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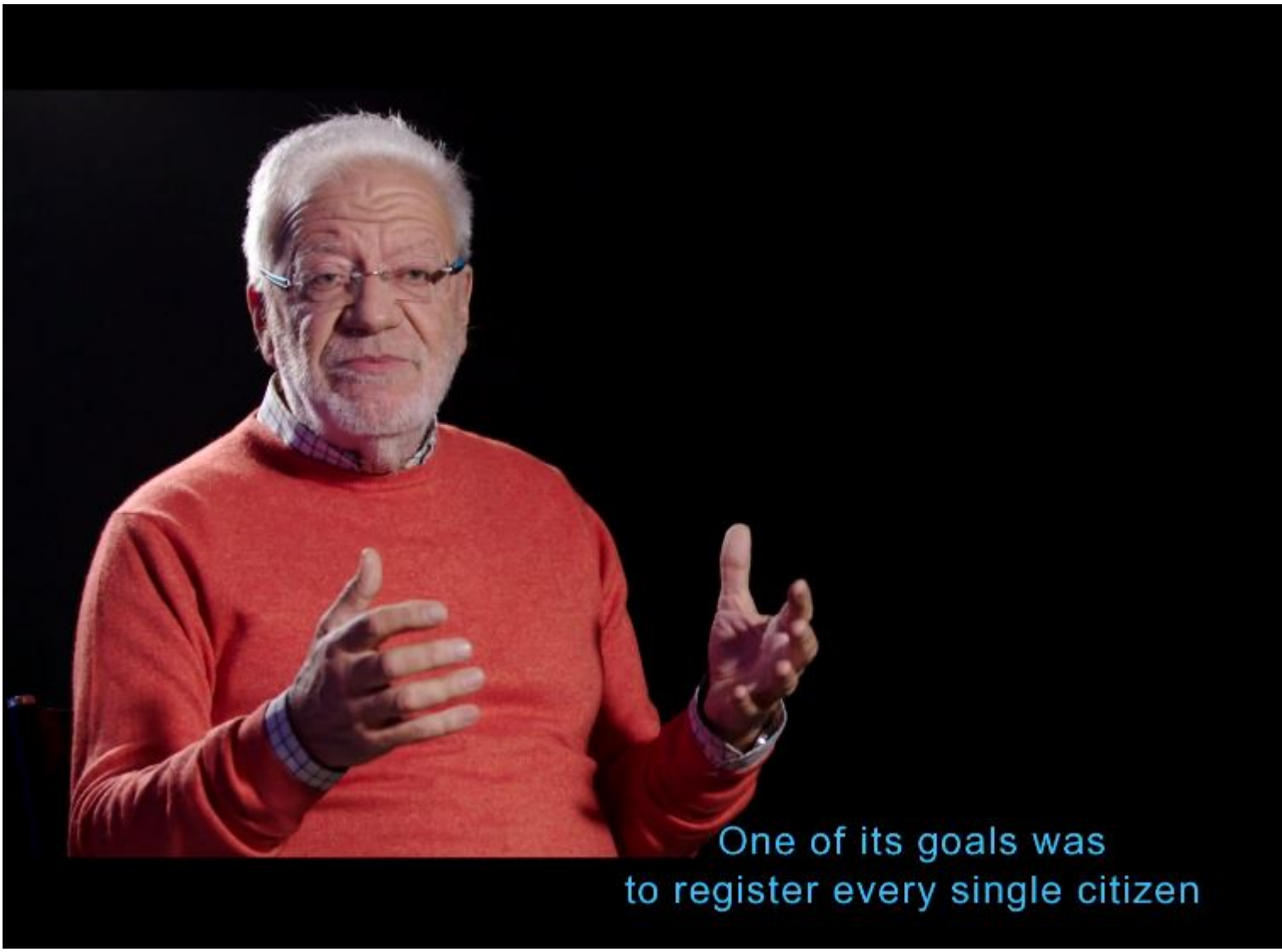
Mobility in China from 1949 to the present day

Submitted by Forum Vies Mobiles on Wed, 11/13/2019 - 12:46

Mots clés

China; history; Asia

Visuel



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For the Chinese Communist Party that came to power in October 1949, mobility was something to worry about. One of its goals was to register every single citizen according to the social classes to which they belonged. To do so, though, they couldn't allow people to move too much. Mobility seemed a bit of a threat, so they had to try to stop it, because they implemented the Agrarian Reform Law in 1951 throughout the country. First of all, to curb people's movements, the point was to label people: they had to go home so that they could get their land. And to some extent, many were very happy to go home, to finally enjoy the property they had been promised. There was therefore a sort of spontaneous movement back to the villages.

Gradually, a system was put in place, that would later be generalized, but which was initially intended for landowners, class enemies and counter-revolutionary elements: these were the first hukou. The hukou is a kind of residence booklet that says: "You were born in this place, so you are a resident of this village, and you belong to this social class." In the beginning, it was simple: the only social classes that had to have a hukou were the enemy classes. You were a landowner and your hukou was in Lijiacun, a village of Li in the province of Shanxi and you had to stay there. When you moved around, you'd be asked to show your hukou - this residence booklet. You needed it even just to travel to another canton. Of course, if you wanted to go and work in a factory, you'd need to get a letter from the village chief, or the representative of the village's party committee, or the commune, or the production team, so that you could get a job. And you'd need a job, because only if you had a job in a particular city - in the provincial capital for example - would you be allowed to go there. But not necessarily with your wife or children.

In the early years of the regime, until 1958, this hukou was reserved for hostile classes. It was a way to control access to the villages. China wasn't developed at the time, but in the cities, there were still buses and, for rich people, cars. Some cars were immediately confiscated by the party leaders: in order to serve the people, they needed the ability to travel, so they took the cars from the rich. But because in the early years they needed the bourgeoisie on their side, they allowed buses, trucks, and of course everything in the countryside: carts, wheelbarrows, etc. I was in China

in 1976: there were still many horse carts in the cities.

China also had many trains. There were 39,000 km of railway lines in 1949, about as much as France had in the 1960s - even though China is about twenty times larger than France. People could take the train, but they needed to have certain permits.

Regarding cities, the Communist Part tried to turn what it regarded as parasitic cities (cities of sumptuous consumption and nightclubs such as Shanghai) into productive cities. To do this, they needed to have workers, and therefore they needed housing for them. This was the period of planning: between 1953 and 1958, China implemented its first five-year plan inspired by the Soviet Union. They created a type of factory, the danwei, which was surrounded by housing for the workers and shops for their supplies. At that time, there was a desire to create a working class. The Communist Party represented the working class that ran the country, but that working class really represented only 5% of the population. How were they going to create it? By bringing peasants into the cities to work in factories. They therefore had to develop the centers. Workers in a danwei would want for nothing, they would not need to leave the danwei: all leisure activities, such as the cinema, were concentrated there. That was precisely the communist dream: people would have work, they wouldn’t need to waste time travelling, they would have their home, their school where they could take the children, the nursery right next door... It was a very practical vision, a dream of modernity that allowed for total control.

In the aftermath of the disastrous Great Leap Forward policy starting in 1958, when 20 million peasants came to work in the cities, it was harder to control them and many ended up begging on the streets because of famine. At that point, they ended up with people wandering around in all directions: this was a great worry to the Party and so they generalized the hukou system.

What was once reserved for landowners and class enemies became widespread, including the pingxia zhongnong the poor and averagely-poor peasants. Everyone received the same kind of housing. The generalization of hukou signaled the end of mobility for most of the rural population – which, it is worth remembering, represented between 80 and 85% of China’s total population at that time. And when you want to repress or silence city dwellers, as in 1957 for example, or during the Cultural Revolution, what do you do? You send them to the countryside and permanently transfer their hukou, so that they will never be able to return to the city. It’s a strategy of internal exile.

Obviously, the Cultural Revolution was a paradoxical moment: it was a time when everything I have described remained in place and was extremely strong. But at the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution, there was a call from Mao to create Red Guards. He told them: “You have to engage in a great exchange of experiences.” How was this to be done? Simple: make transport free for the Red Guards, so they could share their experiences and develop their revolutionary consciousness. People born in 1949 had never left their birthplace. This was a unique opportunity.

There were various solutions: go to other big cities to view their experiences and what can be done to develop the Revolution, or for others, go and do some tourism. They went by truck, by train, by car, by ox cart, by foot... With a portrait of Chairman Mao and a big red flag, everyone together, boys and girls, they swarmed through the trains. People would get in through the windows, climb onto the roofs. It was really like a whole nation on the move. This sort of frustration with mobility would later explode, involving every possible means of transport. It wouldn’t last long, however - only from about July to September 1966 - and only people of the correct social origin were accepted into the Red Guards.

After Mao’s death, China had to deal with the fact that the economy was stagnating. The Chinese leaders looked around and saw that, despite what everyone was saying about China being the Mecca of World Revolution, a place where everything was great, they knew full well that things were actually really bad. From then on, the Chinese leaders, faced with economic stagnation, decided to take the bull by the horns and, between 1978 and 1982, China witnessed a de facto decollectivization of agricultural land. Even if farmers weren’t granted ownership, they were given land under contract, shared land. More importantly, they were allowed to sell their products on the market. At first, not cereals, but vegetables and fruits, everything we call secondary foods. And given that the markets weren’t in the villages, in order to go and sell their products, they had to go into the towns and cities. They still had the hukou of course, but they’d have to haul their products around on market day, and then start selling them in the provincial capital because they could earn more. Then the authorities launched the special economic zones and tried to develop the industry. For this, they opened up to foreign capital, initially mainly from Hong Kong, with investors coming to set up factories that then needed workers. But the hukou was still in place, which meant the peasants weren’t supposed to move. Who was going to come to Shenzhen? Well, the authorities were just going to turn a blind eye. This was called “mangliu” (an old term that already existed under the Empire) which

means “to move blindly.” “Mang-” means “blind” and “-liu” means “to flow” – flowing blindly. It is also reminiscent of the inverted term “liomang,” which means “gangster.” So, these “mangliu” people were associated with this idea of danger, but at the same time they were needed, and so they went where the work was. It was a phenomenon of rural exodus, as we have seen absolutely everywhere in times of industrialization.

These people went to the cities or the special economic zones, but they didn’t have papers. They still had their hukou in the village and they could be sent back at any time. This mobility allowed them to earn more money and send it back to the village, just like all immigration patterns around the world, but it didn’t give them any guarantees. This phenomenon evolved even further as things became a little more institutionalized: by the 1900s-2000s, these workers became entitled to a temporary hukou, which is like a one-year residence permit that is linked to the employment contract. Hukou made it possible for children to go to school. Let’s say you’re from a village in Sichuan. You have been working in Beijing for 10 or 20 years. You have a son, born in Beijing. His hukou belongs to the village in Sichuan, not to Beijing. To go to school, he would normally have to go back to the village and to avoid this, you’d have to pay what is called the jiedu fei. Meanwhile, he isn’t entitled to social services: if he goes to the hospital, he’d have to pay. It’s still like that today: schools in Beijing often refuse children from elsewhere, because they are dark-skinned, or they don’t speak the Beijing dialect properly...

This should ring a bell! Today we call them the nonmingong, peasant workers who aren’t integrated into the city or the special economic zones, even if they built them. Today, in Shenzhen for example, there are 20 million inhabitants, but 3 million hukous. The rest are people who come from outside and can therefore access services, provided they pay and without guarantee that it will last. In December 2017, members of the “low-end” population, known as diduan renkou, were rooted out of Beijing and forced to return to their villages. In the middle of winter, in the dead of the night at 11 o’clock, in Beijing in December, it’s -20°C. Their houses were destroyed and they were thrown out.

So obviously, this mobility is something that allows you to live a better life, but without any guarantees. When you are settled in the city, say in Beijing, and you come from a village in the depths of Sichuan about 2,000 km away, at least today you can call and Skype your parents or children who stayed there. The connection

isn’t as broken as in the past, but you also have to go back to the village to see them at least once a year. Tradition requires that families get together for the Chinese New Year. Since the 1980s, we have seen this extraordinary phenomenon of people working in coastal areas, where the factories and entire modern economy are located, returning to their villages. Workers fill up all the trains, buses, cars... everyone leaves. You now have 250 million nonmingong according to official statistics. When everyone goes back to the village at the same time, the traffic jams are extraordinary. You could call the “chunyun” the “great transhumance.”

Since the 2000s, cars have become widespread. China today is a bit like our countries in the 1950s and 1960s, in the sense that owning a car is a status symbol. In cities, of course, but also in the countryside, where there are more and more cars. Owning a car is something very important. For the middle classes, this is essential: you start with weekends, you get a weekend house, you say the air is polluted in the city, so you’re going to go to the countryside, you go to places where the air is pure, and that causes a lot of traffic jams. During the week-long holidays of October 1 or May 1 or even on weekends, leaving Beijing can take up to 2h30-3 hours just to drive 100 km, and the same to return. People also drive their cars to work. It’s crazy: you have huge traffic jams and all the pollution that goes with it. In that respect, campaigns against car pollution aren’t going to work in the immediate future.

Electric cars - some people are starting to buy them. Maybe that’s one of the solutions, because people who have just reached the point where they can afford their first car won’t follow advice to take public transport, but may find the idea of an electric car attractive. There are more and more planes and airline passengers in China, and that too, for the environment, isn’t great. But people, often in the upper middle classes, can easily work in Beijing while living in Chengdu, and therefore fly every week. This is very common. The TGV has also been greatly developed and offers a new travel option. Like in France, it has also allowed some people to live in one city and work in another. Transport is very important.

The authorities think it is a symbol of modernity. The means of control have greatly evolved: you no longer have to force people to stay in their village or neighborhood to monitor them. Artificial intelligence, facial recognition, phones... You think we use our cell phones a lot over here. I was in China three days ago and when you pay for something with cash, everyone looks at you as if you were from the Middle Ages. No one pays with money anymore: over there, they pay with WeChat or Alipay, through

their phone, which is very easily to control. To control people, you don’t need to limit mobility anymore. The Party’s goal of controlling people hasn’t changed, it’s been updated. In these conditions, mobility is a test of modernity, something that allows the economy to develop, and therefore power is conducive to this modernity. That doesn’t mean it has given up on its goal to control. The hukou, which every year you are told has disappeared, remains in place and is still very effective. We saw this in December 2017 when the diduan renkou - the low-end population - was expelled.

So the Party has given itself no limits. If they want to re-impose limits on mobility, it won’t be easy, but it won’t be impossible. They have new methods of control, and they still also use the old ones.

For the communist regime that established itself in Beijing in 1949, mobility was synonymous with disorder. Once in power, the Party divided the population into classes to better control it: the members of the “exploiting classes” were subject to many restrictions, while the “red” classes were tasked with monitoring them. But by 1958, State control was widespread and travel was limited for all. Yet, mobility gradually became part of Chinese people’s daily lives: corporate executives would fly to their hometown on weekends; the middle classes would drive to their country homes; private cars replaced bicycles in the villages. However, far from signalling the end of State control, this apparent liberation came with unparalleled surveillance. Jean-Philippe Beja revisits the history of 70 years of emancipation under control.