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'Hukou', and what birthplace can still mean for marriage in China

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At the match-making corner in Shanghai, education and hukou status are often explicitly stated on adverts. cementley/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

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For many, marriage is about love, shared interests and shared values. But not all love is created equal and in China, the prospect for young people to fall in love and get married is determined by where they were born.

In China, people's social status is closely associated with what's called their *hukou*. Every person is usually assigned either a rural or urban *hukou* based on the locality of their parents' rural or urban *hukou* registration. Urban *hukou* is considered more advantageous than rural *hukou* as it confers access to more favourable socio-economic resources and higher symbolic status.

The *hukou* system existed for hundreds of years as a tool for population registration and control in feudal and imperial China. Interrupted during the revolutions in the 20th century, the system was reinstated by the communist regime in 1951 with an aim to restricting the mobility of workers in industrial and agricultural sectors.

Hukou provides people and their children with localised access to social and welfare resources such as education, housing benefits, unemployment and medical subsidies. China's rapid yet uneven urbanisation and the faster socio-economic development of urban areas has provided rural and urban *hukou* holders with unequal access to these resources.

Over time, due to the underdevelopment of rural China, urban *hukou* has become an object of desire and urban *hukou* holders enjoy a considerably higher symbolic status than their rural counterparts.

Adding to this complex picture, China's substantial regional disparities in socio-economic development mean not all urban *hukou* holders are equal. For example, an urban *hukou* in coastal areas such as Shanghai or Guangdong gives a person access to relatively more local resources than a city in China's less-developed hinterland such as Guizhou or Yunnan.

Marrying up, marrying down

As many studies have highlighted, rural Chinese who migrate to urban areas are denied access to social and welfare resources. This "floating population" of rural-to-urban migrants accounts for more than 260m people in China – but they are effectively treated as "inferior" citizens. It also accounts for about half of the population in Shanghai, according to a recent study published on *hukou* and marriage in the city.



Rural hukou is 'worth less'. Edward and Caroline/flickr, CC BY-SA

Obtaining an urban *hukou* in metropolises such as Shanghai is extremely difficult. For a rural Chinese to qualify for an urban *hukou* usually requires them to invest in business or property or have exceptional individual merits to win high-status urban employment in the public sector. Given widespread poverty in rural areas, the odds are stacked against rural Chinese who wish to obtain an urban *hukou* by economic means.

But marriage still remains a possible route to gaining urban *hukou*. When they marry an urban *hukou* holder, rural Chinese are allowed to convert their rural *hukou* into urban *hukou*. Still, there is a considerable qualifying period after marriage registration before this conversion can take place and the waiting time can range from two years in cities such as Guangzhou to 10 years in Shanghai and Beijing.

Given the Chinese tradition of "marriage of matching doors", it is still considered "undesirable" for an urban *hukou* holder to "marry down" with a rural *hukou* holder. To compensate for this "downgrade",

urban Chinese would usually marry rural-*hukou* holders with a higher educational status than themselves.

Nevertheless, as educational resources are **scarce** in rural areas, it is challenging for rural Chinese to accumulate the credentials to enable this status exchange in the first place. Studies drawing on **national and regional** data consistently show that less than 10% of people are involved in inter-*hukou* marriage in China.

The persistence of patriarchal traditions in China also means the husband's family are usually **expected** to provide the socio-economic foundation for a couple to start a family. Against this backdrop, men with urban *hukou* are favourably viewed and men with rural *hukou* are severely disadvantaged in the marriage market. As a result, the new study from Shanghai showed that rural women are **twice** as likely than rural men to marry an urban *hukou* holder.

Married to intolerance

Rural Chinese who marry urban *hukou* holders are faced with **multiple oppressions** as they experience considerable inequality at home and negative stigmatisation in society.

Rural women in *hukou* intermarriage are often treated as “**unpaid reproductive workers**”, largely valued for giving birth to the heir of the family. They are often expected to adhere to traditional housekeeping roles and undertake the lion's share of domestic chores. Relegated to be “second-class” members of the extended family, they are often marginalised and treated as “outsiders” in important family decisions.

In Chinese society, discrimination against *hukou* intermarriage is also pervasive. Rural Chinese, particularly women, are widely **stigmatised** as calculative and greedy “gold diggers” who deliberately “hook up” urbanites to seek upward marital mobility.



More paths cross in the city. Denys Nevozhai via unsplash

An astronomical number of rural Chinese migrate to big cities to seek educational and employment opportunities, and China's internal migration amounts to the largest non-wartime population mobility ever in human history.

This increases the chances for rural and urban Chinese to meet, mingle, date and develop romantic intimate relationships with each other. But, the lingering influence of the *hukou* policy means intermarriage will continue to be unlikely between rural and urban *hukou* holders, despite love, romance and intimacy. This will further deepen China's already severe rural-urban and regional socio-economic disparities.



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