## HUKOU'S HUMAN GOST

Measuring the Effects on Those Left Behind kindness. I know you mean well for us, but we should go now," read the suicide note placed beside the four children. They died together,

hanks for your

They died together, each drinking pesticide, the youngest a five-year-old girl.

The 2015 deaths shocked China. Officials made statements, change was promised, hands collectively wrung, and the children's parents – who had both left the impoverished village for work – publicly took responsibility for not being there.

"I have truly failed them," mother Ren Xifen told state media. "How I wish I could go with them."

The dead were 'left-behind' children, and although their fate was extreme, their plight is a common one, with a 2013 government backed survey estimating left-behind children number 60 million, or more than 20 percent of all Chinese children.

But it isn't that people like Ren want to leave their children behind. Instead, the millions of broken families that define modern China are the human cost of maintaining China's household registration system, a Sovietinspired 'internal passport,' also known as the *hukou*.

Today, millions of migrants live in cities with hukous registered in other parts of China, making it more difficult to get government sponsored healthcare, purchase property and – key to most parents – access education.

Although children in the countryside may have fewer educational resources, moving to a city can deny access altogether. The rules vary depending on location, but migrant children's access to public schools is often subject to a quota system and parents will need to pay a fee, which many cannot afford.

"I am illiterate and cannot even write my own name," Ren told media after the deaths. "I wanted them to perform well in school, unlike me, living a hard life."

So Ren, like millions of others, left her children behind.

But why force her to make that decision?

The answer can be found in the 90s and early 2000s, when economic reforms led a quarter billion people to move into Chinese cities.

During that time, cultural anthropologist Dr. Yan Hairong was on the ground, documenting the migration



By Sky Thomas Gidge

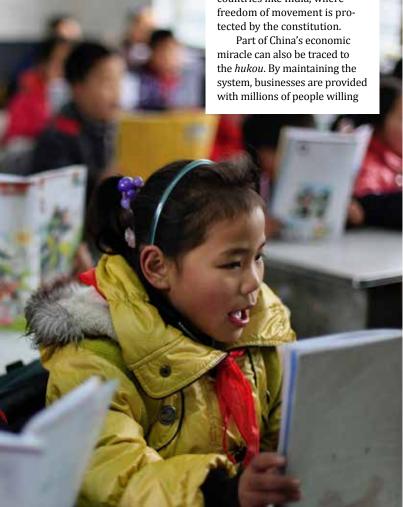
and the role of the hukou.

"My view is that the *hu-kou* system itself has been retooled," Yan says. "The *hukou* system is currently used as a gatekeeper."

A gatekeeper to the cities has proven useful in a country of some 1.3 billion. Although people are mostly free to enter cities and find higher-paying jobs now, the hukou limits the number choosing to do this by making city life less attractive.

People registered in the countryside – where they own land and can access social services – will rethink a move to the city, where wages may be higher but benefits are harder to come by. If they make the move, it's often only for a few years, after which they return to where they are registered.

The result is that China, despite extensive migration, largely dodged the slums and outbreaks of disease that plague other high-population countries like India, where freedom of movement is protected by the constitution.



"It has created a situation where you fracture families"



to work for low wages, before returning to their home in the countryside.

"What's being misunderstood today, [the hukou] is being seen somehow as evil," says Yan. "The view is mainstream – not because most people share it, but because the people who have this view are very vocal. When you look at newspaper articles, you have a single voice, critical, condemning."

Anecdotally, most Chinese view the *hukou* as necessary to control migration to cities and maintain public services.

And they may be right. Kam Wing Chan is a professor at the University of Washington and has written extensively about migration in China. He points out that local governments don't rely heavily on households for funding, so more migrants

in a city does not mean more cash in the budget.

There have been abortive attempts at *hukou* reform in the past, but the Chinese government says it will be slow and 'orderly,' with a planned 100 million migrants – about half of the total – to get city registration by 2020.

"If the hukou reform continues at the current pace – reducing the percent of migrants by about one third of a percentage point a year – it will probably take another 30 or 40 years to abolish the hukou system," says Chan.

That is too slow for experts like Dr. John H. Bacon-Shone, a former member of the HKSAR Government Central Policy Unit and current director of the Social Sciences Research Centre at Hong Kong University.

"I'm not suggesting it's an easy problem, but they have to find some way to do it," he says. "There would need to be a transition period, but I don't accept that they can't cope at all. Many people who want to move have already moved."

Bacon-Shone points to the one-child policy as a rule that was defended, until being dropped with little impact.

"I can't see that [the hukou] has had any positive impact... it has created a situation where you fracture families," he says. "It may not be as visible a consequence, but it doesn't mean it's a lesser one."

## **HOW TO PLAY** You apply for a You've been offered an urban Nanchang To begin, each player rolls one die (open our That's AR app and scan hukou. Lose hukou in one turn while exchange for the government your property. this page to roll a virtual die on your Move forward 2 processes your phone). If the result is a 1, 2 or 3, you paperwork. spaces. were born with a rural hukou and must start on the RURAL PATH. If you roll a 4, 5 or 6, place your piece on the URBAN PATH (use a coin to mark your spot on the board). Once each player has a piece on START, take turns rolling one die and moving ahead the number of spaces rolled. If you roll a 6, for example, move ahead 6 spaces. The government is cutting taxes When approaching the FINISH, you for citizens with Dmust land directly on the space to rural hukous. win. If you're 4 spaces away from the Move forward 5 FINISH and roll a 5, you must remain spaces. where you are and try to roll a 4 on your next turn. You have a job in the city but your Your girlfriend's ${\bf 4}^{\rm The \ first \ player \ to \ land \ on \ the}_{\rm FINISH \ wins!}$ let her marry a man with a Beijing hukou. Move back 2 children cannot attend school there without PLAYERS: 2-4 hukous. Move **EST. PLAY TIME:** 10 MINUTES back 4 spaces. A family friend Landed on this helps you enter a spot? You can state company opt to switch to and earn a the shorter path Chongqing and obtain an hukou. Move urban hukou! forward 2 spaces. You work in Shanghai but cannot acquire a hukou there. Move back 1 You just received You have a Beijing RMB2,000 from hukou but landed the government to a dream job in fix up your rural Nanjing. Lose one home. Move turn as you think forward 2 spaces. about what to do. **START** RURAL PATH URBAN PATH