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Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

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Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

China's rise and its formidable economic growth over the last 30 years, averaging at 9.7 % p.a. (Reddy, 2007, p. 49), often eclipse some of the tensions that lurk at the very foundations of this success. However, Premier Wen Jiabao has expressed fears for the future development of China by rendering its rise as "unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable" (cited in Ho-Fung, 2009, p. 19). Contradictions and tensions, of which I will write more in the following paragraphs, seem to have begun emerging to the surface with the heightened occurrence of protests, primarily in the Chinese coastal area. Not only are we witnessing industrial actions demanding higher wages, more rights and better treatment of workers (Branigan, 2011), but there have also been confrontations between local governments and disenfranchised villagers over land appropriations, such as the one in the south-eastern village of Wukan in September and December 2011 (Pomfret and Buckley, 2011). These events are indicative of the growing inequality gap in China, where the Gini coefficient has risen from 0.33 in 1980 to 0.47 in the recent years (Fan & Sun, *Regional Inequality in China, 1978-2006*, 2008, p. 1). Moreover, these inequalities have tremendous impact on the Chinese economy and its social fabric. One of the most vulnerable, but yet crucial, social groups is migrant workforce that "floats" from rural to urban areas in search of generally low-paid jobs. They come from poor rural regions in the western part of China and their presence is essential for keeping wages in the export-oriented industry low, which is, ultimately, one of China's biggest comparative advantages.

Equalizing policies on the one hand - such as the *hukou* system of household registration, which was established under Mao's rule - and uneven development of Chinese regions have become increasingly entangled that the question of cause and effect between these two notions seems legitimate. One position asserts that in the post-Mao period social inequality became an unavoidable "natural product of development" (Fan, 1997, p. 622), something that is embedded in "objective laws of economics". While it may be true that Deng Xiaoping's opening up policy and the Ricardian division of labour exacerbated regional gaps, it is essential to emphasize that preconditions for this phenomenon were created by a regional policy with an opposite goal - namely, Mao's *hukou* system. This point of intersection between Mao's narrowing of disparities and Deng's intentional application of uneven development policy is the first contradiction I will be discussing. By echoing Neil Smith's observation: "It is not just a question of what capitalism does to geography but rather of what geography can do for capitalism" (Smith, 2010, p. 4), I would bluntly rephrase it into: "It's not just a question of what capitalism does to inequality but rather what inequality can do for capitalism". The second contradiction is derived from the first and, in principle, asserts that China's current biggest advantage also epitomizes one of the largest potential disruptions of its social fabric. In the midst of this contradiction is the "floating" migrant workforce and low wages they receive. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to demonstrate that economic regional disparities in China are systemic, and have been created by a peculiar interplay of opposite policies. Moreover, the structure of China's labour force reflects what W.A. Lewis called "labour market dualism" (1954), where one sector is industrial and urbanized, while the other part of the labour market subsists the first one. In



my opinion, these contradictions increase the probability of social crises that can disrupt China's stability and thus have implications for the entire world.

In the first part of the text, I will focus on the evolution of the so-called *hukou* system of household registration and its role in the urban-rural divide, which has deepened the marginalization of the Chinese surplus labour. This system of demographic control managed to outlive several regional policies. Established under Mao in the 1950s, it was an essential part of his redistributive policies, while following Deng Xiaoping's opening of China's economy, the effective role of *hukou* had changed. In the second part of this research paper, I will describe Deng's policy of uneven development that focused primarily on economic efficiency, in contrast to Mao's economic equity. I will also illustrate how mechanisms and theories used to justify post-Mao policies effectively exacerbated the urban bias which, ultimately, left some 150 million rural migrants (Kiely, 2010) "floating" between the village and the city, out of which some 115 million are without basic access to public health (Reddy, 2007, p. 64).

Finally, in the third part, which contains the crux of this essay, I will elaborate on the synthesis of the aforementioned policies, which results in contradictions - namely, *hukou* as a precondition for uneven development and, more recently, China's comparative advantage as a potential social disruption. In general, risking oversimplification for the sake of clarity, the structure of this essay can be followed through a linear development, starting from the cause, making of, and finally, effects of the Chinese uneven development.

Mao's *Hukou* System

Almost immediately after the civil war in 1949, Mao Zedong began re-balancing China's regional development and one of the main issues in the narrowing of disparities was the influx of rural migrants into cities in the east. *Hukou* (system of household registration) was one of the mechanisms created to equalize Chinese uneven development. Currently, it serves as a kind of internal passport, and it divides the Chinese society into agricultural and non-agricultural with each person's identity tied to his or her own household, i.e. one's place of birth. This identity is crucial for one's social well-being since direct access to social welfare benefits, health insurance, housing and education is closely tied to one's *hukou* identity. These services are provided by local governments, but only to residents with the valid *hukou*. Moreover, every Chinese rural resident had to be registered in a collective, usually based on a work unit, since collectives became the basis of rural identity and, thus, placing oneself outside a collective meant being outside the recognition of law. According to Cheng and Selden, legal social mobility in China has been almost exclusively downward, meaning from the city to the village (1994, p. 663). It could be argued that the system of household registration "created a marginalized group of migrant families who are not allowed to enjoy the same employment, housing, health and welfare benefits as the urban residents in China" (Wong, Ying, & Song, 2007, p. 37).

In the years prior to the official introduction of the *hukou*, there had been a widespread belief in the Chinese administration that cities like Shanghai or Guangdong cannot sustain a large number of inhabitants. Although the 1954 Constitution guaranteed freedom of residence and movement (Selden, 1979, p. 188), PRC's government became increasingly worried because



of the so-called “blind influx into cities” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 653) that had put government’s ability to maintain social order and peace to the test. According to Richard Kirby, from 1949 to 1956, urban areas saw increase in population of 34.6 million, out of which 19.8 million were rural migrants (Kirby, 1985, p. 107). Mao’s administration began addressing the rural-urban migration by sending hundreds of thousands of people back to the countryside and thus introducing a systemic urban bias that was perpetuated in the future. During this “preparatory period” of the *hukou* system, prior to 1955, migration was not strictly regulated and relocation was mainly voluntary. Nevertheless, the government used incentives like free transport, land distribution and state subsidies to draw migrants away from the cities (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 649). Reasons behind this approach lie in the fact that the Chinese government obliged itself to promote growth and prosperity in urban areas, which effectively meant to “provide jobs, subsidized food and housing for all urban residents” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 650). On the other hand, there was a presumption that rural areas are self-sufficient and can absorb almost unlimited supply of labour unemployable in the cities. Uncontrolled influx of rural migrants meant more problems with poverty in cities and more mouths to feed. Therefore, Mao resided to demographic “equalization”, although economic bias towards urban areas persisted.

Since the First Five-Year Plan, primarily focused on urban development and industrialization (Library of Congress Country Studies, 1987), gravitational pull of urban areas seemed to be too strong and this eventually caused policies aimed at stemming the flow of rural migration to fail. In fact, in the first half of the 1950s, the Chinese government under Mao tended to adjust urban-rural migration according to economic growth in the cities. At certain times, when there was shortage of labour in urban areas, number of migrants would increase, while on the other hand, the government would deport, for example, half million rural migrants, when harvests in villages were abundant, like in Shanghai in 1955 (Howe, 1971, p. 69). This implies that China’s uneven development had been addressed inconsistently in the first half of the 1950s and, ultimately, government’s guarantee of urban prosperity had been challenged.

Only when the State Council passed “The Directive Concerning Establishment of a Permanent System of Household Registration” in 1955, “a full-blown” *hukou* system was released (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 655). What does a “full-blow” *hukou* encompass? Firstly, in contrast to previous versions of the system, it “specified *detailed* procedures for individuals changing residence to apply for migration certificates” (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 656, emphasis added). It regulated and imposed strict rules on how to carry out intra-rural, intra-urban and rural-urban migrations. Food rationing also became tied to the *hukou* permit, which further complicated internal migrations. If a person wanted to receive food rations, social benefits or to get a job legally, he or she would have to go through a series of exhausting bureaucratic procedures of registration, de-registration and document collecting, which made it “almost impossible for an individual to move from one residence to another” (Wong, Ying, & Song, 2007, p. 37). As Cheng and Selden note, “by the mid-1950s...even lodging in hotels or inns required travel documents issued by a work unit or local government” (1994, p. 657). Railroads and key highways were filled with checkpoints from where illegal migrants would be returned back home (Tien, 1973, p. 95). These policies introduced a systemic differentiation between the city and the village, even though their original and nominal goal was the economic equity of the entire Chinese population.



Despite the decrease in migration numbers from 1955 to 1958, permeability of the *hukou* system became apparent with the economic boom in urban areas, which led to the shortage of workforce. By the late 1950s, many people started returning to cities in search of jobs and employers were more than happy to invite them. In many cases, migration certificate was not even required and, thus, some 38 million additional people moved to cities by autumn 1958 (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 665). Although predictions of that year's harvest were favourable, lack of peasants in the field, food rationing system, drought and, ultimately, bad weather conditions resulted in the loss of crops and eventually in the Great Chinese Famine that lasted from 1958 to 1961 and killed tens of millions of people (Xizhe, 1987, p. 650).

After this humanitarian disaster, the Chinese government decided to implement the *hukou* system on a full scale and more consistently, in order to regulate the population creating the urban-rural divide. Household registration system was maintained in a more or less the same form for the next two decades. Reforms carried out in the 1980s and 1990s devolved the control over *hukou* to local governments, but the general qualifications needed for legal migration were still “designed to serve the needs of the state” (Chan & Buckingham, 2008, p. 590). This meant that changes were made to ease lives of state officials, soldiers, students etc., but peasant migrants with little education still faced stark discrimination in the cities. Although there were some reforms of the *hukou* system to the date, its urban bias remains unresolved. It is still very complicated and expensive for rural migrants to change their *hukou*, which leaves them without social benefits, access to education or health insurance. These aspects played (and continue to play) an immense role in opening up of the Chinese economy from the late 1970s onwards, since it provided a ready platform for the implementation of Deng's ladder-step policy of development, of which I am going to elaborate in the next paragraph.

Deng's Uneven Development

In the year 1978, China's then-president Deng Xiaoping initiated his open-door policy and opened China to international trade, free market and economic efficiency. This system of state capitalism became known as the “capitalism with Chinese characteristics”. While Mao's equalizing experiments ended with catastrophic results, Deng saw opportunity for China's development in economic efficiency. This efficiency was to be achieved mainly through regional division of labour that was supposed to emphasize comparative advantages and the subsequent equalization of growth would come through the “trickle-down effect”. Seventh Five-Year Plan divided the country into three regions that were supposed to develop gradually, so it has become known as the “ladder-step theory” (Fan, 1997, p. 624). The Eastern region stretched from Liaoning to Guangxi province and state policy towards it focused on manufacturing industry and export-oriented growth, since Deng found that low wages and high productivity are crucial comparative advantages of the coastal area. Soon after the opening up of the economy, the so-called Special Economic Zones (SEZ) were established in the Eastern part of the country and they pulled in investors with tax-incentives, trade independence and other benefits. Central and Western regions are rich in natural resources and, therefore, their role was (and still is) to provide primary goods for factories in the East. Another role of these regions was to provide the so-called “unlimited” supply of labour when factories demanded it. In terms of the aforementioned Lewis model, dual labour markets were formed, where the countryside worked for the coastal area. This is where the *hukou* system steps in. A mixture of urban-biased investment in industry that created jobs,



and the inability of the Chinese migrant worker to receive proper and legal social status in the city have put a tremendous downward pressure on wages, which, in turn, brought in more investments, but at a high social price. This combination of policy effects, in my view, simultaneously promotes China's economic growth and the degradation of migrant workforce.

It has to be admitted that Deng's initial plan was indeed to bolster the coastal area and subsequently to spread the wealth to the west. His policy was pragmatic compared to Mao's unrealistic and demanding projects. Nevertheless, the ladder-step policy has yet to justify its existence, since "in the last two decades, rural per capita income has never exceeded 40 per cent of the urban level" (Ho-Fung, 2009, p. 13). In other words, "the benefits [of China's development] have not trickled down to assembly-line workers from largely rural backgrounds who make the exported goods" (Chan A., 2003, p. 4). Deng Xiaoping's policy essentially established a very strong urban bias that has been perpetuated to this day.

Of course, China's uneven development has numerous causes and it is the result of a complex interplay of circumstances, but nevertheless, there are several components that can be pointed out as crucial in explaining this phenomenon. I have already elaborated on one of them, namely the *hukou*, and the second one - the specialization of China's regions - had been exacerbated during the post-Mao export-led development. Parallel to the very obvious urban preference in investment strategy and greater fiscal and monetary autonomy for coastal areas (Fan, 1997, p. 625), there is another factor influencing China's uneven development - the so-called phenomenon of "scissors gap" in prices. There is a tendency in trade towards the establishment of unequal exchange between agricultural (primary) goods, which are mainly products of rural areas and manufactured goods. More concretely, during Deng's ladder-step approach, prices between these two types of goods diverged and, in effect, drained the wealth from rural areas into cities. According to Carl Riskin, "scissors gap' had even existed since the early days of the PRC...and in the late 1970s, [it] remained wide, and some even claimed it had widened" (1987, p. 27). As Cindy Fan notes: "some researchers argued that [this] distorted price structure is the key reason for uneven regional development" (1997, p. 627). The current Chinese administration tried to hinder the effects of unequal exchange by "abolishing agricultural taxes and raising government procurement prices for agricultural products" (Ho-Fung, 2009, p. 20) and it did successfully slow down the flow of migration, but they could not solve systemic imbalances.

After Deng's opening up and with the initiation of the "capitalism with the Chinese characteristics", provinces and cities gained unprecedented autonomy in decision-making. What is important for the Chinese uneven development is that the minimum wage level setting had been decentralization at the beginning of the 1990s (Chan A., 2003, p. 3). Thus, provinces competing among each other for investment began lowering minimum wages, which further deteriorated migrant positions in the coastal areas. As Ms. Fan correctly observes, unequal exchange and province competition had created the opposite of what the ladder-step policy intended to achieve. It resulted in "local protectionism and regional tensions rather than coordination among regions" (1997, p. 629).

I should rather qualify this point. It is indeed a fact that China managed to lift millions of people out of poverty, especially in the post-Mao period. Nevertheless, my aim in this essay is to indicate the frailty of its underpinning social relations and how it came about. This



being said, I now turn to the present status of China's development, namely in the light of growing tensions between urban and rural areas, the position of migrant workers and how these circumstances affect China's social fabric.

Deng Meets Mao

China's main comparative advantage in the world economy is its low wages. Cheap workforce enabled it to position itself at the top of export-oriented manufacturing countries and maintain a vast trading surplus. So far, I have tried to map preconditions that have led to the creation of the present contradictory structures in China's economy. In this section, I will combine the aforementioned policies in order to explain how *hukou's* discriminatory legacy and Deng's tradition of uneven development have led to the creation of some 150 million migrant workers without basic access to health care or education, who, in turn, create China's biggest competitive force – cheap labour. And it is precisely because of these policies that the low standard of living maintains a downward pressure on wages. At least, that has been the case over the last 20 years. The very same phenomenon that brought China tremendous growth could be the cause of its disintegration. Workers demanding higher wages and new rights could shake the present state of things, which could also have global repercussions.

Thus, historical combination and interplay of Mao's and Deng's policies, created a peculiar economic model of export-oriented growth whose rate of expansion has never been seen before. Moreover, the so-called Lewis model of dual economies seems to have developed in China, where one part of the country's economy produces and the other one supplies the "unlimited" labour. What is troubling is that, as some argue, a point in time "at which rural surplus labour has been exhausted" (the so-called Lewisian Turning Point) has arrived (Ho-Fung, 2009, p. 20), and it could have serious consequences for global production networks, as well as for China's internal development. Cheap labour attracted investment in the manufacturing sector, but wages, contrary to economic forecasts, remained low for very long time. This distorted China's economy, hindering the rise of its middle class and inducing low levels of domestic consumption. It has also contributed to the rising feeling of social disfranchisement, which has the potential to disrupt China's growth. In my opinion, Mao's *hukou* and Deng's uneven development can account for the contradiction described above.

There are many explanations of China's tremendous competitiveness. One position argues that China's wages are low and stagnant due to the undervalued currency (Renminbi or the Yuan). However, Ferguson and Schularick argue that not even a 50% appreciation of the Yuan would close the gap between wages of China and the rest of the world. For example, China's wages reach only 4% of the US wage level and even the countries in its neighbourhood cannot compete (Ferguson & Schularick, 2011, p. 11). On the other hand, as Ho-Fung asserts, it cannot be argued that this competitiveness is simply a result of "natural phenomenon" of the so-called "unlimited supply" of labour. Instead, he continues, "[the unlimited supply] is a consequence of the government's rural-agricultural policies which, intentionally or unintentionally, bankrupt the countryside and generate a continuous rural exodus" (2009, p. 12). Reasons for China's wage stagnation lie in the combination of several factors but, as I have already argued, the *hukou* system of household registration and the ladder-step policy in the post-Mao era could be considered as the main culprits. The latter



Research Paper 3/2012

Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

—
June 2012

created a permanent coastal bias in investment, while the “trickle down” effect for the Chinese peasants hardly happened. The former policy created a demographic control system which rendered some 150 million domestic job seekers as illegal, depriving them of almost any rights in cities where they look for (usually low-paid) jobs. For them, dilemma arises because life is harsh in the city, but it is even worse in the village.

As I have already noted, there have been certain adjustments of the *hukou* over the years, but it still remains highly discriminatory. For example, in today's China, since the *hukou* certificate is still connected to the household, rural migrants lack proper housing, education, health care and social welfare in urban areas (Wong, Ying, & Song, 2007, p. 34). Families quite often become separated and only one parent migrates to the city to work. Once they find a job, which is almost always low-paid, with “disconcerting working conditions” (Wong, Ying, & Song, 2007, p. 35), migrant workers face discrimination in the workplace by managers and frequently by urban residents, who perceive them as illegal immigrants. As I have already mentioned, they find themselves in a peculiar limbo, where they indeed earn more than in the countryside, but cannot ask for better conditions and wages, since their status is illegal. Wong *et al.* describe how newly arrived migrant workers are forced to pay a deposit in order to get a job, or in some cases, employers would ensure they do not lose them by paying their workers at the end of the year (2007, p. 34). Additionally, migrant workers have to save disproportionately more than urban residents, since they have to pay for their health expenses and children's education.

All these circumstances have created a very large and docile workforce, that boosts China's export engine. On the other hand, the very core of its competitiveness might be a ticking bomb. This is where the contradictory forces of Mao's and Deng's policies come into light. With the so-called Lewisian Turning Point on the horizon, bargaining power of the workforce is gradually increasing, and some 200 000 local protests in China in 2010 (Keliher & Wu, 2012) reflect this reality. Unless the Chinese government does something to rebalance its country's development, this could result in serious disruptions in China's export-oriented industries, social relations and, ultimately, in the world. Nevertheless, there are initiatives to deal with the problem, as was obvious from China's Twelfth Five-Year Plan, which focuses on topics such as affordable housing, education and reducing disparities (China's 12th Five Year Plan: Overview). Whether it will succeed in managing the aforementioned contradiction remains to be seen. There are indications that the recent stimulus package provided to boost growth was not, in fact, dealing sufficiently with the urban-rural divide. Hung writes that most of the stimulus went into the urban-oriented growth promotion through fixed assets, which simply increases China's overcapacity (2009, p. 22). Only 20% of the stimulus “was allocated to social spending” to increase consumption (2009, p. 22). As I have tried to outline in this essay, the point is that China's growth is peculiarly fuelled by tensions, which can derail its development. If more workers start asking for higher wages and better work conditions and, in the meantime, the Chinese government misses an opportunity to smoothen the uneven development, it could certainly shake Communist Party's legitimacy, which is currently based solely on providing economic growth and creating jobs.



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Affairs

Research Paper 3/2012

Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

—
June 2012

Conclusion

In conclusion, what can be said of China's migrant workers and their role? Are the contradictions created by different development policies too complex to resolve smoothly and gradually? I have tried to map the genesis of an important part of China's economic success, namely, its migrant workforce. Some 150 million people are nowadays discriminated by the system of household registration and remain trapped between the countryside and the city. At the same time, these circumstances enable China to increase its global competitiveness and, possibly, to cut the branch it is sitting on. An increasing number of protests in the recent times and higher bargaining power of workers could cause major shifts in the Chinese manufacturing. Companies could move to other countries or, perhaps, use the newly built infrastructure to move inlands. Another option for China is to shift up the chain of value into more value-added sectors. It seems that the Chinese government is aware of these problems and it addresses them in its Twelfth Five-Year Plan. Nevertheless, the question of whether the effects of Mao-Deng contradictions could be resolved in time remains. It can certainly be said, though, that China is at the crossroads.



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Research Paper 3/2012

Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

June 2012

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Research Paper 3/2012

Deng Meets Mao: Contradictions of China's Uneven Development

—
June 2012

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