Response by Cindy Fan

Communist states closely regulated the movement of people through the use of household registration and internal passports. The collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the introduction of market reforms in China have eased the movement of people across domestic and international borders. Millions of individuals have changed their place or state of residence in the last decades, creating an ever-growing population on the move across the former Communist world and beyond.

Despite these changes in the scope and ease of population movement, states continue to regulate and monitor mobility in important ways. We pose the following questions about the role of state and non-state actors in regulating migration:

The number of people on the move within China is more than the number of foreign-born population worldwide. The role of state and non-state actors is key to understanding such massive mobility as well as the dramatic changes in mobility between the “socialist period” and the “post-socialist period.” I focus primarily on internal migration in China to answer the following questions.

What kinds of migration regimes currently exist and how have they changed from the Communist era?

Three primary migration regimes currently exist in China. First, state-sponsored migration under the central-planning logic still exists, although its magnitude has significantly declined. This is the legacy of the socialist period from 1949 to about 1978, when mobility was largely associated with state agencies allocating jobs to school graduates and transferring workers from one job to another. Those migrants are often referred to as “permanent migrants,” because state-sponsorship entitles them to be officially registered as a resident at the migration destination (and obtain a local hukou; see below).

The second regime involves displaced individuals and families due to state-sponsored large-scaled projects such as the Three Gorges Dam Project, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the South-North Water Transfer Project. They receive monetary compensation and/or are allocated a new place to stay. In that light, they are akin to permanent migrants.

The third regime refers to self-initiated migration mostly for the purpose of economic betterment through jobs in places other than one’s home town or village. This regime has been made possible by the speedy development of markets in almost all sectors of the economy – industry, trade, construction, housing, retail, service, etc. – since the late 1970s and the resultant demand for labor. The vast majority of these migrants are rural-urban migrants. They are by and large considered temporary migrants because most are not eligible to obtain local
residence (local *hukou*) at the destination, although they may have worked and lived at the destination for an extended period of time.

“Floating population,” referring to individuals living in places other than where they are officially registered, is a good estimate of the stock magnitude of temporary migrants. That the floating population has increased from 23 million in 1990 to 144 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010 – and is projected to reach 350 million by 2050 – shows that it is the self-initiated, market regime that has dominated mobility in China during the post-socialist period. Similarly, flow data on 5-year interprovincial mobility shows skyrocketing increase in temporary migration and decline in permanent migration. The respective numbers for 1990, 2000, and 2010 are 6.2 million, 27.5 million, and 49.2 million for temporary migrants and 5.4 million, 4.2 million, and 4.1 million for permanent migrants.

**How do Communist and post-Communist states regulate population movement differently from other kinds of polities?**

The Chinese government uses institutional means to regulate population movement. In particular, the household registration (*hukou*) system, implemented in the late 1950s, has been the most effective means of migration control. Under this system, every Chinese citizen is recorded as a member of a household together with a residence or *hukou* status – either rural or urban – and associated with a specific locality. The *hukou* status is passed on from parents to children and is difficult to change. People with urban *hukou* are entitled to work and access subsidized food, housing, education and other social services. Those with rural *hukou* have access to farmland but are otherwise on their own.

Before the 1980s, open markets for food, housing and jobs were virtually non-existent, and almost all necessities in urban areas were controlled by the state. Without urban *hukou* and accompanied benefits, it was next to impossible for peasants to survive in cities. Thus, peasants were bound to the countryside and rural-urban migration was minimal. Since the 1980s, expanded markets for food and other necessities have made it possible for rural migrants to live and work in cities without necessarily possessing urban *hukou*. This has enabled a surge in rural-urban migration. Nevertheless, those migrants remain temporary migrants institutionally, economically, and socially – the vast majority are not expected and do not intend to stay permanently in urban areas. In that light, one’s place of origin, specifically one’s place of registration, remains a critical factor in regulating migration. In free-market economies such as the United States, internal migration is free, and establishment of one’s locational membership and access to accompanied benefits – such as in-state fees for college – is a function of residency rather than inherited institutional status.

**How do international organizations and non-state entities interact with state actors in regulating migration flows?**
The most prominent international organizations that have shaped population movement in China are multinational corporations. In search for cheap, disciplined labor and weak environmental and labor oversight, multinational corporations not only invest in China but solicit and utilize government support to establish and expand their operations. The numerous foreign enterprises in coastal provinces that employ massive numbers of unskilled workers have exerted a strong pull to rural-urban migrants from poor inland provinces. Many of those foreign enterprises began in sites – such as the Special Economic Zones – where the national or local government offers attractive incentives such as free rent and tax breaks.

More recently, labor unrest and wage hike in coastal areas has motivated some enterprises to move inland. Here, again, local governments have provided incentives that shape where multinational corporations relocate. When planning to shift some of his workforce from coastal Shenzhen to inland Chengdu, Taiwanese investor and Foxconn founder and chairman Terry Gou commented: “I told the Chengdu government: I’m investing $3.5 billion [in the factories] and we want you to invest $7 billion…” A mega-plant of Foxconn in Chengdu is welcome news to Sichuan migrants who may now work closer to their home village, but this would not have been possible without a close partnership between the multinational corporation and the city government.

**How do designations of legality and illegality impact population movement?**

Some writers, mostly in the Western media, have referred to temporary migrants in China as undocumented or even illegal migrants. Technically, those migrants are not illegal because they do have the right to move about in China, although they might be considered outsiders if they are not registered in the place where they live. Nonetheless, one’s hukou status does impact the locational possibilities of residence and work. Typically, rural migrant workers not only keep their rural home but leave behind some family members – spouse, children, and/or parents – to farm and provide care-giving. Remittances are often used to build or expand houses for the migrant’s eventual return. And, migrants tend to return home during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) and/or during planting and harvest seasons. Migrants’ circulatory movement and maintenance of the rural social and economic bases indicates that institutional status is still quite critical in determining where one’s home, or permanent settlement, is.

**How have changing borders affected migration regimes and transformed distinction between “internal” and “external” migrants and “legal” and “illegal” migrants?**

This question might be more applicable for migrants who cross international borders. However, the following three cases illustrate how changing borders affect “internal” migrants in China. As cities physically expand outwards, they encroach upon rural neighborhoods, whose residents then become in-situ migrants. Such “urban villages,” numbering in the hundreds in large cities, used to be farming
villages but have seen their farmlands converted into urban uses. Their residents, still having a rural status, now must rely on non-farm sources of income, and many have turned to leasing out their houses to “real” migrants – those who have left rural homes to work in cities – for a living.

A second case involves rural places being “upgraded” into urban designations – towns or cities. Residents in those places instantly become urban. In that sense, they also are in-situ migrants. During the last two to three decades, numerous such administrative upgradings have occurred throughout China, boosting not only the number and size of towns and cities but also the level of urbanization and magnitude of urban population.

Finally, Hong Kong is a rather unique case. Under the “one country, two systems” arrangement implemented since Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, the border between Hong Kong and the mainland still operates much like an international border with customs and immigration control. Mainland Chinese do not have right of abode in Hong Kong. Such arrangement has served the purpose of making the return of Hong Kong possible and relatively uneventful, but tension has risen about mainland Chinese migrating to Hong Kong and/or abusing its resources. In particular, mainland Chinese women giving birth in Hong Kong in order for their children to become Hong Kong citizens; and mainland Chinese smuggling goods across the border; are among the two most contentious issues in recent years.

**How have changing borders disrupted historical migratory patterns?**

The return of Hong Kong to China that was negotiated between Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher during the early 1980s had set off waves of Hong Kong citizens departing for Canada, Australia, and to a certain extent the United States. Many have since returned to Hong Kong; those who decided to stay and their offspring now constitute significant communities in the respective destination countries.

Since the Hong Kong handover, “immigration” from mainland China to Hong Kong has been in great number.

Both the above two cases demonstrate how the changing nature of a border creates new waves of migration.

*We also recognize the roles that individuals and groups play in defining migration patterns, often in opposition to the goals of the state. In thinking about these issues, we pose the following questions:*  

*How have migrants responded to these various migration regimes and what do their responses teach us about the lived experiences of migration?*  

Rural migrants in China are active agents navigating new circumstances in the post-socialist period by taking advantage of new job opportunities in cities while
recognizing and protecting the value of their rural resources. Their reliance on both cities and the countryside thus results in their straddling and circulating between the two. Not only their daily lives but their family lives are significantly impacted. Specifically, households are commonly split into two or more places. Spouses may live in different places; and children may be raised by one parent alone or by grandparents. The lure of urban wage has contributed to young people growing up not having any farming experience but rather preparing to enter migrant work as soon as they finish school. Farming is an increasingly undesirable means of livelihood. In some villages, farmland is left fallow and pig sty is empty. Rather, migrant work has become a way of life in rural China, such that in many villages most of the adults and young adults are gone and only the young and old are left.

What strategies and tactics have individuals and groups used to subvert or maneuver around migration regimes?

Rural migrants have actively pursued division of labor in order to tap into urban wages and at the same time maintain their social and economic bases in the countryside. The most typical forms are gender and intergenerational divisions of labor. When the husband leaves home for migrant work, the left-behind wife is responsible for farming and raising children. If both spouses are away, then the left-behind elderly are often the ones taking care of the children. Both, and other similar cases of division of labor (e.g., among siblings), entail splitting the household as a strategy.

How have these strategies redefined common distinctions between forced and voluntary migrations; temporary, seasonal, transit and permanent migrations; and patterns of chain migration and migratory networks?

Migrants’ strategies challenge existing definitions and terms about migration. Temporary migrants in China are temporary only in terms of their hukou status. Yet, despite their many years of living and working in cities, they are not permanent migrants not only because they lack urban hukou but also because they are socially and economically inferior and do not intend to stay permanently. It seems that the categories of permanent and temporary migrations are, at best, inadequate to describe China’s rural-urban migrants.

Likewise, the concepts of seasonal and transit migrations are not fully applicable. True, some rural migrants do return during the Spring Festival and during planting and harvest seasons. But increasingly migrants use technology to keep in touch with family and replace long and expensive train rides. Among younger migrants, in particular, not returning home for a year or two is not uncommon. As for transit migration, it could be argued that migrants are in transit because they are footloose and they frequently change destinations (places of work). Yet, to say that they are in transit implies an eventual permanent settlement in the city, which has so far not been a common or viable choice at all.
China’s rural-urban migrants are voluntary migrants. However, rural poverty and poor outlook for agriculture as a means of livelihood leaves peasants no options other than working in urban areas. In that light, they are forced to migrate. Finally, migratory networks are indeed characteristic of the process of rural-urban migration in China, namely, family members and fellow villagers who are experienced migrants are often the reason for new migrants to choose a specific destination and a specific occupation (e.g., Anhui women working as domestic workers in Shanghai). The concept of chain migration is to a certain extent applicable, as it is increasingly common that the migrant’s spouse and other family members would follow him/her to the city, albeit not necessarily staying there permanently.

*How have communication technologies (Cell phones, social networking sites, Twitter, Skype) transformed imagined migration possibilities and movement patterns?*

Communication technologies make it easier and faster for migrants to be in touch with left-behind family members, allowing for fewer returns if migrants choose to work more as well as save on travel expenses. Those technologies have also enabled migrants to transmit among themselves information about wages, job opportunities, and work conditions. As outsiders to the city, migrants are footloose and many are ready to change jobs and even locations when more desirable opportunities arise elsewhere. The labor shortage experienced in the Pearl River Delta since the mid-2000s is precisely due to migrants learning about better jobs elsewhere, especially in the Shanghai and Yangtze Delta area, and thus deciding to leave.