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Does Migration Research Matter in China? A Review of Migration Research and its relations to policy since the 1980s

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Abstract:

While China continues attracting the attention of social scientists worldwide and Chinese names and faces become a must for international forums, what can Chinese social researchers do in China? Placing it in the context of socio-political changes as well as intellectual development after the Cultural Revolution, the paper delineates how professional academic research on migration emerged in the 1990s vis-à-vis ideological debates and policy study. One of the most important achievements of academic research has probably been the establishment of a *migrant*-centred narrative which focuses on migrants' experiences and problems, as opposed to treating *migration* as an aggregate phenomenon to be managed by the state. In doing so this narrative helps win wide sympathy for migrants. This paper also calls attention to an emerging triangular relationship between research, mass media and policy makers where research influences policy through informing the public and promoting certain public discourses. At the current stage the interactions between the three parties and the subsequent policy changes are often driven by dramatic incidents, and researchers therefore face the challenge to make the triangle more sustainable.

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Does Migration Research Matter in China?
A Review of Migration Research and its Relations to Policy Since the 1980s[1]

While China continues attracting the attention of social scientists worldwide and Chinese names and faces become a must for international forums, what can Chinese social researchers do in China? This paper reviews academic research on internal migration conducted by China-based scholars since the 1980s. Placing it in the context of socio-political changes as well as intellectual development in China after the Cultural Revolution, the paper delineates how professional academic research on migration emerged in the 1990s vis-à-vis ideological debates and policy study. Professional academic research has provided scholars with more political autonomy and public influence. One of the most important achievements of academic research has probably been the establishment of a *migrant*-centred narrative which focuses on migrants' experiences and problems, as opposed to treating *migration* as an aggregate phenomenon to be managed by the state, which paradigm prevailed in earlier discussions. By portraying migration as a human experience and revealing migrants' problems, this narrative helps win wide sympathy for migrants, and the sympathy has directly shaped public debates since late 2002.

Apart from reviewing the content of research, this paper also calls attention to an emerging triangular relationship between research, mass media and policy makers. In this triangle research influences policy through informing the public and promoting certain public discourses. At the current stage the interactions between the three parties and the subsequent policy changes are often driven by dramatic incidents. Researchers therefore face the challenge of making the triangle more sustainable. In order to achieve this, we may need to reflect critically on our meta-narrative of migration, which is

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currently underpinned by a liberal ideology of market economics and the concerns of individual rights, and a lack of labour discourse and structural analysis. At the same time, practical measures should be taken to improve the dissemination of research results and enhance the triangular interactions at the local level.

This paper is based on the two authors' documentary studies over years and more importantly, their deep involvement in research, policy debates and actions related to migration since the early 1990s. One of the authors (Tan), as a long-time editor of the leading sociology journal in China (*Shehuixue Yanjiu* or *Sociology Research*), has been following closely the trends in social research in general and migration studies in particular. Tan is also one of the most active researchers involved in practical programmes for migrants. The other author (Xiang) started his migration research with a six-year anthropological study of a migrant community in Beijing known as "Zhejiangcun" in 1992, during which project he also helped set up probably the first migrants' association in China (Xiang 2000). Subsequently he worked on migration and social change in India and Australia and this may provide a broad perspective in reflecting on our colleagues' work.

Given the complexity of migration, this paper can no way claim to be comprehensive. Rather, we highlight the aspects that are probably special for China and that are particularly important for understanding the linkage between research and policy. In terms of discipline, we confine ourselves to sociology in the broad sense (including anthropology, institutional economics and political sciences), to which the majority of existing literature on migration belongs. The ensuing part of the paper starts with a brief overview of the subject matter and points out why internal migration in China deserves special attention. Then the paper reviews how internal migration entered Chinese scholars' intellectual agenda and summarises the basic trends of the research. The third section delineates the triangular relationship, which we regard as a basic infrastructure for effective research-reality interaction.

Finally, we put forward recommendations for how to improve the influence of academic research on policy making.

The "floating population"

Although large-scale rural-urban migration is almost universal for any country at a certain stage of development, it has special significances in China both numerically and institutionally. According to China's recently-released fifth population census of 2000 and other surveys in Beijing and Shanghai, we estimate the current volume of rural-urban migrants to be 106 million.[2] Furthermore, large-scale rural-urban migration is expected to last for at least another two decades, much longer than that in other countries, where it often levelled out in one or two decades. The fundamental mismatch between industrialisation and urbanisation in the Chinese economy – where agriculture makes up for only 15.9 per cent of GDP while hosts 50 per cent of total labour force in 2000 (National Statistic Bureau 2001, cited in Bai Nansheng and Song Hongyuan et al. 2002: 159) – requires a long time to reach a more balanced economic-demographic structure through rural-urban migration.

Far more important than the magnitude is its institutional significance. Migrants in China whose mobility is not mandated by the state are undergoing not just a change of residence, in doing so they are also disengaging from state control and support. Because the administrative system in contemporary China is still highly territorialised – that is, it is

[2] The census reported 121.07 million internal migrants as of the year 2000 and among them 88.4 million were rural-urban migrants. The census defines "migrants" as those who lived in a township or district (in big cities) different from where they register their permanent residence for more than half a year. Other surveys conducted in Shanghai and Beijing found that about 20 per cent migrants in cities stayed less than half a year. Our estimate of the 106 million rural-urban migrants is reached on these bases.

According to the census, rural-urban migrants are mostly young, almost 70 per cent are between the ages of 15 and 49 and 20 per cent between 25 and 29. Occupation wise, 40 per cent are self-employed or business owners, and 43 per cent are employees (the remaining are children, elderly and occupation unknown) (National Statistic Bureau of China 2001).

delimited by rigid jurisdictional boundaries between urban and rural areas, and between provinces and municipalities – spontaneous migrants are no longer integrated in the established social system and have therefore become a special social category, "floating population" (see Solinger 1993; Xiang 1999; Zhang 2001). Although official documents and some research literature sees large-scale migration as a phenomenon of "modernization"-- a supposedly universal economic process, an institutional analysis suggests that the floating population as a special social group is a product of the interplay between economic transformation (not only from "tradition" to "modern", but more importantly from a command to a market economy) and state regulation. This special relation of migration to the state and the larger institutional transformation, as we will substantiate in a historical review below, is vital for understanding the relationship between research and policy.

A key policy for sustaining the territorialised administrative system is the household registration system (known as "*hukou*" system in Chinese). The registration system was put in place in 1958 in order to prevent spontaneous rural-urban migration, but in the long run it functions to keep the grain price as low as possible to support a high speed of industralisation (particularly in heavy industries) in cities by confining the majority of the population in the rural area. Under this system, people born in rural areas cannot move to the city and obtain urban *hukou* status unless mandated by the state (for literature on *hukou* system, see Christiansen, 1990; Cheng and Selden, 1994; Mallee, 1995; Chan and Zhang, 1998). A person with rural *hukou* could not purchase even the necessities such as food and coal in the city, let alone the access to services in housing, health and education. Apart from that, for a long time a peasant needed formal documents from the township government where he/she belongs to in order to buy train tickets to travel to big cities.

Peasants resumed their spontaneous migration, surprisingly, not after the Reform was introduced at the end of the 1970s, but in some areas during the

peak of the Cultural Revolution when the grassroots administration could not function properly amidst chaos (Xiang 2000). Surprisingly again, the state in fact imposed stricter control of peasants' movement at the beginning of the Reform, mainly because of the high unemployment rate in cities as a result of the return of large numbers of urban youth who had been sent to countryside since the 1950s. Following directives from the top authorities to stop peasants' migration in 1980 and 1981 (Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party [CCCCP] and State Council 1980; State Council 1981), urban government, particularly the public security bureaus, adopted the tactics of "surrounding, chasing, blocking and raiding", as described in official documents and public media, to oust migrants. In response migrants had to resort to "guerrilla war tactics" to survive in the city (Xiang 2000).

It was only in 1984, when the introduction of the household responsibility system for land tenure increased agricultural productivity significantly therefore creating a much more relaxed atmosphere for policy making, that peasants were allowed to move to cities on the condition that they could arrange their own grain (CCCCP 1984). After that migration increased steadily and by the end of the 1980s, the numbers increased from fewer than 2 million in the early 1980s to about 20 million (Du Yin and Bai Nansheng et al. 1997: 1).

Internal migration, however, did not become a public concern until the end of the 1980s when the Reform came to a sudden halt. The failure of "crash through" (*chuangguan*, similar to the shock therapy in former Soviet Union) in reforming the pricing system in 1988, the subsequent inflation, and the efforts by the then Premier Li Peng to calm down economic overheating and to strengthen government control over the private sector, put many construction projects on hold. As a consequence, great numbers of migrant workers were laid off. Enormous flows of jobless migrants then "journeyed" from one city to another looking for work, and the terms of "floating populations", "tides of migrants" and "blind flows" (*mangliu*) became new

key words in policy and public debate. Responding to this, in early 1989 the General Office of the State Council (1989) issued the Urgent Notification to Control Migrant Workers' Blind Outmigration Strictly, which was followed by more specific directives by the State Council and other ministries (Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Public Security 1989; State Council 1990; General Office of the State Council 1991; Ministry of Civil Affairs 1991). Around the same time, the State Council (1991) issued the Suggestions on the Reform of the Rules of Detention and Deportation which extended its 1982 regulation to include migrants as a subject to be detained and deported (back to their place of origin) if they fail to present documents required.

This situation changed again in 1992 when Deng Xiaoping's series of speeches delivered during his tour to southern China resumed the momentum for rapid economic reform which was put on hold after the Tian'anmen Square incident. Real estate development, as one of the first sectors that recovered, pulled in large numbers of migrant workers. The number jumped from 20 million at the end of the 1980s to 60-70 million in 1993 (Du Yin and Bai Nansheng et al. 1997: 1). After that China moved to an open market economy steadily and rural-urban migration increased year by year until late 1990s when economy started slowing down. Policies of the central government once again became more favourable to migrants. In 1994, the Ministry of Labour (1994) issued the Provisional Regulations on the Trans-provincial Mobility of Rural Labour for Work, which recognized migration as a legitimate activity. The Labour Law promulgated in the same year stipulated that migrant workers should be entitled to the same rights as all other workers in principle. In official language, this is described as a shift from a policy of "blocking" to a strategy of "channeling": government does not attempt to stop migration anymore, but still regards tight regulation necessary in order to achieve an "orderly movement" (*youxuliudong*). This policy ambiguity was clearly reflected at a high-profile national working conference on migration in which various ministries participated in 1995. The very fact that the state council organized such a meeting signifies the

authorities' acceptance of migration as a reality, yet all the participated ministries perceived migration potentially problematic with the only exception of the Ministry of Agriculture which voiced very weak defense for migration.

It is this kind of policy ambiguity in the second half of the 1980s and the second half of the 1990s, rather than the outright restriction of migration, that created the most difficulties for migrants. In order to achieve an orderly kind of movement, migrants were required to apply for three permits in order to work and live in cities: (1) the permit for temporary residence (*zanzhuzheng*), (2) work permits (*wugongzheng*) or permit for undertaking business for the self-employed, and (3) document of the marital and pregnant status of female migrants issued in the place of origin. When applying for these permits, migrants had to pay various fees. Since migrants are regarded as "outsiders" and managing migrants is seen by urban government as "extra" work, they are commonly charged levies to finance government to carry out the work related to them (for how migrants are turned into a source of profit for local government see Solinger 1999: 86-91). Whenever the urban authorities wish to reduce the number of migrants, they could simply stop issuing the permits and turn the migrants "illegal" to be detained and deported.

The most significant policy shift regarding migration came in late 2002 when the leadership transition was finalized (though not fully publicized) at the Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Among other movements that distinguish themselves from the previous administration, the new president Hu Jingtao and premier Wen Jiabao called public attention to disadvantaged groups (*ruoshi qunti*), of whom migrants are a major part. They have also promoted the notions of "scientific view of development" (*kexue fazhan guan*) and "placing people in the centre" (*yirenweiben*, a slogan which has replaced the mantra that "everything should be centred on economic development" – *yique yi jingji jianshe wei zhongxin*) to correct many local governments' obsession with GDP growth and neglect of human

and social development. Furthermore, premier Wen Jiabao personally intervened to help migrants obtain unpaid wages and he made formal pledge in his report to the National People's Congress in 2003 to clean up all the back-pay owned to migrants in three years. In January 2003, the General Office of the State Council (2003) issued its Number 1 Document specifically on migrants: Notification on Improving the Work of Managing and Providing Services to Peasants Who Move to Cities for Work. In China, State Council directives are still more powerful and effective than laws or rules promulgated by any ministry and the 2003 Number 1 Document fundamentally altered the official language on migration.

The impacts of the recent change at the top were clearly felt at different levels of government. For example the minister for public security made an emotional speech in early 2003 criticising some policemen's harsh treatment of "migrant brothers" in a southern province, language which was almost unthinkable in the public security system just a couple years ago.[3] Local government is now more willing to change their policies at least to show that they are in line with the people-centred approach. This policy shift is more fundamental than that of 1984 and 1994 not only in that the new policy stance stresses the positive effects of migration more, but more importantly, it places migrants at the centre. According to the new official language, government departments' priority is to serve migrants and protect their rights, rather than regulate migration flow as an object. This directly reflects the academic discourse on migration that has developed throughout the 1990s, as we will review below.

"Floating population" in intellectual agenda

In China, the floating population is on one hand institutionally significant and politically relevant, but is at the same time perceived as an apolitical issue – it does not threaten any groups' vested interests nor does it pose any

[3] Interview with an official of the Ministry of Public Security, Beijing, May 2003.

ideological or political challenge to the authorities. This made independent investigations and research on the topic possible. Furthermore, since migration is a new phenomenon that developed outside of the state's purview, the state needs information about it and welcomes academic research. As a reflection of this, rural-urban labour migration has been almost a standard topic in calls for research proposals from state funding institutes. International donors also identify internal migration as a funding priority of their China programmes. The Ford Foundation in Beijing, for example, granted 2.4 million US dollars between 1994 and 2001 for migration research projects (Beijing Office of Ford Foundation 2001: 1). Oxfam, UNESCO and the Asia Foundation have also supported similar research. As a result, rural-urban migration became one of the best studied topics in China, along with such issues as township and village enterprises (TVE) and the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOE). Before moving to detailed review of migration research, however, a reflection on the general intellectual landscape of China is under order.

Professional social research in general and on migration in particular in the People's Republic of China became possible only after the Cultural Revolution (officially 1966-1976). The Chinese intellectual landscape after that was first dominated by two types of activities: ideological debates and policy scheme designs. A national debate on "the criteria for truth" in 1978 was decisive in ending the Cultural Revolution, and it was followed by ideological reflections on Marxism and socialism. At the same time, the urgent need to get the economy and society back to normal called for new practical policies. Since there were hardly any working economists or sociologists at that time, persons with science and engineering backgrounds played the main role in developing new policies. This further enhanced the overarching notion of social engineering. The one-child policy, for instance, was devised based on an alarming mathematical projection of population growth by systems control engineers. But the lack of understanding of the social aspects, particularly the outright ignorance of cultural sensitivity and the gross underestimate of

the public resistance, made the policy implementation extremely costly, including creating a high level of tension between peasants and local cadres unprecedented in the PRC history. Some Chinese demographers have suggested that a less draconian scheme could have achieved just the same demographic result but at a much lower social and political cost (e.g Liang Zhongtang 1985; for critical accounts of the development of the "population science" and population policies in China, see Greenhalgh 1986; 2003).[4]

Entering the late 1980s, ideological debates developed to a new stage known as the "culture heat" (*wenhua re*). Numerous new books were published, new journals launched, and various Western thoughts introduced. At the same time, a group of young economists, encouraged by the then Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, competed designing schemes of reforming the rural economy, state-owned enterprises, pricing system and other issues. Unlike in the earlier stage, ideological debate and policy study became closely interlinked in the late 1980s. For instance the New Elitism theory, arguing for a strong technocratic leadership, was proposed by both ideology theorists and policy researchers.

The 1989 Tian'anmen Square incident silenced both camps, and it was only after 1992, following Deng's speeches during his south China tour, that academic activities resume. Partly because of the state's tighter control over ideological debates, partly thanks to intellectuals' dissolution of abstract theories and grand policy prescription, grounded empirical research gradually became the mainstream work of the academics. Rural-urban migration in this context became a popular topic since as a new phenomenon it is particularly suitable for empirical inquiry. Symbolically enough, some intellectuals who used to be engaged in cultural debates or policy design chose migration as their first research project when they returned to China after 1992 from de facto exile. As opposed to the general debates traditional Chinese

[4] We thank Dr Zhou Guangyu at the Australian National University for calling our attention to this case.

intellectuals have been engaged in for thousands of years on one hand, and policy study on the other, professional academic research bases analyses on systematic examination of empirical evidence, and aim to accumulate knowledge rather than seek quick practical solutions or to address the public directly. But the most critical feature of academic research lies in its "out-of-box thinking", i.e., shedding new light on reality by thinking beyond established frameworks that often mirrors the official set-up. Academic research also gained more autonomy from a "standardisation" (*guifanhua*) movement in Chinese social sciences in the mid-1990s which emphasised that research is a profession which should comply with international standards. This movement was further entrenched by state programmes of university development, where academic publications almost determine a researcher's career advancement.

Reflecting the changes in general intellectual landscape in China, migration was discussed in three strands of literature: ideological analysis, policy study, and more independent academic research. Articles written by intellectuals in the 1980s and early 1990s on one hand criticized the *hukou* system and exhausted migration as "the third peasantry revolution" compatible to the land reform in the 1930s and 1950s (the first revolution), and the disbanding of the commune system in the late 1970s (the second revolution). On the other hand writings of similar styles called attention to the opposite, namely the possible deconstructive consequences of migration, which is related to the popular discourse of "crisis" (*weiji*) at that time.[5] The one-time bestseller *Seeing China from a Third Eye*, authored under a German name but widely believed to be written by a Chinese ("Lo-i-ni-gel" 1993), warned that:

[5] The discourse of "crisis" projected an image that China was in a middle of crises of all kinds. But in general the crises were described in abstract and even metaphorical terms (e.g. "cultural crisis" rather than fiscal crisis) as represented by the highly influential TV documentary *He Shang* (The Death of the River). The sense and discourse of crisis can probably be traced to the tradition of self-denying and of seeking for radical change among Chinese intellectuals since the May 4th movement, and was also supported by the reformist fraction within the state which pushed for rapid institutional and cultural changes. More work is needed to unravel and reflect on this discourse prevalent in the late 1980s.

> [t]he tides of floating population is a ticking bomb for the society. From a psychological point of view, when hundreds thousands of people are moving around blindly, the resonance effect of emotion generates a great sense of being abused and the desire for revenge without reasons. Such emotion of each atom converges and constitutes a powerful deconstructive force, making imminent a death movement without leaders and without aims.

Both of the notions, celebration and doom, had far reaching influences on the subsequent public debates in the 1990s, which were very much centred on the question: is migration "progressive" or destabilising?

Instead of deconstructing these grand questions and replacing them with discussion on specific issues, experts working in government or semi-government institutes, a major producer of "scientific knowledge" of migration in the 1990s, in fact reinforced this approach and particularly the negative aggregate image of migration. Although by that time grand scheme design had given way to specific policy study, the deeply ingrained desire for social engineering entailed that the experts took up a top-down perspective. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, Zhang (2001, 29) has summarized the research literature of that period in this way:

> Most [literature on migration] focus on two sets of interrelated issues: First is to define and describe the demographic background, economic activities, mobility scale, speed of growth, and spatial distribution of the "floating population." Second is to assess the social impact of this migration and explore strategies that can be used to implement more effective regulation over the migrant population. Almost all official and scholarly publications are obsessed with the question of how to improve the government's techniques to regulate rural migrants.

Zhang has pertinently pointed out that "such accounts in the name of scientific research and knowledge serve as a powerful means by which a particular kind of image of the 'floating population' is firmly established". This image is often described by the following words such as "dirty, silly, poor, aimless, uncivil, congregating, and money-driven" (Zhang 2001, 32).

But academic research on migration that developed parallel to policy study presented a quite different picture. While policy experts were regarded as more authoritative for the aggregate data that they mastered, writings by academia proved to have longer-term impacts on the public and policy makers. What differentiated academic research most sharply from experts' work was its focus on *migrants*. Academic research sees migration as a human experience with multiple dimensions and mixed consequences rather than a phenomenon that can be either "blocked" or "channeled" like running water. Zhang's abovementioned analysis suggests a direct, causal relationship between "scientific knowledge" and public attitudes to migration: the public perceives migrants so because research literature says so. In the case of academic research that avoids massive generalization and simplistic judgment but focuses on details of specific issues, research informs readers more on *how to think about migration* than on the question of whether migration is good or bad. The most powerful influence of academic research, it seems to us, lies in its more people-centered approach than it specific conclusions. Since the linkage between the first two types of research to the public and policy is self-evident, our ensuing analysis focuses on professional academic research on migration.

Snapshots of academic research on migration

Sociological research on migration in China since the 1990s can be roughly divided into three types. First, as part of the standardisation and professionalisation of social research, a bunch of publications draw on Western literature and attempt to apply existing theories and concepts to the

case of migration, as evidenced by the debates about "strong ties" or "weak ties" (Li Hanlin 2003; Li Hanlin and Wang Yi 2001; Qu Jindong 2001), "social capital", "trust" (Liu Linping 2002; Zhai Xuewei 2003) and "rationality" (Huang Ping 1997; Wen Jun 2001) of migrants. There are many reasons why Chinese sociologists are particularly interested in concepts related to "networks", but one fact stands out clearly. That is, Chinese scholars have been eager to explore the "societal" aspect as opposed to the state in understanding the Chinese society in general and the Reform in particular. The network is seen as the basic unit for "building" a society (e.g. Xiang 1999). Undoubtedly this literature deepens our scholarly understanding of migration, but its contribution to public debates and policy making remain limited.

The second body of literature, which makes up the majority, is descriptive and aims to document new phenomena and to reveal new problems. Wang Xiaoyi (2002), for example, observed that with economic development, some migrant-receiving communities became more closed and migrants were further excluded, which challenged the simplistic view of "modernisation" which holds that the development of market economy can only bring about more openness, and thus called for stronger policy intervention. Li Qiang (2000; 2002) sheds light on the group of migrants whom he describes as "the underclass elite" (*diceng jingying*) based on survey data. These migrants are blocked in upward mobility due to the *hukou* system and other institutions despite their high human capital. The disparity between their status in the community of origin and in the city may result in deep frustration which can be socially destablising. Wang Chunguang (2001) examined the "new generation of migrants" who came to cities in the 1990s, as opposed to those who migrated in the 1980s. Compared to the earlier migrants, the new generation has a much weaker attachment to the rural communities but faces the same obstacles in integrating in urban society. Research on the return of migrants (Ba Nansheng and Song Hongyuan 2002; Li Lulu 2002) established the fact that only a very limited number of migrants

returned to home communities, and furthermore return was rarely their voluntary choice. This debunks the once popular myth of a possible reversed migration that may boost rural development, and instead the research reiterates the urgency of reforming the household registration system and speeding up urbanization.

Research on gender and migration from a feminist perspective has been particularly lively and productive. It was once assumed that women benefited from migration socially because migration provided them more freedom and for the left-behind women, the absence of men meant more autonomy and power for them particularly in agricultural production (Du Yin and Bai Nansheng et al. 1997, 40—56; Cai Fang 2000, 152—159; Si Xiu, cited in Cai Fang 2001, 103). Arguing against this, feminist researchers have pointed out that left-behind women became more active in agriculture simply because agriculture has become more marginal rather than women become more powerful (Jin Yihong 1990; Gao Xiaoxian 1994; Fei Juanhong 1994). In the cities, migrant women face systemic discrimination and had to work harder with less pay and are expected to be obedient (Tan Shen 2001). Detailed research on female migrants' life experiences, views and emotions (e.g. Tang Can 1996; Pan Yi 1999; Tan Shen 1997; Feng Xiaoshuang 2000) produced much valuable information helping the public deepen their understanding of migrants.

The third type of research is action oriented where researchers use their expertise to help design or implement the programmes of NGOs or government agencies, and in turn advance their research through participatory observation. First experimented with by some individuals in the early 1990s (e.g. Xiang's experiment with a migrant traders' association in Beijing in 1994, see Xiang 2000), action-oriented research became more common by the late 1990s. This was very much encouraged by international donors, particularly the Ford Foundation, but more importantly it was made possible by some significant changes in semi-government agencies and the

emergence of NGO-type institutes. The three major semi-governmental "mass organisations" in China, namely the trade union, the youth league and the women's federation, all have started working more independently (from the Party and the government) on issues that they deem important. As part of this development, they have initiated or supported activities to provide services to migrants. For example, in March 2002, Migrant Workers' Association, possibly the very first migrant workers' union in PRC, was set up in Zhejiang province, southeast China. The Association attracted 1,500 members soon after its establishment and was at least for a while acclaimed as valuable experiment by the authorities (see Pan P., 2002). Xingyang prefecture of Henan province in central China, an important migrant-sending place, organised outmigrants' trade unions based on villages and then set up corresponding branches in major destination places to protect migrants' rights. This initiative was backed by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. In terms of migration-related NGOs, notable examples include the Guangzhou Migrant Workers' Document Handling Service Centre which helps migrants produce documents in legal battles for protecting their rights, the Legal Assistance Centre at Beijing University, the Female Migrants' Club in Beijing and the Shenzhen-based Institute for Contemporary Observation collaborates. Many of the NGOs were either set up by researchers or keep in close touch with researchers from their advice.

Apart from direct impacts on reality, action-oriented research has a special advantage in advancing knowledge by providing first-hand analyses of successful and failed practices, and identifying new, often unexpected, social forces that may contribute to the course. For example Tan Shen and and Liu Kaimin (2003) have argued that large transnational corporations can be an effective working partner in protecting migrant workers' rights, particularly through their so-called Code of Conduct Movement, which would otherwise have been thought unlikely.

Action-oriented research is different from policy study in that, while the latter concerns what the state can do through formal policies, the former focuses on actions of non-state parties in search of change. Although action-oriented research does not necessarily seek conceptual advancement, it shares with other academic research the basic stance, namely the migrant-centred approach. Apart from the new information and insights that it brings about, the migrant-centred perspective has also contributed to developing a new relationship between research, media, and policy, which subject we will turn to now.

An emerging triangular relationship

Research is of course not an intellectual exercise *per se*. How research itself as a social practice is carried out and how it is related to other institutions may be more important than the research content in determining its public influence. There are channels whereby academic researchers in China can influence policy makers directly, for example by participating in drafting laws, by lobbying members of the people's congress and the people's political consultative conference to propose new bills[6], and by writing internal reports to the leadership.[7] But the most significant development in the recent years has been the increasing importance of *in*direct means of influencing policy. A triangular relationship between academic research, mass media and policy makers has emerged, where research influence policies by informing the public and subsequently creating certain public pressure through the mass media.

[6] For example a group of members of the National People's Congress proposed the bill to ensure citizens' freedom of migration through an amendment of the constitution at the Fifth session of the Ninth National People's Congress in March 2002. Members of Beijing People's Congress were also instrumental in stopping some district government from dismantling migrant children's schools in more than one occasion.

[7] For example, in October 2003, the Chinese Association of Population Studies sent an internal report, comprising abstracts of six academic papers presented at the annual meeting for 2003, to the all-powerful Politburo to urge *hukou* reform. The Association managed to do so partly because the president of the Association is a former member of the State Council.

A brief overview of the recent changes in China's media is necessary in order to situate this triangle. The media in China is far from free and independent, but its transitional and somehow ambiguous nature, namely that it remains a mouthpiece of the Party but at the same time is allowed to report and comment on certain types of issues independently, compounded by the strong incentive to appeal to the public for commercial consideration (for analysis of this nature and its coverage on migrants in China see Florence 2003: 45-6), may have made itself fairly effective in pushing for policy change. This is because, firstly, the linkage of media to the party-state accords it a usually high level of authority and legitimacy, and views expressed in formal media, particularly when it is backed up by academic opinions, can thus influence and even mobilise a large audience. Similarly, due to the connection to the state, specific government institutes cannot simply dismiss media reports. When Xiang was helping setting up the migrants' association in Beijing in 1994, a constant request from the association leaders was to arrange media reports about them. The leaders knew it very well: media reports would not only win them wide sympathy, but more importantly provide a "protection umbrella" in their dealing with the local government (see Xiang 2000). Xiang brought the association to the attention of a high-profile national newspaper and provided some analyses on the significance of the story. In the end the story appeared and was even reprinted in other media, and there are good reasons to believe that the reports at least prolonged the life of the Association. At a time when the public are sceptical to government's statement and independent alternative information source is yet to be established, state-controlled but commercialised media in fact constitute a common arena where both the public and the state interact.

The strategy of the central government to use the media to keep local government in check gives the media more teeth.[8] Armed with this strength, the media has engaged itself in issues of migration actively and critically. For example, in December 2000, the Beijing-based media criticised the Beijing Bureau of Labour and Social Security so harshly for its exclusion of migrants from certain jobs that the bureau had to assemble a press conference to defend its stance. The high-profile *Workers' News* has a special column on migrant workers, so do two local newspapers in Shanghai (Ford Foundation 2002, 71).

The incipient autonomy of the media is also enhanced by its increasing professionalism, as evidenced by the growth of groups of journalists who commit to professional excellence more than to political royalty. While the media of the 1980s often relied completely on official reports as the sole information source, since the 1990s academic research is commonly cited as a source that is more credible and more original in insight thus more appealing to the readers. The approach of the academic research that sees migration as a human experience instead of an object to be managed by the state brings academic work even closer to the interest of the media. Partly reflecting the influence of research, a subtle but significant change in media coverage on migration can be discerned, namely the increasing coverage of migrants' individual stories, particularly of the problems that they face. Photos of migrants that appeared in the national press in the early 1990s were almost invariably of large crowds of faceless migrants packed in railway stations; but after by the end of the 1990s the lens shifted to the human face of migrants.

There is not only a convergence between China and more democratic societies in how research influences the reality in the field of migration, but Chinese social researchers are probably more optimistic than their

[8] The new leadership also set a policy in 2003 that the national TV station can allocate a limited time only for news about official meetings and politicians' activities, and more coverage should be given to social issues and matters close to the people.

counterparts in other countries regarding their possible influence. A study sponsored by UNESCO and carried out by Asia-Pacific Migration Research Network (APMRN) in Australia, the Philippines and Thailand clearly established that "the most striking impact of migration research on policy is through indirect mechanisms" (Iredale et al. 2002: iv) including via mass media. But the APMRN research found that academic research in Australia and the Philippines had basically no influence on policy making (Iredale 2002 et al.). This is probably because in democratic societies pressure from the media is mainly associated with the concerns of elections, but in China a government department is under the pressure from the higher authorities for immediate actions once a problem is revealed in the media.

How exactly does the triangle work? The interaction has so far been *ad hoc* and event-driven. The recent changes in the policies regarding migrant children's education and the detention and deportation of migrants form typical examples. Related to the *hukou* system, the state budget for basic education in China was allocated based on the number of permanent residents of each locality and migrant children were therefore excluded. From the early 1990s migrants in some big cities set up their own schools, but with very poor facilities and without licenses. Mr Zhao Shukai, a researcher based in the Development Research Centre of State Council who has worked on migration since the early 1990s, came across a migrants' school in work and brought a group of TV reporters there when he was interviewed for another topic. This brought the issue to the limelight in 1995. Since then the topic has triggered widespread public debates and the central government has required all schools in cities to admit migrant children unconditionally once they apply. Although the policy is yet to be fully implemented at the local level, various volunteer groups have been set up to offer either financial support or free teaching at the schools. A number of research projects have been carried out on this issue over last few years (e.g. Lu Shaoqing and Zhang Shouli 2001; Han Jialin 2003). Apart from concrete suggestions, systematic information and new insights from the research also helped

sustain public attention. Furthermore, the problem of migrant children's education has become a symbol for the disparity between migrants and urban citizens in entitlement. Having a symbol is always important to keep up the momentum of debates and what kind of symbol is used often shapes the direction of the debates (it is clearly in migrants' favour to have migrant children's education as the symbol).

While researchers helped identifying problems in the case of migrant children's education, in the campaign to stop detaining and deporting migrants, they played the role of translating an incident into a topic for debate and facilitating the debate by providing legal analysis and social critique. In March 2003, a young migrant Sun Zhigang was detained in Guangzhou, the major city of south China, after he failed to produce his temporary residence permit on the street. He was subsequently beaten to death in the clinic of the detention centre. When this was uncovered by the newspaper *Southern Weekend*, several groups of academics wrote pubic letters to the National People's Congress to urge reforming the systems of detention and deportation and of temporary residence. On 19 May, a public seminar titled "The Question of Constitutionality of the Detention and Deportation System" was held in Beijing. Symbolically enough, the seminar was jointly organised by the Law School of China's Politics and Law University, China Review Net and Beijing Hua Yi Law Firm – an exercise of collaboration between research institute, media and civil society. In the meanwhile numerous researchers published their commentaries and interviews in the media providing views from different perspectives. In response to the strong public voice, the State Council swiftly abolished the system and changed all the detention centres to shelters for voluntary shelter-seekers. But even more significant than this, the tragedy urged the entire society to rethink fundamental issues such as the rule of law, human rights and social justice. Public media, particularly by using the vehicle of the Internet, was the initiator and main actor in this debate. But the incident might not have been

turned to a critique of a system and led further to the action without academic inputs.

Event-driven interactions in the triangle can be highly effective since dramatic incidents easily catch the public's attention. However it may also render the influence of research unsustainable or inconsistent: public attention can be diverted away quickly before any real change is made, and policy change in response to one event may conflict with an adjustment made in another occasion. Therefore, researchers in China face the challenge ofhow to stabilise the triangular relationship. In order to be more proactive in identifying problems and initiating debates, we may need to explore both new intellectual strategies and practical measures, which we specify in the next, final section of the paper.

Critical reflections and future strategies

This paper has reviewed the evolution of migration research and its relation to policy change in China since the 1980s in both historical and institutional contexts. Two key developments stand out clearly -- firstly the establishment of relatively independent professional academic research on migration as opposed to ideological debate and policy study, and secondly the emergence of the research – media – policy triangle. These two developments are interlinked, particularly in that both academic research and media reports of the late 1990s became increasingly *migrant*-centred, and in turn this narrative changed the focus of the public discourse on migration from concerns with of "blocking" or "channeling" to migrants' rights.

Despite this progress, however, we must recognize that academic research on migration and the triangle are both new. Although the migrant-centred approach has yielded significant achievements both academically and socially, it is not without shortfalls. Underlining the academic writing and media reports on migration after the late 1990s are two key notions: migrants'

rights and the free market. While the discourse of rights has obtained wide popularity, the ideology of the free market is in fact the most effective in convincing policy makers to undertake change. It is argued that since a market economy is the ultimate goal of the Reform, government must remove discriminatory regulations regarding migrants and treat all employees equally. The rights discourse is also largely based on the liberal ideology with emphasis on *individual* rights and the ideology of populism. In a sense the ideology of populism as applied here reinforces liberalism: it is argued that ordinary people (migrants) are capable enough to regulate themselves and therefore social engineering is unfeasible and even counterproductive. State regulations should thus be minimised. Xiang Biao (2005, xviii-xix) recently reflects on why his earlier work on Zhejiangcun had privileged business networks over labour relations.

> The Zhejiangcun study was carried out at the time (from 1992-1998) when Chinese society was dominated by an elitist ideology that subscribed to the free market model (as developed in the West) as the ultimate and only goal for China, while regarding the poorly educated masses as the largest burden on development. To take issue with this discourse, I had to demonstrate the powerful development impetus within Zhejiangcun – a migrant business group made up of precisely such a 'low-quality population'. Concerned over the simplistic views on the 'market' and goals for the reform, I was eager to show that market was a social construct, and that the networks and reasonings deemed 'backward' could be conducive to and even crucial for building up a healthy market system. I was also driven by the desperate need for critiques of state policies and views. In other words, my ideological concerns may have made me more sensitive to Zhejiangcun's dynamism and success in its overtly visible business activities and in handling the state, but it obscured the more silent businesses: the women and the workers turning out Zhejiangcun's competitive products in cramped workshops behind the stage. I was preoccupied

with refuting idealised versions of market models, but I ignored the pains associated with the market, particularly the inequality between capital and labour, and between men and women.

Thus far a labour discourse and structural critical analysis are still badly lacking. For example very little research has been conducted in China examining migrants' factory life, resistance and strategies (Pan Yi's work, for example Pan Yi 1999, is a notable exception), and the public media has given even less coverage to these issues. In other words, migration is understood as a matter of economic development and rights protection rather than capital-labour relations or structural inequality. Researchers now clearly face new challenges: given the ever-deepening process of privatization and widening gap between rich and poor, it is not enough for the government to *undo* discriminatory regulations. Instead the government has to provide welfare services to the disadvantaged including migrants. Developing new social thoughts beyond the notions of rights and the market is an urgent task in front of Chinese researchers. Indeed, we may well see an intellectual movement that reverses the earlier trajectory, namely the increasing preeminence of ideological critique in academic research, after a period of domination by relatively descriptive and empiricist works.[9]

Apart from the intellectual agenda, various practical measures are also needed to make research more relevant and to stabilise the triangle. We would like to mention two only. First, a better information dissemination mechanism is needed. As mentioned earlier, triangular interactions are normally driven by dramatic, often tragic, incidents, which expose some fundamental problems. But in fact many academic researches had revealed the problems long time before. For example a report by Cui Chuanyi and Pan

[9] The "New Left" school in China has attracted some attention both in China and overseas since the late 1990s. Stressing the increasing social inequality, the thought is critical of Western, market-driven development model and the liberal philosophy for social and political development. But the New Left by and large remains at the stage of "offense", namely attacking the mainstream liberal ideology, and yet to develop their own systematic social theories.

Yaoguo published as early as 2002 provided extensive evidence for the problems associated with the detention and deportation system. Two separate field research by Tan Shen (2000) and Xiang Biao (1995) in Guangdong, 1994, both discovered that delays in wage payment was common and an even fix arrangement. But the problem was never taken seriously until an accidental encounter brought it to Primer Wen Jiabao's personal attention. Thus far researchers have done a good job in accumulating data and articulating views which enable them to voice quickly once an incident occurs, but still fall short in being proactive to prevent tragic consequences. The Ford Foundation in China has adopted the strategy of pairing up academic scholars with government experts in carrying out projects sponsored by them. It is hoped that in doing so, academia can inform the latter of new methodologies and analytical perspectives, while the latter contribute their deep understanding of government's concerns and better channels for research result to be properly disseminated.

Finally, developing local research capacity should be given a high priority. As in many other countries, the distribution of research resources in China is highly uneven. While large cities, particularly Beijing, possess large numbers of research institutes and national media, local places are hungry for information and analysis of problems specific for them. The triangular relationship as analysed in this paper thus far works mainly on the national level. But in order to make real changes, local media and local officials are of equal, if not greater, importance. The desire for research to have immediate effects on policy often limits donors' attention to a few researchers close to the central government. This is valid to some extent since most policies are promulgated at central level while the local governments are normally tasked for implementation. But given that a paradigm change in policy regarding migration has been made at the central level, in the coming years policy implementation at the local level will be crucial. Furthermore, more so than in the case of policy formulating, the attitude on the street and opinions

expressed in local media will profoundly affect policy implementation. Local researchers should have a much larger role to play.

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