migrants?

Previous studies often focus on household registration itself, which is an impossible way of fully understanding the nature of the role of the household registration system or to explain why the reform of the household registration system has little effect. In contrast, this study was oriented by the socio-ecological system theory. The theory holds that the environment that affects the development and change of individuals or groups is a multi-level system [21] and there are mutual influences and correlation relationships between these systems. Changes in one aspect will cause changes in other aspects, which will affect the behavior of individuals or groups [22]. It is noted that China's hukou system is not just a household registration system; the value of an urban/rural hukou lies in the resources attached to the hukou. Such resources have been distributed in China's social welfare, healthcare, education, land management, and other systems. According to the socio-ecological system theory, rural migrants' intention and behavior of *luohu*, as well as their wellbeing are subjected to the larger complex systems. Meanwhile, various systems are interdependent and interconnected; the change of the hukou system has been driven by other institutional reforms, the development of labor markets, the reform of social welfare,

and social insurance systems. Thus, this study contextualized the examination of the hukou system reform and linked it with the ongoing system changes in China.

This study adopted historical analysis. Systematically searching and retrieving government documents, reports, and materials from China's Policy Information Database ([www.gov.cn/zhengce/](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/)) and CNKI Law Database ([law.cnki.net](http://law.cnki.net)), both are formal and among the largest databases of government papers in China, this study reviewed the development of the hukou system in China, examined the hukou system reforms in the last four decades, and analyzed the dynamics of the hukou reforms and changes of other social economic policies, institutions, and institutional arrangements, in order to capture the impacts on rural migrants and their luohu perception and behavior.

## 2. A Retrospective Review of 40 Years of Hukou Reforms

China's household registration system has a long history of more than 2700 years, dated back to 685 BC in the Spring and Autumn Period. The household registration system in China today was set up by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on 9 January 1958, through the promulgation of the "Regulations on Household Registration of the People's Republic of China" (RHR). In detail, PRC's hukou registration collects a number of demographic information, such as gender, date of birth, ethnicity, family members, etc. Its key information includes the "place" and "type" of household registration. That is, a Chinese citizen can only be registered at one site and be specified as either "agricultural hukou" or "non-agricultural hukou". In essence, the hukou system defines two basic facets of a Chinese citizen: "who you are" and "where you are".

According to the regulations within RHR, "... citizens who move from rural areas to cities must hold the proof of employment from city labor department, the proof of admission from schools, or the permit of mobility granted by the city household registration authority, and apply to the household registration authority of their original residence for handling the mobility". That is, RHR per se did not impose limits on inter urban-rural population mobility, yet the mobilities must be authorized by either formal institutions such as work units or schools. In September 1958, eight months after the promulgation of the regulation, the central government of China issued the "Notice on Several Issues Concerning the Streamlining of the Workers and Urban Population", which, for the first time, explicitly stated about the "strict control over the relocation of population from rural areas and counties to large cities", so to control population mobility and the amounts of urban workers. Three years later, in 1961, the central government further promulgated the "Nine Measures to Reduce Urban Population and Grain Sales in Towns and Cities", the aim of which was to further curb urban population growth and reduce the number of employees. Following the guidelines, the Ministry of Public Security promulgated the "Opinions on Strengthening the Administration of Household Registration" in December 1962, emphasizing that "when handling the relocations of hukou, we must strictly control those from rural areas to cities". The Ministry of Public Security further issued several notices, in 1964 and 1977, to strictly prohibit the move from rural to urban areas or from small towns to large cities. Accordingly, an invisible wall was constructed between urban and rural areas and most rural hukou holders were expelled outside of urban territories [23].

The changes appeared in 1978 when China started the market-oriented reform and "open door" policies to promote the country's social economic development. The central government has issued a series of documents to adjust the hukou system since 1978, which include three periods of reforms: (1) the limited reforms of the hukou system before 1997; (2) the opening of small towns and cities to rural migrants between 1998 and 2011; and (3) the opening of large- and medium-sized cities and conditional luohu of rural migrants in mega cities after 2011.

In 1984, the promulgation of so-called "Notice on Farmers' Luohu into Towns and Cities by the State Council" opened the first channel to change rural hukou to urban hukou, in addition to the limited traditional channels of military services, work-unit recruitment, or college enrolment. As promulgated in the notice, "All farmers and their dependents who

apply to work in the township, as workers, businessmen and service industry employees, who have fixed residences, have business operations, or are long-term workers in township and village enterprises and public institutions, shall be granted the right to settle and be registered as residents by public security authorities. The ‘Self-care Food Rations Household Registration’ booklet should be issued and they should be registered as non-agricultural population. Food supply authority should secure the supply of grain and oil, and the ‘Grain and Oil Supply Certificate’ can be issued”.

The first round of the opening of urban hukou had a very limited impact on rural-to-urban migration and rural migrants’ *luohu*. In practice, the newly registered households could not enjoy the same social welfare benefits as urban residents, even the explicitly stated supply of grain and oil. As this round of hukou reform was only applied to small towns and cities, interests among and attractions to rural migrants were low. The most significant factor was that the change from rural to urban hukou required the farmers to forfeit their rights to farmlands, house construction plots, and other related rights of villagers.

The second round of hukou reform mainly included the pilot reform of the hukou system of small towns and county-level cities in 1997 and subsequent overall opening of these places in 2001, which marked the change of China’s hukou system from cautious regulation to prudent openness. In 1998, the State Council approved the policy of “Opinions on Solving Some Prominent Issues in Current Household Registration Administration” issued by the Ministry of Public Security. It states that “citizens who make investments, start businesses, purchase commercial housing, together with their immediate families . . . may be allowed to settle in cities”. This indicates the start of rural migrants’ *luohu* in large- and medium-sized cities. Meanwhile, the Central Government then started to decentralize the power of the hukou administration to the local governments and various local practice and models emerged. The 2001 reform stresses “to retain operational rights to contracted farmland and to allow farmland transfer with compensation in accordance with the law”.

Unexpectedly, the effect of the second round of hukou reform was also minimal. In 2012, about 53% of the Chinese population lived in urban areas, yet only 35% were registered as urban hukou holders, that is, about 235 million migrants living in cities or townships with rural hukou. There were several factors that might have affected rural migrants’ decisions and intentions. First, despite the lowered thresholds for *luohu*, there were still a number of institutional barriers, such as the requirement of “lawful and stable residence” was clearly set up, which in practice was equivalent to property ownerships, yet most rural migrants lived in rental housing. In addition, the opening hukou system of large- and medium-sized cities was only available for a highly selected group of rural migrants who basically can afford a surcharge. For ordinary rural migrants, the threshold of becoming a homeowner or making an investment in cities was too high to reach. Additionally, though the regulations stressed “ . . . to retain operational rights to contracted farmland and to allow farmland transfer with compensation in accordance with the law”, in practice, local authorities still demanded rural migrants to forfeit their rights of land and other rural collective economic benefits.

The third round of hukou reform started from the promulgation of the “Notice of the General Office of the State Council on Actively and Steadily Promoting the Reform of Hukou Administration System” in 2011, which signified the effort to dissolve the urban–rural migration boundary. The *luohu* in small- and medium-sized cities and towns are fully opened as there is almost no criteria set upon the relocation of rural hukou into these cities. Moreover, in addition to the investment and purchase of commodity housing, people can obtain the urban hukou through the city’s talent programs and employment. The policy states that “people who have lived in cities (excluding municipalities directly managed by the State Council, sub-provincial cities and selected major cities) with a legal and stable employment status for three years, and have a legal stable residence (including rental housing), and have participated in social insurance for a certain number of years in accordance with state regulation . . . can apply for registration as permanent urban

residents". Importantly, the condition of "lawful and stable residence" has been clearly defined and rental housing has been included.

Surprisingly, the third round of hukou reform has not led to a large number of rural migrants' *luohu*. Since 2011, the average annual size of new urban registration has been by no means a small figure, 8.35 million, yet most of this new urban registration has been due to college admission (rural college students automatically obtain urban hukou), rather than rural migrants' *luohu*. In 2014, following the implementation of the national strategy of "new-type urbanization", the State Council promulgated the "Opinions of the State Council on Further Promoting the Reform of the Hukou System", which reiterated that "No preconditions such as the forfeiting of operational rights to contracted farmland, rights to homestead, rights to sharing collective economic profits should be set for the *luohu* of rural migrants in cities". Moreover, the policy proposed a vision to unify the urban and rural hukou system and eliminate the differences between agricultural and non-agricultural hukou. This most recent policy push did result in new urban registration and increased the urbanization rate, but the number of rural migrants settled in cities is still limited.

The review of the last three rounds of hukou reform thus indicate a dilemma within China's hukou system reform process. On one hand, the door of obtaining urban hukou has been gradually opened, if not fully, as the state intends to further encourage rural migrants to settle in cities or even stimulate rural–urban mobility, especially aiming at medium- or small-size cities. On the other hand, the size or scale of rural migrants' *luohu* has been below the expectation of the government. Why is there a mismatch between the efforts of hukou reform and the interest of rural migrants' *luohu*? The dynamics of the hukou system with other institutional reforms and administrative arrangements would offer certain explanations.

### 3. The Changing Dynamics of Hukou System

#### 3.1. *The Role of the Hukou System in History*

The hukou system is a major component of the architecture of China's population controls, yet it is just one component among several others. Even before the market reform, the hukou system was not the only tool of the governments to control population mobility. Indeed, there were three additional important institutional arrangements serving the control of population mobilities: the rural collective production system, the state food distribution system, and the urban work-unit system for urban labor forces' employment and welfare. The four-leg structure tightly controlled the population; there was almost no pathway for rural people to relocate to urban areas.

In 1978, the implementation of the "household contract responsibility system" authorized villages to arrange agricultural productions and distribute products, thus freeing farmers from the village collectives. Later, in 1984 the central government issued the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Economic Restructuring"; as a departure from planned economics, this policy granted enterprises the autonomy to do business, allowing the development of collective-owned enterprises, private-owned businesses, foreign investments, and, consequently, enterprises' autonomy to hire. In 1985, the central government started to allow rural residents to go to cities to engage in small business and service operations and delivery. Meanwhile, the state food distribution system was abolished, specifically abolishing the system of supplying low-cost necessities for urban residents. Accordingly, rural people in cities, similar to urban hukou holders, were able to purchase food and other necessities in the market.

Together with China's market-driven economic reforms, freed rural residents were able to leave their hometowns, find works in cities, and were able to obtain food, housing, and other necessities from the market. Employment opportunities and higher levels of income in cities became a huge pull factor; the large amount of the mobility of rural migrants after 1978 was not attributed to the reform of the hukou system, instead it was primarily due to the economic context and reforms of other institutional systems.

### 3.2. The Detachment of Hukou and Social Welfare Systems

Under a planned economy in pre-reform China, the welfare enjoyed by non-agricultural urban hukou holders, such as education, housing, health care, old-age support, funeral services, etc., were all provided by the employers, i.e., governments and/or state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Farmers or agricultural rural hukou holders relied on themselves or rural collectives to access this welfare. In 1980, the central government of China ended its long-term practice that provided or assigned SOE jobs to urban non-agricultural hukou holders; instead, a labor market was taking shape. For residents with urban hukou, jobs and employment were no longer arranged by the government, indicating its separation from the hukou system.

The change of the employment system was followed by a series of the reforms of the social welfare system. For the old-age pension, in the pre-reform era, the pension was paid by SOEs and thus was a responsibility of the state. In October 1983, the Ministry of Personnel held a national work conference on social security and welfare, proposing the pooling of SOEs' pensions. In July 1986, the State Council promulgated the "Implementation of Labor Contract in State-Owned Enterprises", articulating that the old-age pension was to be paid by individuals with the contribution of the SOEs. As for the healthcare, the pre-reform systems of "labor insurance" and "health services on public expense" entailed rising medical expenses and wastes of medical resources. After 1978, local governments began to carry out healthcare system reforms. In 1993, the central government set up the new contributory healthcare system in which both employers and employees would pay into. After 1998, all employers in cities and towns, including governmental and public agencies as well as major SOEs, participated in the so-called "basic medical care" system to access healthcare benefits. These changes in the early stage of China's economic and social reforms, while primarily aiming to free the SOEs from being the solo welfare provider and stimulate their market activities, contributed to China's social insurance programs, a socially funded welfare system that is connected to individual citizen not the hukou.

The detachment of hukou and housing systems was even prominent. Before the market reform, the allocation of housing was a major component of the planned economy as housing was de facto welfare provided by the state or employers [24]. In 1998, the housing allocation was almost totally stopped, along with the establishment of a system of housing provident fund, the development of the urban land market, and the construction of the commodity housing market. Consequently, both urban hukou holders and rural migrants can access commodity housing, purchase or rental, in the market.

In this way, as the state strips enterprise welfare when building a social welfare system to alleviate financial burdens, almost all dwellers of urban areas need to acquire their social services in a market-oriented manner. No social welfare is provided in the traditional mode of the pre-reform era. As a result, whether they acquire urban hukou or not, rural migrants are no longer marginalized in terms of the provision of social benefits, services, and welfare. China's effort of marketisation and a mobilized labor market caused the detachment of traditional social welfare benefits from the hukou system, therefore rural migrants' *luohu* in cities could no longer bring the same amount of practical benefits.

## 4. The Changing Value of Hukou

Rural migrants' behaviors, especially the intentions, of obtaining an urban hukou (i.e., *luohu*) in cities could be very much decided by the changed practical benefits and values associated with a certain category of hukou.

### 4.1. The Changing Rights of Rural Migrants after *Luohu*

The right to the city was not a notion being considered in pre-reform China; in fact, the function of the hukou system to control population mobility, particularly precluding rural residents from urban cities was exactly the opposite. The practice of excluding rural migrants from urban life in the history had remained for a long period of time, despite the



progressive reforms of economic and social welfare systems; obtaining an urban hukou, i.e., *luohu*, did not automatically grant rural migrants the equal right to various urban benefits.

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, it was difficult for rural migrants to be enrolled in the social welfare system, if not impossible, even after obtaining an urban hukou (with very few exceptions). For example, the earliest hukou reform document promulgated, “Notice on Farmers’ Settlement into Towns and Cities by the State Council”, stating that newly registered non-agricultural households were not eligible for low-price grain and oil supply. China’s welfare reforms at that time were primarily to meet the needs of market-driven economic reforms and to cover urban hukou employees, especially when many SOEs experienced layoffs and bankruptcy. It was until June 1997, when the State Council approved the “Notice on Pilot Reform Programs of Household Registration Administration in Small Townships and Cities and Improving Household Administration in Rural Areas”, by the Ministry of Public Security, that the *luohu* residents were allowed to join the urban social welfare system and enjoy the same benefits as local urban residents.

It is noted, while certain welfare benefits were detached from the hukou, the hukou-based education system had been untouched until 2000. The children of rural migrants cannot attend public schools other than their hukou-based schools, forcing rural migrant families to either leave their children behind or pay for their children’s primary education if not school-less. In 2001, 2003, and 2014, the State Council issued three documents to ensure the rights of full-time public primary and middle school education for all rural migrant children; local governments and public schools have the responsibility to enroll children of rural migrants and incorporate them into the classes with students from urban hukou families.

In addition to the right to education, in 2006, the State Council’s “Several Opinions of the State Council on Solving Problems of Migrant Workers” put forward proposals on promoting migrant workers’ right to social welfare protection in cities. It stated that “where conditions permit, migrant workers with stable employment should be directly included into basic old-age insurance, their employers should continue to pay for their old-age insurance”. The right to access urban welfare programs was further expanded to healthcare in 2014, so that “migrant workers who have stable labor relations with employers should be included in basic old-age insurance and basic medical insurance for urban employees” and “flexible employed migrant workers can participate in local urban residents’ basic medical insurance”. Accordingly, rural migrants who are formally employed in cities are included in the old-age and healthcare social insurance system, no difference for urban or rural hukou holders.

Even further, after putting forward the so-called “new-type urbanization” national strategy in 2014 [24], the central government accelerated the process of integrating urban and rural social welfare systems. Consequently, many local governments contributed efforts to integrate the minimal living protection systems for urban and rural residents and some developed cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Tianjin, as well as some major cities in Central and Western China such as Changsha and Chengdu, have unified urban and rural minimal living protection systems and standards. Given the growing integration of urban and rural welfare programs and the evolving larger national social security system, the gap of welfare benefits between urban and rural hukou holders has been further decreased. The notion of the right to the city for rural migrants has been emerged in the policy discourses.

#### *4.2. The Changing Values of Urban Hukou and Rural Hukou*

China’s national social welfare and social security system, established in 1998, after decades of reforms and development, now include employment-based so-called “five insurances and one fund” social insurance programs, that is, old-age insurance, basic medical insurance, unemployment insurance, maternity insurance, and work-related injury insurance, as well as the housing collective fund; all are contributed by both employees and employers. The formal employment status, instead of hukou, is the key. These social

insurance programs are closely linked to employment, so that the differences in social welfare benefits derive far less from hukou than from employment statuses.

At the beginning of the 21st century, new national programs were set up for rural residents who were not supposed to be in the labor market to be employed. The central government introduced policies in 2002 and 2009, respectively, to establish a new rural cooperative health care system and a new rural old-age insurance system. Until 2013, the number of participants in the new rural cooperative health care system reached about 900 million, covering 99% of the rural population. Additionally, the number of participants in new rural old-age insurance system reached 474 million. In addition, the rural minimal living protection system started its piloting in 1995 and, by the end of 2001, more than 80% of the country's counties and cities adopted this system and in 2007 the system became available nationwide. In 2015, the number of people enjoying a rural minimal living allowance was as many as 49.03 million. With the establishment of these national systems, a separated set of social welfare benefits are available for rural hukou holders, despite that some of them are working and living in cities.

Meanwhile, despite China's ongoing economic–social reforms and modernization efforts, rural development has remained a priority; a series of progress such as the Household Responsibility System instituted in 1978, state supports of agriculture and the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2005, have revolutionized agricultural production. In addition, farmers markets, government incentives for township and village enterprises, legitimized private household business, and state-promoted rural tourism and rural e-commerce have been booming across China's rural areas, leading to rural regeneration [25,26] and, consequently, increasing the value of rural hukou.

Though the gap, inequality and disparity still remain and are huge in many social and economic indicators for rural and urban residents, from a historical point of view, increased rights to urban benefits and the availability and eligibility of rural social insurance programs have led to the relative increase in the value of rural hukou. Additionally, the gap between urban and rural residents in benefits (i.e., the actual dollar value of these social welfare and social security programs) is constantly narrowing. In addition, since the beginning of this century, the importance attached and the investments into agriculture, rural areas and farmers, by the state are unprecedented. All such efforts have effectively raised the value of the rural hukou and reduced the imperativeness of rural migrants' intentions of *luohu*.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

This study examined the historical process of China's hukou system reform. Reviewing the three rounds of the hukou system reform in the past four decades identifies a mismatch between the expected effects of hukou system reform and the actual scale of rural migrants' *luohu*, that is, a mismatch between the government policy intention and rural migrants' behavior. The analysis of the dynamics of hukou system reform and other institutional changes indicates that, with the diminished rural–urban bordering effect in migration mobility, and the increasingly narrowed rural–urban gap in welfare benefits, living condition, and economic opportunities, the value and (dis)advantages of urban/rural hukou are perceived correspondingly. Thus, the decreased intention of rural migrants' *luohu* in cities has reflected such changed and changing perceptions.

Consequently, we come to the conclusion that, before reform and opening up, the hukou system was the fundamental system to restrict the flow of the population between urban and rural areas. After reform and opening up, with the reform, the role of the system in restricting population mobility is declining. However, this decline is due to the household registration reform itself on the one hand, but, more importantly, to the reform and changes in other aspects. Before the reform and opening up, the government hoped to limit population mobility through the household registered system, which was achieved. After reform and opening up, the government hopes to promote the settlement of a floating population in cities through the reform of the registered residence system and promote the



development of urbanization, but the effect is not significant. The reason is that the reform in other aspects has solved many problems faced by the rural migrants in urban life.

Unlike observations in the international migration study that the intention of obtaining a legal status has been consistently strong among undocumented/unauthorized immigrants, China's rural migrants working and living in the city did not respond positively toward government's offerings of *luohu*. When geographic mobilities become more feasible, affordable, and even desirable both socially and financially, the intentions to obtain a status in the destination place (either a city in China or a country of migration) is not only a rational individual choice but also subject to various conditions, involving the origin and destination place's provisions (e.g., duration of residence) and their administrative practices. For example, in the German context, EU citizens presented lower naturalization intentions than the non-EU Turkish citizens; except for the psychosocial factors (such as personal identity, emotional attachment, level of integration, etc.), the legal advantages associated with a German citizenship (e.g., right to vote, right of residence, and freedom to travel within EU) were the main consideration [27].

For China's rural migrants, the equal provision of social welfare in urban and rural areas laid a solid foundation for advancing the integration of urban and rural areas. A unified hukou system without the non-agricultural/urban and agricultural/rural divide becomes possible. An integrated social welfare and social security system is the prerequisite for the elimination of the differences between urban and rural hukou, especially for the migrants with close proximities to the city or in the same administrative area. However, for those rural migrants from afar, *luohu* is still by no means a simple issue. They not only need to find stable employment, but also need to overcome a series of obstacles in social relations, culture, and even mentality. The key point in promoting their integration into cities is not solely linked to the hukou system, but rather the designing of inclusive social policies.

China's hukou system today is no longer the key barrier of population mobility as it was in the pre-reform era. In terms of creating public policies, the resettlement of rural migrants in cities, or say people's urbanization, is not only linked with the issue of *luohu* but is also closely linked with other institutional reforms. Additionally, the reform of hukou is one of the needed steps toward a more inclusive and sustainable urban China, even though the preferences of migrants to hukou is by no means strong, as the "right to the city" [28] and the free mobility of the population are still the aim of this lasting and ongoing reform.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.T. and Q.X.; methodology, M.T.; validation, M.T., Q.X., Z.L. and Y.Y.; formal analysis, M.T.; investigation, Q.X.; resources, M.T.; writing—original draft preparation, M.T.; writing—review and editing, Z.L., Y.Y. and Q.X.; supervision, M.T.; project administration, M.T.; funding acquisition, M.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 41871129) and the Second Tibetan Plateau Scientific Expedition and Research Program (No. 2019QZKK0406).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Fan, C.C. Migration, Hukou, and the City. In *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies*; Yusuf, S., Saich, A., Eds.; The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2008; pp. 65–89.
2. Zuo, X.; Wang, F. Inside China's cities: Institutional barriers and opportunities for urban migrants. *Am. Econ. Rev.* **1999**, *89*, 276–280.
3. Wang, F. *Organizing Through Division and Exclusion: China's Hukou System*; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 2005.
4. Lu, Y.L. Does hukou still matter? The household registration system and its impact on social stratification and mobility in China. *Soc. Sci. China* **2008**, *29*, 56–75. [[CrossRef](#)]

5. Song, Y. What should economists know about the current Chinese hukou system? *China Econ. Rev.* **2014**, *29*, 200–212. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Afridi, F.; Li, S.X.; Ren, Y.F. Social identity and inequality: The impact of China's hukou system. *J. Public Econ.* **2015**, *123*, 17–29. [[CrossRef](#)]
7. Zhang, L.; Tao, L. Barriers to the acquisition of urban hukou in Chinese cities. *Environ. Plan. A* **2012**, *44*, 2883–2900. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Zhang, J.P.; Wang, R.; Lu, C. A quantitative analysis of Hukou reform in Chinese cities: 2000–2016. *Growth Change* **2019**, *50*, 201–221. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Chan, K.W.; Buckingham, W. Is China Abolishing the HuKou System? *China Q.* **2008**, *195*, 156–179.
10. Wu, L. Decentralization and hukou reforms in China. *Policy Soc.* **2013**, *32*, 33–42. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Young, J. *China's Hukou System: Markets, Migrants and Institutional Change*; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
12. Chan, K.W. The Household Registration System and Migrant Labor in China: Notes on a Debate. *Popul. Dev. Rev.* **2010**, *36*, 357. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Johnson, L. Bordering Shanghai: China's hukou system and processes of urban bordering. *Geoforum* **2017**, *80*, 93–102. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Romero, M. Crossing the immigration and race border: A critical race theory approach to immigration studies. *Contemp. Justice Rev.* **2008**, *11*, 23–37. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Bansak, C.; Pearlman, S. *The Impact of Legalizing Unauthorized Immigrants*; IZA World Labor: Bonn, Germany, 2021; p. 245. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Wu, F.; Zhang, F.; Webster, C. *Rural Migrants in Urban China*; Routledge: Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, 2013.
17. Wang, Z.; Zhang, F.; Wu, F. Intergroup neighboring in urban China: Implications for the social integration of migrants. *Urban Stud.* **2016**, *53*, 651–668. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Liu, Y.; Liu, Y.; Li, Z.; Chen, H. Growth of Rural Migrant Enclaves in Guangzhou, China: Human Agency, Everyday Practice and Social Mobility. *Urban Stud.* **2015**, *52*, 3086–3105. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Pai, H.-H. *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants*; Verso: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2012.
20. Roberts, K. The determinants of job choice by rural migrants in Shanghai. In *Urbanization and Social Welfare in China*; Routledge: London, UK, 2001; p. 12.
21. Bronfenbrenner, U. Ecological Systems Theory. In *Six Theory of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues*; Vasta, R., Ed.; Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.: London, UK, 1992; pp. 187–248.
22. Ostrom, E. A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social Ecological systems. *Science* **2009**, *325*, 419–422. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
23. Chan, K.W. *Cities with Invisible Walls*; Oxford University Press: Hong Kong, China, 1994.
24. Huang, Y.Q. The road to homeownership: A longitudinal analysis of tenure transition in urban China (1949–1994). *Int. J. Urban Reg. Res.* **2004**, *28*, 774. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Wang, Y. Institutional interaction and decision making in China's rural development. *J. Rural. Stud.* **2020**, *76*, 111–119. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Li, Y.; Xu, Q. Role of Social Capital and Social Enterprise in China's Poverty Relief. In *Contestations in Global Civil Society*; Oberoi, R., Halsall, J.P., Eds.; Emerald Publishing: Bingley, UK, 2022.
27. Steiner, I. Immigrants' Intentions—Leaning towards Remigration or Naturalization? In *Migrants and Expats: The Swiss Migration and Mobility Nexus*; Steiner, I., Wanner, P., Eds.; SAGE Open: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2019; pp. 293–314.
28. Harvey, D. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*; Verso: New York, NY, USA, 2012.