
The Hukou System

Chinese Modernization Pattern: Tradition & modernity

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*"You are not individualists in China.
Your society is itself the creation
of your communal soul (Das, 63-64)*

Abstract

The Chinese modernization is common characterized as transitional. The essence of it is that while Chinese cultures are changing and adapting to new modern times, the relative link and relation between cultures has not changed much in the past decades. Traditional or previous habits have not fully replaced by new one, on the contrary, sometimes a new concepts have become complementary of the older. As result, traditional values and modern social forces are shaping contemporary Chinese society.

Chinese modernization is embedded in a complex interplay between social, economic and political elements. A paradoxical process that is driving by a number of factors, including industrialization without urbanization, government institutions with entrepreneurial–corporate bias, an incipient society, a market & planned economy and modern society with agrarian features. Within this interesting puzzle of phenomenon that Chinese modernization presented, the Hukou plays a relevant role as the reflexion of the interplay of traditional values in the existing modernization process.

The aim in this paper is to show that the socio phenomena of both social continuity and social change in contemporary Chinese can be found in a number of different ways and Hukou is one of the most representative case of this modernization pattern. In particular three important concepts -the history, relation-based society concept and state-civilization notion- should be included in the analysis of the Hukou system to better understanding its prevalence and important role in today's China.

Key words: *culture, Hukou System, history, civilization*

The Hukou System

Hukou¹ is a common name use in China for the household registration system. It is a resident permit given by the local government. Every person should register in a household registration book, which defines their status as local or migrant and agricultural and non-agricultural. Different from the past, the Hukou does not restrict the free movement of people, but it still has an important implication in provision of social welfare. Nowadays, the importance of Hukou is that it determinants the rights and provision of public service and welfare programs, such as children education, medical care, housing subsidies, social security coverage, and so on (Chan and Zhang, 1999). Access to these public welfare are limited to local urban Hukou holders, while temporary rural migrant workers, since they do not hold local Hukou, are not entitled to these subsidized public services.

After years of reforms, city governments are now entitled to define the regulations for the Hukou within their jurisdiction which have led to considerable decentralization of Hukou administration and different treatments among Chinese citizens. In addition, these reforms have also brought several ways for getting a “local Hukou” that allow migrants enjoy the same benefits and service that local urban residents enjoy. Possible channels for rural–urban Hukou conversion include: recruitment by state owned enterprises, enrollment in higher education institutions, professionals, land acquisition by government, wealthy (investors and property buyers) (Chan and Zhang, 1999). In the case of Shanghai the city government has adopted a restrictive local residence system. The so called Shanghai’s residence card grantees mostly those who are very rich (purchase apartment in the market or make large investments to open a company) or highly educated (Y.F. Chen, 2009).

All these requirements are beyond the reach for the majority of rural migrants which prevent them from accessing various forms of social welfare benefits. For instance, Wang

¹ According to the World Bank report, Hukou can function in parallel as similar systems do in Japan (World Bank, 2014).

and Holland (2011) found that nearly 40% of the migrant children in Shanghai were barred from enjoying a public education due to inequitable educational opportunities and strict admission requirements. For migrants who are not covered by the employment-based social insurance programs, they can only participate in social insurance programs in their own Hukou locations, but cannot have access to social insurance programs in their migration destinations. They are also segregated out of the subsidized housing market (Huang, 2003). According to the Li et al. (2010), the Shanghai's residence card system, which has been introduced in 10 other Chinese cities, will gradually be adopted nationwide².

Although there have been numerous reforms, the Hukou system still plays a large role in Chinese people's lives, leading the citizenship in the Chinese society context in a interlocked situation with a division and discrepancies between the rural and urban population.

Several studies have investigated Hukou system from different perspective. The previous literature on Hukou has largely focused on its role as institutional obstacle in the integration of urban migrants (Jiang et al., 2012), its role in the social exclusion of rural-urban migrant (Limei et al., 2010), and of labor market discrimination (Jiang, Lu, & Sato, 2012; Lu & Chen, 2006). Some studies have examined the impact of the Hukou on the access of rural-migrant to the housing (Li et al., 2015), social welfare programs (Song, 2014) and the social identity and inequality of migrants (Afridi et al., 2015 and Li Wei, 2013). Other studies have investigated its extensive reform process (Wang, 2015 and Ren, 2015).

Although almost all of the studies mentioned above provide an extensive explanation to the characteristics of the Hukou system; however, they still cannot provide a fully picture of the role of the Hukou in the context of the Chinese modernization. Even though the reforms of the Hukou have brought benefits to some migrants, there are still some other factors that act as barriers to reform the Hukou system.

In the Chinese modernization no other phenomenon has been played a crucial role more evident than the Hukou system. However, its evolution and reform takes place in a particular modernization pattern, in which the continuity of traditional practices and modern forces are shaping all socio-economic phenomenon in the society. So what are – other cultural factors that could explain the difficulty in reforming the Hukou system?

² For instance, taking Beijing as an example, one channel to obtain a Beijing Hukou is through an investment in Beijing over five hundred thousand dollars (Cai, 2011).

To fill such knowledge gap and to fully understand the role of Hukou, this paper analyses the Hukou as a socio-economic phenomenon that represent the interaction between traditional values and the emergence of modern practices. By a comprehensive literature survey, this paper includes three important factors that should be integrated into the analysis of Hukou within the Chinese modernization context: the history, Chinese relation-based society characteristic and the nature of the Chinese state as a Civilization-State.

Three determinant factors

This paper suggests three levels of understanding of the Chinese Hukou: history, relation-based society concept and Civilization-State notion. The combination of the above concepts provides a better understanding of the prevalence of Hukou system.

1. Important role of the History

The majority of studies have analyzed the Hukou System from the instauration of the People's Republic of China, this means from 1949. In this sense, most of these studies have shown that the Hukou system was result of the social control and stratification implemented by the Communist Party of China (CCP). However, a closer look at the history reveals that the origins of the Hukou back to the imperial regimes³ (Dutton, 1992). Contrary to other works on this topic, the foundation of the Hukou is not a communism creation; in fact during the ancient times the dynasties were adopting the so called "*baojia* system"-collectively & mutual responsibility- a system which is back to the 11th century used to organize families into units and was implemented by different dynasties, although the CCP institutionalized it. In its original concept, the *baojia* system was a community-based system of law enforcement and civil control with one *jia* consisting of ten families and ten *jia* (or one hundred families) making a *bao* (Xiaowei, 2011).

Table 1 shows, among different Chinese imperial dynasties, the role of the *baojia* system and its evolution into Hukou. In general, the table shows that a basic social organization in imperial times was implemented as a system of social registration to collect information

³ See Dutton, (1992); Xuefei Ren, (2013); Van Der Sprenkel, Sybille (1997); and Young (2013).

about household, social control, stratification and, at the beginning, for taxation purposes⁴. From the Xia system, through different dynasties and the Republic of China (ROC) to the current modern Chinese government, there has been always a variant of methods of social control by household registration (to collect information about population, social organization and for land administration).

Closely related to the concept of this social organization, is that of “family and “community”. Traditional Chinese grassroots society was composed of semi-autonomous local units, each of which was structured around the Kinship system as its core, in which the tradition of a sense of community by loyalties to native place, family and status group was the common norm (Xiaowei, 2011). Even though the imperial formal bureaucratic power was undeniable, traditional agrarian society was governed by high level of autonomy-indigenous leadership based on the solidarity groups of kinship, and social control was based upon the collective principles of joint-responsibility and mutual surveillance. This both social and political structure therefore highlight that the *baojia* system - and consequence evolution into Hukou - was a composition of a traditional social grassroots and a political power.

The history matters to the analysis of Hukou system. As shown earlier, the Hukou has been historically linked to a largely social political tradition formed during the imperial China and it evolved to become a thoroughly institutionalized and deeply legitimized tradition.

It was till 1958 when the Hukou system was fully institutionalized as an administrative mechanism to restrict population movement between cities and rural areas. There have been significant reforms in the Hukou since its early institutionalization (Kam & Buckingham, 2008; and Wang, 2015). However, despite of the numerous reforms Hukou’s regulations are still in force and still influence many social aspects in China, especially the provision of welfare benefits (housing, employment, public medical insurance, education and wages)⁵.

⁴ Some studies have argued the difference between *lijia* and *baojia* system. Others scholars have claimed that the *lijia* system was created to registered households in group for tax purposes. However, *baojia* system its original concept involved not only social registration but taxation matters as well. In fact both systems were confused in practice, filled with inaccuracies information and declined through the course and the end of the Qing dynasty (mainly because the collapse of the dynasty). See Van Der Sprenkel, Sybille (1997) and Bodde, (1986).

⁵ The new government strategy launched in 2014 “Unified Urban-Rural Household Registration System” aims to allow 100 million rural workers and other permanent residents settle in towns and cities by 2020 (Wang, 2015). This means that the government attempts to provide an equal access to urban social welfare for migrant workers.

2. *Second, Relation-based Society*

An important feature of China and Chinese society is that the foundation of the society is neither individual based nor society-based but rather relationship-based (King, 1991). What is central to Chinese society is the quality of human relationship. In Fei's words, "Chinese society was constructed according to a differential mode of association" (Fei, 1992:62-3). There are no fixed groups with the defined memberships, but rather, myriads of overlapping networks of relationships. This considerable emphasis on the primacy of social relationships has important impact of their identification in the society. As "collective society", the "individual" self is often seen as immersed in and defined by its social relationship of the group (family).

Two aspects of this principle may be stressed here. In the first place it emphasizes a clear definition of each individual's duties and responsibilities. Since the morality of differential relationships is particularistic, one's obligations to others depend on the specific nature of the relationship and the network in which it is embedded. Second it encourages a rigorous obedience and respect to the authority for the stability and order of the group.

Thus, the relation-oriented tradition not only implies a simple acceptance of the hierarchic authority and her/his role and status in the society, but the recognition that through the principle obedience and respect to the authority the stability of the group can be ensure. As Stockman remarked, "If everyone held to the expectations associated with their status, social stability and harmony would be maintained, and the order of the cosmos would prevail" (Stockman, 2000: 71). These principles correspond closely to the value of many Chinese people of avoid confrontations in order to keep harmony (Poch de Feliu, 2010)⁶.

Confucian principles of the relation and family must be seen as an ideological structure deliberately to preserve the harmony of an unequal society. However, the concern here is to understand not just the explicit tradition values of a society, but also the continuities as well as changes of the role of these principles in the wider social framework.

⁶ In fact, Chinese dialectics does not assume the non-existence of conflict. Rather they take conflict as representing progressive steps toward harmony, in which the solutions depend on a universally-accepted world system rather than on coercive force.

This value of relations, collective, duties and obedience are not only deeply rooted and pervasive in the Chinese culture and play an important role in Chinese person perceptions, identities and behaviour, but they could also be a disincentive factor for encourage changes or reforming a Hukou system.

3. *Third, Civilization-State*

Another important traditional value affecting the individuals is the notion of China as Civilization–*State*. Chinese civilization is an uninterrupted civilization that extended from the first day of its formation to the modern era. Its perseverance it is unique characteristics of lack of separation or differentiation between the sacred and secular realms, between state itself and institutions. By comparison with the development of state-notion in western societies, Chinese society did not experience the emergence of Nation-State.

While China is being considered as a Corporative State which it knows by the dominance of the state over society, this conception however does not apply well in a country with long history as a civilization-state. The notion of China as a civilization-state can be seen in the Lucian Pye study. In his work of China Civilization, Pye shows the necessity for use the notion of “civilization-state” rather than a “nation-state”. In Pye’s words, “China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations, China is a civilization pretending to be a state” (Pye, 1990).

The concept of civilization-state leads to the Chinese *Tianxia* system 天下 (Zhou Dynasty - 1046-256 BC). Translated as “all-under-heaven”, it dates back to ancient times. Zhao refers to the Tianxia family system as “genuine, responsible system for the whole world rather than just for nation-states” (Zhao, 2005: 66-67).

The description of the *Tianxia* from the ancient texts indicates an unique but holistic concept that envisage a universal system inclusive of all nations, and a world of, and for all peoples. The central features of China as a civilization-state can be characterized a “Centre-China” or “Home-World” where the connectivity of everything in the universe and the complexity of relations between various actors are in dynamic process.

Here two specific aspects of the *Tianxia* system came into consideration. The first, as a complex institutional structure, it embraces an approach where the nature of the state is partly defined by its relation to society and vice versa. In ancient China, there was not

separation of powers, no separated legislative or judicial instances and there was not institutional differentiation of the economy and the policy (Stockman, 2000). The lack of differentiation between sacred and secular realms, or even the absence of autonomy of cultural activities from the state, shows an inclusive system that denies the dichotomy of separation between the self and the other. Utilizing this approach, it is possible to argue that in Chinese State and society are in fact two things in one⁷. The two forces oppose and complement one another simultaneously. They cannot be separated but must be considered as a whole. This concept of completeness make difficult to identify the (blurred) line separating State from society. As Qin Yaqing “for a system called all-under-heaven, everywhere and everyone is within rather than without, so that only degrees of closeness exist” (Qin, 2012: 72). This paper argues that China's civilization- state concept, and its traditional legacies have affected popular perceptions of certain dependence on the state, have not incentives to perpetuate the social status quo and disincentives to embrace changes.

The other stemmed from the relation-based aforementioned concept. A basic feature of the civilization-state in *Tianxia* system is its emphasis of the role of the family⁸. In the Chinese society, since ancient times, family was the centre and prototype of social relationships, and the whole society was conceived as an enlarged family (Xia, 2014)⁹. This *family-relation* concept is related to the *relation-society* concept mentioned above. Family thus is seen by Chinese as the basic and most important unit of society in the society, in which the principles used within a family also apply for all social groupings, including the state and the world as a whole; thus in traditional Chinese thinking, “relations of relations” (relation among family) include relation between humans, between social groups, and between individual and state.

Seen from this perspective, it can be argued that the Chinese *Tianxia* system refers to a whole system which includes a dynamic interaction of four important elements:

⁷ Mention should be made about the Chinese term for state is: “guo-jia” (国家). It is a combination of “guo” (国-nation) and “jia” (家-family), denoting the strong sense of this paternal and consensual relationship between family and state.

⁸ China is that its civil society was largely self-governed. the modernization argument is in line with the

⁹ The family was also a fundamental principle stated by Confucius. He argued that decent politics and good governance should be based upon family ties. According to Confucius, the ideal type of family represents a living space where all calculation of self-interest is minimal, and where the atmosphere is completely harmonious, and thereby favourable for the unconditional development of cooperation, caring, and responsibility between the different members (Dirlik, 1995).

tradition & culture, state, relations and family. It allows to have a view of how these elements shape the relation between state and society and how the nature of the state is partly defined by its relation to society.

There is a considerable body of work that emphasizes the critical role of the Chinese state over society, in which the state has effectively co-opted new economic groups and regulated the market to favor its continued control, thereby causing dependence of society on the state (Guo, 2000). While this argument describes the relation between state and society from the political point of view, the problem with applying the 'state – centered' approach to such relationships is that the reality is so one-sided. It does not take into account the essential features of a civilization-state, which combines a complex and constant interplay between the public and private, the local and global and the synergy between the political and economy. Nor does it include the structural links between state and society (mutual identification) formed through traditional practices.

The civilization-state also coincides with the role of the Chinese state itself. Given that the sense of belonging to the culture, tradition, history, language and custom are deeply rooted in Chinese people, the state enjoys much greater natural authority, legitimacy and respect, as it is seen by the Chinese as the guardian, custodian and embodiment of their civilization. The legitimacy of the state, therefore, lies deep in Chinese civilizational tradition.

This analysis provides an opportunity to understand the cultural concept of Chinese as civilization-state on Chinese Hukou. Use of Chinese civilization-state concept may provide more analysis to fully understand how cultural and civilizational matters in the existence of Hukou in Chinese society.

Is it contradiction or process?

The current Hukou has undergone numerous studies over the past 30 years. Unlike what many scholars believe, Hukou is no longer of fundamental importance in limiting migrant workers' labor mobility. However it still poses severe restrictions on the provision of welfare system to migrant workers, such as housing, employment, public medical insurance, education and wages. It can be argued that the existence of the Hukou could be considered as an institutional exclusion against mainly rural migrants, or even the means by employers

and companies – in conjunction with the government- are making instrumental use of the cheap labor to ensure profitable returns to capital investment in China's economy¹⁰.

In a more comprehensive view of Hukou, other factors as the history, civilization-state and relation based society – continued to have a huge impact on the reform of Hukou system. The Chinese state is completely different from how the state (state-nation) is perceived in Western societies. Thus China needs to be understood in its own terms. This article adds three concepts as a holistic approach aim to broaden understanding the Hukou System in China. All these factors have formed a traditional rationale and deep cultural acceptance of certain division and inequality between urban residents and the rural migrants. A brief review on the history, relation-based society and Chinese civilization-state concept also help explain the rationale for understanding that China was, and still remains, in possession of the essential features of a civilization-state.

This article is not justifying the Hukou in China, which is inequitable in many ways. Rather, this work arguing the Hukou is the result of some historical practices and values originated from ancient time as it can be seen in the *baojia* System, and the relation based-society concept in which the sense of belonging to a group implies duties, responsibilities, acceptance of hierarchies and the obedience to norms; all within the *Tianxia* system that emphasises the connectivity of everything in the universe and the complexity of relations between various actors therein, as the relation between state and society.

The relevance of this approach to Hukou is that it provides a picture of the continuities and changes in contemporary Chinese modernization. As many social phenomena in Chinese society, the Hukou also represent the complex, dynamic, and non-uniform process in which while some traditional values continue to have a huge impact on the socio-economic practice, others have been changed.

Thus, it is not surprising that while China place a premium on individuals' social capital within their group of friends, relatives and close associates (relations), it had a weakly develop the notion of the group, the organization, and of society as a whole, that might enable mobilization for the pursuit of collective societal goals. As Young argues, "inequality

¹⁰ Another important analysis is provided by Shaohua. In his work, it is the social exclusion and market resources that severely limit migrant workers' life chances, and not the Hukou itself. Shaohua concludes that the "Hukou-based legal exclusion has less impact on migrant workers when they strive to find a better job, move up the social ladder, and secure opportunities to settle in the city" (Shaohua, 2011: 277).

between urban residents and the people of the countryside [Hukou] was always legally and culturally accepted (Young, 2013:55). This “paradox” provides a reason to explain the “contradictories” forces facing at the moment to reform or abolish the Hukou System.

In sum, given the nature of Chinese civilization, its traditional values and practices are still very relevant in present Chinese society, and these values are shaping the emergence of new ideas in times of dramatic change. The so-called "modernization" which means a break with tradition has taken different pattern in China. It may be just the natural process of one Civilization-state which implies the constant *interaction* of two *different* forces (tradition and modernity) which cannot be reduced to either, but it is a *co-existence*, or yin and yang, making a synergy through a harmonising *process*.

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Table 1 Chinese Hukou Form

<i>Time</i>	<i>Hukou Form</i>
Xia Dynasty	Used a household registration to record and population census.
Shang Dynasty	Developed its own record of household.
Western Zhou	Primitive forms of Hukou.
Qin Dynasty	Adoption of the "Baojia System" as a registration system for taxation administration.
Han Dynasty	Used "Baojia System" for taxation & conscription. Recorded information about families without specific information about the people in the household.
Southern Dynasties	Used a type of registration based on their location.
Northern Zhou Dynasty	Used a type of registration based on their location, birthplace and native towns.
Southern Song Dynasty	Used a type of registration based on their location.
Sui & Tang Dynasty	Fully incorporated the Hukou System.
	Peasants were allowed to move and migrate.
	Categorized and treated people differently.

	Land-based Hukou provision.
	Taxes
Yuan Dynasty	Used the “Baojia System” to control people.
	People were treated differently according to the ethnicity and profession.
Ming Dynasty	Decreased the economy importance of Hukou, no longer used as taxation function.
	Different types of Hukou: military, peasants, merchants and handcraft.
* Qing Dynasty	Hukou lost its registration as tax functions.
	Attempted to legalize the imperial Hukou with a modern legislature “Qing Hukou law”, but it did not take place due to the collapse of the Dynasty.
	Data collection and social control were the main functions of “Baojia System” which required a mandatory registration.
	Population had freedom of internal migration.
* * Republic of China	Hukou was adopted for political tools.
	Hukou system implementation was weak due to political and financial conditions.
	It was less restrict of internal migration.
People's Republic of China	50's early version provided citizen the right to free internal migration.
	At the beginning of the new government Hukou was used as a military strategy, social control and for collecting information (stabilization for the regime).
	Others Hukou System task were: resource allocation, agriculture collection, rural-urban division, social control, demographic and capital formulation.
	1958: Formal Institutionalization of the Hukou System by PRC.
	1957-1959: Rural population had substantial freedom of migration, but massive increase of population worried CCP for the food ration to the edge of collapse and a consequence destabilization of the new regime.
	1963: Between twenty six to twenty eight million urban Hukou holders were relocated from the cities to their former villages.
	Cultural Revolution 1966-76: Many Hukou records were destroyed and massive free movement took place.
	1968-69 Hukou System was restored and many reforms took place since then.

Source: Author elaboration based on: (Young, 2013), (Van Der Sprenkel, Sybille, 1997), and (Bodde, 1986).

*Previous and after the collapse of the Qing dynasty and consequent end of imperial China was marked by a period of economic and political instability.

** Period of political instability.
