Does China Have an Apartheid Pass System?

Peter Alexander and Anita Chan

This article makes and defends the claim that China's contemporary household registration system can reasonably be described as a quasi-apartheid pass system. The historical and ideological underpinnings of the two systems vary greatly, and the racial core of the South African system, lacking in China, led to its eventual demise. Nevertheless, the essence of both systems lies in the use of passes to control the influx of rural migrants into urban areas, thereby buttressing cheap-labour economies. Possible explanations for this similarity are presented. Finally, it is argued that in China, as in apartheid South Africa, the pass system is associated with massive abuses of human rights, and that its retention should be opposed.

Keywords: Apartheid; China; Household Registration; Influx Control; Pass

China maintains a system of permits that control migrant workers from the countryside in a similar way to the pass system under apartheid. This is a strong claim, and to many readers our paper's lead sentence will seem highly controversial. Those knowledgeable about the apartheid system in South Africa may even dismiss the statement as incredible. But if the statement stands up to detailed scrutiny, it would not only strengthen criticisms of Chinese labour relations, it would also, more broadly, call into question the underpinnings of China's so-called economic miracle.

Our paper was born out of a chance encounter at a conference on globalisation and labour, held in Hong Kong early in 2001. The authors—a South Africanist and a China specialist—discussed the evidence at length again a year later in Beijing, and later still in Canberra, and exchanged information and commented on drafts by means of countless email exchanges. The structure of the paper could not be simpler:

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first a consideration of the South African pass laws, then a look at China’s household registration system, and finally a conclusion based on a comparison of the two.

The Apartheid Pass System

The literal meaning of apartheid is ‘apartness’, but in political discourse it meant ‘racial separation’, and as such it provided an ideology and a policy framework for the National Party, which ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Thus, the ‘apartheid pass system’ can be taken to mean the systematic use of internal passes to control the movements of black South Africans during the years of Nationalist rule. At its core, the purpose was to restrict the movement of rural people into urban areas: that is, ‘influx control’. In reality, as shall be observed, important aspects of the system were adaptations from pre-apartheid years (when, to complicate matters, racial separation was already practised, albeit in a milder and less ideological form than after 1948). Moreover, the laws that underpinned the phenomenon were abolished eight years before the Nationalists were removed from government. In what follows below an attempt will be made, first, to describe the pass system and, second, to relate this to a broader understanding of apartheid.

In 1910, when the Union of South Africa was established, a patchwork of pass laws was already in place, affecting different parts of the country in a variety of ways. The earliest passes, introduced in the Cape from 1709 onwards, were aimed at facilitating the movement of, first, slaves, then servants, and later ‘foreign Natives’. From 1870, with the development of large-scale mining, the Transvaal government introduced ‘shilling passes’ to limit an efflux of workers from white-owned farms that wanted to retain their labour. In the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, Africans were required to hold a local identification pass, and, since it was linked to employment, this increased control by both employers and officialdom. In other towns and jurisdictions, black workers might be required to carry service contracts, travel passes, district passes, night passes, residential permits, tax certificates, and/or one of a number of other documents. The registration fees and fines associated with these documents were used to provide municipal services, mostly for whites (Hindson 1981: 36–41; Hindson 1987: 21–33; Kahn 1949: 275–83; Levy 1982: 76–80; Saunders and Southey 1998: 130).

According to Doug Hindson (1987: 31), who undertook the most detailed study of the system: ‘In the expanding industrial areas, the pass laws enabled the authorities to endorse out rural work seekers who failed to find work. If they failed to leave the urban area, they could be forced to do hard labour.’ Notwithstanding this capacity to ‘endorse out’—a key feature of influx control—these earlier measures were aimed mainly at securing and controlling labour, maintaining public order, and raising funds, rather than limiting urbanisation as such. With regard to this last concern, key changes came with the passage of the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911, which applied principally to the main mining districts, and the 1923 Urban Areas Act, which affected the towns. In important respects—including requirements to carry labour contracts, thus helping to sustain unfree labour—these measures
built on preceding Transvaal legislation, but went further. In particular, by linking employment to the provision of racially segregated accommodation in the form of residential 'locations' or compounds, the acts provided a basis for ensuring that, except for a small minority, Africans would not have rights of residence beyond South Africa's rural areas. In addition, labour depots were built to house work seekers, permits to seek work could be denied if there was little work, and the urban unemployed could be imprisoned or sent to a labour colony (which usually meant working on a farm for nothing) (Hindson 1981: 69-74). Ellison Kahn (1949: 288) summarised the way the laws, as shaped by the Urban Areas Act, affected a rural African wishing to work in Johannesburg:

[First] he has to produce his identification pass to the district pass officer and obtain a travelling pass. [...] In Johannesburg the travel pass is taken from him, and he is issued with a permit to seek work for six days. This [...] might be renewed once and even twice. [...] If successful in finding work ... the Native has his service contract registered. ... If the Native wishes to travel he must have his employer's permission, and, in addition, if he wishes to proceed from the Witwatersrand [the gold mining and urban area centred on Johannesburg], a travel pass from the pass office.

In practice, in the urban areas, unlike the mines, there were problems with implementing the changes. Partly this was because much was left in the hands of the municipalities, and these were often reluctant to assist, and partly it was because the number and lack of commitment of urban employers made aspects of the law difficult to police. New statutes and amendments were introduced, and convictions for pass law offences increased. Such convictions rose from an annual average of about 48,000 in the early 1920s, to roughly 94,000 a decade later, to over 140,000 between 1940 and 1944 (Hindson 1981: 383). Yet the urban African population grew rapidly, by 57 per cent in the ten years up to 1946 (by which date it outnumbered South Africa's urban white population) (Alexander 2000: 19). By 1937, Jan Smuts, then minister of native affairs, was acknowledging that the 'influx from the country has been largely uncontrolled', and five years later, when he was prime minister, he added: 'You might as well try to sweep the ocean back with a broom' (quotes from Greenberg 1987: 33; Lipton 1986: 21). The twenty-year period until the end of the Second World War witnessed considerable economic growth, and, as a consequence, the level of urban unemployment had been relatively low, minimising disquiet over in-migration (Alexander 2000: 18; Greenberg 1987: 34). However, in the immediate postwar years—with bad droughts, demobilisation from the army and job retrenchments—there was a sudden increase in urban unemployment, especially among Africans (Alexander 2000: 99).

The Nationalists' 1948 victory in large measure flowed from their promise to address the perceived failure of influx control, which, as well as encouraging many urban whites to fear a 'black peril', had produced a labour shortage on the farms. The policy for dealing with these problems was implemented through three key pieces of apartheid legislation, all enacted in 1952, and all involving increased powers for the central government. First, a new Urban Areas Act prohibited Africans from
staying in proclaimed urban areas for more than 72 hours (a reduction from 14 days), unless, according to Section 10(1) (quoted in Hindson 1981: 201):

a. he was born and permanently resides in such area; or
b. he has worked continuously in such area for one employer for a period of not less than ten years or has remained continuously in such area for a period of not less than fifteen years ... or
c. such native is the wife, unmarried daughter or son under the age of [18] ... of any native mentioned in paragraph a. or b. ... or
d. permission so to remain has been granted to him...

As Merle Lipton notes (1986: 26), those included in paragraph d. were technically migrants, and only those included in the first three paragraphs were popularly referred to as 'section tenners', i.e. Africans with rights associated with urban residence. It was this act that drew a clear line between urban and migrant workers. Many Africans who had previously worked and lived legally in the cities were now threatened with being endorsed out if they became unemployed (Posel 1991: 112).

Secondly, the Native Laws Amendment Act provided for a national network of labour bureaux. District bureaux would control the efflux of Africans out of the native reserves and white farming districts, preventing travel to the urban areas unless there were vacancies to be filled. Meanwhile, local bureaux in the urban areas implemented the government's urban labour preference policy, which aimed to reduce urban unemployment (Posel 1991: 92–108). Those recruited through the bureaux, as well as those recruited for work on the mines, were treated as migrants.

Finally, there was the confusingly named Abolition and Co-ordination of Documents Act, which introduced a new comprehensive pass. This was known in Afrikaans as the bewysboek (book of proof), but most Africans knew it as the dompas (stupid pass). As Keith Breckenridge has argued (2002: 1), 'more than anything else, [this pass] defined the essence of life in Apartheid South Africa', giving 'detailed substance to the old ideal of the universal, centralised registration and control of all African adults'. According to the act, from a fixed date all Africans over 16—including, for the first time, women—would have to carry the new pass (for men the date was set as 1 February 1958, and for women it was 1 December 1960). The pass was in the form of a small book, and included an identity card (with the bearer's photograph, name, identity number, and ethnicity), their permanent address, employment details, 'encounters with the police' and, for men, a record of tax payments (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 390; Duncan 1984: 83; Horrell 1960: 4). The system was centrally administered by a Pretoria-based bureau that filed all pass applications—each of which included an applicant's ten fingerprints—and computerised all key data (Duncan 1984: 83). A small elite among Africans—which included chiefs, professors and medical doctors—was exempt from the main requirements associated with the pass, but still had to carry a dompas, albeit of a different colour from the ordinary one.

The new measures were not initially implemented as harshly as in subsequent times. It took years to physically introduce the new passes, there was a continuing
lack of co-operation from some local authorities, many employers preferred to engage new workers without using the bureaux, and there was considerable popular opposition, especially to the extension of pass laws to women. But during the 1960s—following the massacre of anti-pass law protesters at Sharpeville and the destruction of organised resistance—the screws were tightened. Exemptions were removed, Section Ten rights were reduced, single women were generally prevented from coming to town, and it became more difficult to obtain employment without going through a bureau (Greenberg 1987: 41–4; Hindson 1987: 69–70; Lipton 1986: 35).

There can be no doubt that the pass laws were responsible for abuses of human rights, the break-up of family life, and considerable poverty (for examples, see Horrell 1960: 27–39; Sachs 1965: 259–64). In the urban areas, the laws were underpinned by ‘a routinised pattern of large-scale police raids and daily street-corner interrogations’ (Frankel 1979: 207). Prosecutions for pass law offences peaked in 1968 at 693,661, a figure that represented more than 10 per cent of the working-age population (Greenberg 1987: 2; Hindson 1981: 385). Penalties included deportation and imprisonment, but the most common was a fine, which usually, according to a 1983 survey, amounted to between 30 and 90 rands (at a time when the average earnings of an African worker were about 300 rands per month) (Omond 1986: 97, 125). Moreover, whilst influx controls did not halt urbanisation, they tended to shift its locus to parts of the reserves, now termed bantustans, that were close to industrial centres, and in these peri-urban enclaves the living conditions were harsher than in the urban areas proper (Hindson 1987: 72).

Workers survived as best they could. Some, such as Sam Pholotho, later president of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, secured employment using forged work permits (Kiloh with Sibeko 2000: 31). Petrus Tom (1985: 7) and Moses Mayekiso (LACOM 1990: 28–37), who became leaders of the National Union of Metalworkers, remembered dodging police raids, either by running or by hiding under beds, in toilets, inside wardrobes, and even in washing tubs. Both men also recall the importance of corruption, with Mayekiso commenting: ‘The police were very fond of bribes in those days. If you had ten rand in your pocket, you just handed it over and then they would not arrest you.’ According to two sociologists writing in 1963, corruption was so widespread that ‘precise figures as to the cost of a pass are quoted even in remote villages in Tanganyika’ (Wilson and Mafeje 1963: 9–10). They reported a conversation with a pass office clerk who told them that selling passes was ‘not very nice, but a man’s got to live. ... One must help one’s fellows.’ Poverty was so great in the rural areas that cost–benefit analysis might encourage law breaking; thus, for instance, ‘a person from the Ciskei [one of the bantustans] who worked illegally in Pietermaritzburg for nine months and went to prison for three months as a consequence, improved his standard of living by 702%’ (Duncan 1984: 86).

The pass laws were not scrapped until 1986, but in 1973, following a powerful wave of strikes in Durban, a number of minor reforms were adopted that reduced the number of pass law convictions (these included the abolition of Masters and
Servants legislation, which had enforced coercive labour relationships since 1841) (Hindson 1987: 81). After the Soweto uprising of 1976, the government appointed a commission that in 1979 proposed a number of other reforms, including the dismantling of boundaries between urban areas and white farming districts. Few of the commission’s recommendations were implemented, but it contributed to shifting opinions within the state, and in the early 1980s a number of high-profile court judgments led to some softening of the pass laws. Eventually, the government decided to replace influx controls with what it called ‘orderly urbanisation’. In practice this led to the development of massive informal settlements around the urban areas (Hindson 1987: 83–7; Hindson and Lacey 1983: 98–9; Murray 1995: 232).

Nigel Worden (1998: 120) suggests that the pass laws were abolished as a consequence of ‘a combination of employer needs, the spiralling costs of the immense bureaucratic administration, and the belief that repeal would appease international criticism of apartheid’. Although this is a fair assessment, one might add that, with increasing agricultural mechanisation, the benefits of pass laws had diminished even for white farmers. Moreover, migrant workers, no longer able to survive on low wages, were often at the forefront of trade union mobilisations, and these in turn led to increases in the price of ‘cheap’ labour (Hindson 1987: 82–3). More broadly, as Martin Murray argued (1994: 42), ‘the central contradiction in this whole system of segregating and regulating the movement of urbanizing Africans arose out of the unattainable objective of trying to secure a suitable supply of labour while minimizing the presence of Africans in the metropolitan areas’.

How should we make sense of the pass system within a broader understanding of apartheid South Africa? Influx control, one of apartheid’s central pillars, would not have been possible without the pass laws. However, the pass system is not reducible to a facet of influx control, and there is merit in distinguishing its different aspects. First, the pass laws contributed to an oppressor that was specifically racial. Whilst all adult South Africans required an identity document, only Africans—not whites, nor the Indian and so-called ‘coloured’ populations—had to carry passes. Pass legislation provided the police with opportunities to detain any African who might be unemployed, in breach of an employment contract or curfew, or a tax offender, or a political activist, or any African merely disliked by a particular policeman. Moreover, since ‘pass bearers’ were not officially classed as ‘employees’ until the law was changed in 1979, Africans experienced further discrimination in terms of industrial relations and trade union rights.

Influx control, as distinct from the pass laws, was concerned to limit the number of workers with rights to permanent residence in urban areas, whilst at the same time fostering the periodic migration of Africans between their rural ‘homes’ and jobs in urban areas or in the mines. Thus, it drew a sharp line between those Africans who were regarded as urban—that is, those with Section Ten rights—and those who, in essence, were regarded as rural. Section Ten Africans had certain benefits, albeit more meagre than those of whites. These included access to family housing, to urban schools, and, though this is more complicated, to unemployment
insurance and state pensions. By contrast, rural migrants were not allowed to bring their families with them to the urban areas, their average wages were lower, and if they were old or infirm they were expected to return to a rural area.

In a seminal article, Harold Wolpe (1972) argued that for South African capitalism the chief benefit of influx control was that, by buttressing the migrant labour system, it helped reduce costs to a minimum. Drawing on Marx’s labour theory of value, he argued that, whereas, with an urban workforce, capitalists had to provide an income that included the costs of reproducing the next generation of workers (food, housing and clothing for children and child rearers, and basic education), with migrant workers these costs could be offset by subsistence agriculture. He further suggested that apartheid, including its new pass laws and other repressive measures, was an attempt to grapple with the fact that by 1948 production in most rural areas had declined below levels where subsistence was still possible. In the 1980s, Hindson (1981, 1987) built on this analysis by showing how the pass laws actually created a differentiated labour market. He argued that, as well as reinforcing cheap, migrant labour, influx controls also permitted the expansion of a stable urban labour force, increasingly needed to undertake semi-skilled work.

These perspectives, while helpful, remain inadequate. First, the economic growth that accompanied influx controls was geared towards creating an economic basis for political domination by whites. Second, by limiting urban unemployment, by restricting the development of a permanent black urban working class, and by strengthening the means of repressing black opposition, influx controls had direct implications for sustaining Nationalist rule. Moreover, the functionalism implicit in Wolpe’s and even Hindson’s analysis prevented the development of a more nuanced assessment; one that recognised contradictions present within the pass system that would contribute to its unravelling. Here, a significant consideration is that, had the pass laws been concerned just with influx controls they might have maintained divisions between urban and rural African workers, but inasmuch as they were also about oppressing Africans in general, they provided a strong basis for unifying African opposition to apartheid (see also Posel 1983).

China’s Household Registration System

China’s household registration system (HRS) maintains a rigid distinction between China’s rural population, that is people who have a rural hukou (household registration), and urban residents, who have an urban hukou. Movement of rural people into the cities is restricted, and they require a permit to stay and work temporarily in any urban area. If caught without these permits, people with a rural hukou could be placed in a detention centre, fined, and deported back to their home village or home town (that is, ‘endorsed out’, to borrow a South African expression). Those with a rural hukou who obtain a temporary employment permit to work in an urban area are not entitled to the pensions, schooling, unemployment benefits, etc. enjoyed by those who have an urban hukou. There are, in short, some obvious and significant similarities between the two countries, but a closer examination is
required before we can consider equating China's pass system with what operated in apartheid South Africa.

The Chinese HRS can be divided into two stages: the Maoist period, from 1949 to 1978, and the period associated with the economic reforms that began in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping and then continued to the present day. The HRS under the economic reforms was inherited from the previous period, but its nature underwent major changes that were due not so much to any new and deliberate design by the state, but rather mostly to the economic and social changes that China has witnessed over the past two decades.

Before 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party came to power, the movement of people in China was not restricted. The HRS, which was modelled on Soviet practice, came into existence alongside the creation of a planned (or command) economy. Such an economy required meticulous planning of all macro and micro facets of society, from industrial policies specifying where to allocate the country's resources, down to what we would consider as the most personal of everyday affairs, such as the daily amount of foods consumed. To ensure this worked, it was necessary to institute a rationing system for staple foods and other necessities, such as cloth. This required an elaborate ration coupon distributive system, which in turn required that everyone be registered. These ration coupons could only be used in the locality where they were issued, which automatically restricted people's geographic mobility. Grain ration coupons, with which one could buy state-subsidised grain, were only issued to urban residents. Peasants were responsible for feeding themselves, and when they travelled they were supposed to bring their grain with them.

"The initial motive behind registering the population was simply to become clear about the numbers involved" (Slinger 1999: 43). The public security ministry (i.e. the police force) was the government bureaucracy in charge of registration. The 1951 Regulations Governing the Urban Population explicitly stated that the regulations 'were formulated with a view to maintaining social peace and order, safeguarding the people's security and protecting their freedom of residence and of movement'. When moving residence, according to these very early regulations, one was supposed to inform the local public security organ, so that it could cancel the household's census record, and then report to the relevant authorities at the new place of residence (Cheng and Selden 1994: 649). At its inception, registration of residence was not to control rural-to-urban migration, but was used for controlling the movement of urban people.

Concomitant with the registration of one's place of residence was the establishment of what is known as the 'work unit' (danwei) system. The industrial workers—regarded as the progressive, advanced class—were entitled to benefits such as pensions, housing, labour insurance, and subsidised meals, which were linked to the work unit (Lu and Perry 1997: 1–10). The danwei system was also a system of tight social control. Work units were granted enormous power by the state to control their employees. Changing jobs even within the same city required the approval of the work unit authority, which had control over the personal documents necessary for a job transfer. As a result of an individual's dependency on his or her work unit,
there was very little job mobility in China. Individuals generally could move only when they were assigned new posts by the work unit or government authorities. In the days of Mao, one heard much about husbands and wives living in separate cities due to work units not granting either of them permission to change jobs, and husbands with urban jobs had great difficulty bringing their wives and children from rural residences to the cities (Walder 1986: 28–84).

Control of rural-urban migration became a component part of this system of extraordinarily strict labour-market controls. Peasants were allowed to come into the city only when their labour was needed, for instance during the Great Leap Forward, when a vast amount of labour was expended in iron and steel production, or to work on large-scale labour-intensive infrastructure projects. Otherwise, peasants were to stay in their place, in the newly formed agricultural collectives. In 1955, the Directive Concerning Establishment of a Permanent System of Household Registration formally divided China’s population into two main groups: those with urban hukou and those with rural hukou (Cheng and Selden 1994: 655).

Beginning in the 1960s, peasants with a rural hukou were allowed to work in the cities only if recruited temporarily as a group by urban work units (Solinger 1999: 49). A rural collective arranged for this temporary factory work, and the group did not normally receive salaries directly from the factory. Instead, the money was remitted to the rural collective, and members of the temporary urban work squad were paid out of the same wage pool as their rural neighbours.

In sum, at the time Deng came to power at the end of the 1970s, a host of institutions was already in place that controlled the movement and job conditions of all sectors of the population in China. With the introduction of economic reforms, creating space for domestic and foreign capitalists, state-directed allocation of labour had to gradually give way to a less rigid labour market in which people could attempt to secure jobs on an individual basis. At the same time, foreign direct investment (FDI) flowed in from Hong Kong, Taiwan, elsewhere in Asia, and Western countries, and these firms demanded a vast number of low-paid, unskilled workers to make labour-intensive goods for export. This export industry was valuable for China, and became a sizeable component of the Chinese economy. Today, China is the second largest recipient of FDI in the world, after the United States.

The reason often cited for China’s attractiveness to foreign investors has been its large reserve of cheap, docile labour. China’s population is huge, and there is great pressure on the land, whence comes an almost inexhaustible pool of poor migrant workers. Figures published by the US Department of Labor (2000: 1–51) show that China’s minimum legal wages in the textile, garment and footwear industries are about the same as several other Asian countries, which are, as a whole, slightly lower than in Mexico and several Central American countries. However, the wages cited for China do not reflect the hourly wage in Chinese factories, as employers make the workers labour for illegally long hours—up to 70 hours a week—to obtain the monthly legal minimum wage. When these additional hours are taken into account, wages in China are lower than elsewhere in the region (Ross and Chan 2002: 8–13), often lower even than those in Cambodia and Vietnam, two countries that are
poorer than China. The fundamental cause, we think, is China’s HRS, which is central to the maintenance of cheap migrant labour.

One big difference between the earlier planned economy and the present day is that while China’s population is still divided into two main groups — those with an urban hukou and those with a rural hukou — for the former group the controls over job mobility were greatly reduced by the 1990s. Educated urban people, whose expertise is in high demand in a decentralised economy, can now move more easily from work unit to work unit and from place to place. By the close of the eighties, with the prices of food and goods now largely set by the market, the ration-coupon system had vanished. Gradually the state stopped allocating most jobs, allowing a labour market to thrive. Production plans were no longer handed down from on high, and state enterprises had far greater decision-making powers in managing their own production and in hiring and firing labour. Pay scales could be set at the enterprise level, whereas earlier there had been eight national wage grades. With a de-emphasis on political conformity, work units no longer performed the same function of authoritarian social control. One scholar called it the ‘de-statization’ of Chinese factories (You 1998: 111–33), but this de-statization was not extended to an elimination of the hukou divide. Control over freedom of movement and over the domicile of those people holding a rural hukou has not been rescinded, invoking similarities to the pass system.

Dorothy Solinger (1999: 83) describes the procedures a peasant has to go through in order to work in an urban area:

If a factory’s leaders wished to engage peasant laborers, they needed to deal with the city labour bureau. First the workers or their group had to be in possession of a certificate from the home place’s government allowing them to leave and go into the city. Then the workers had to be issued a temporary work permit (linshi gongzuo xiekezheng). Next factory officials were to take this permit to the public security bureau, which would dispense a temporary residence certificate before the workers or group would be entitled to sign a contract with the enterprise. No individual (holding a non-urban hukou) was allowed to change jobs without retracing these steps.

Despite this pass system, the enormous bureaucratic edifice that was erected to control the influx of migrants could not stem the flow. In China, enticed by work opportunities in the rapidly developing industrial regions along the coastal belt, tens of millions of peasants from poor inner provinces, trying to escape poverty and subsistence livelihoods, have surged out in search of jobs (K.W. Chan 2001: 127–55; Du 2000: 67–78; Gao 1998: 70–7; Rozelle et al. 1999: 358–67). It is impossible to estimate the exact number, but a range of between 50 and 80 million is often cited (see, e.g., Khan 1998: 41; Li 2001: 306). It is estimated that Beijing has 1.6 million migrant workers, that Shanghai has 3.3 million, and that in Guangdong Province there are 12 million (Li 1998: 47; also see Pun 1999: 337; Nanfang Gongbao, Dagongren [Southern Daily, Migrant Worker Edition], 5 April 2002). During the week after the Chinese New Year, when migrant workers who had gone home for the festival return to the cities, bringing with them relatives and friends, the effect on transport is dramatic. For instance, in a matter of days Guangzhou, the largest city
in south China, suddenly has to handle a couple of million migrant workers descending upon it by trains and buses. Early in 2002, in the hope of dampening expectations for jobs, the Guangdong provincial government announced that factories should not recruit new migrants during this period; but still 5.2 million migrants came immediately after the New Year, a quarter of a million more than the year before (Li 2002).

New arrivals in search of low-end jobs are desperate to recoup the money they have invested in transport expenses and in applying for the array of documents and certificates that they need to acquire before leaving home, and they will take any job available. Here is the case of one migrant reported in a Chinese newspaper. He was informed by a friend that if he went to Shenzhen he would have a job, but before he left he had to apply for a 'border region pass' (120 yuan, taking six months), a personal identity card (80 yuan, taking a month), an unmarried status certificate (60 yuan, valid for one year), and a certificate to prove that he was not born out of quota (45 yuan, valid for a year), totalling 305 yuan (Yangcheng Wanbao [Canton Evening News], 30 March 2001). To put this into perspective, the minimum wage in Shenzhen in 2000 was 547 yuan for a full month's work, and he would be lucky if he could enter a factory that would pay him as much as that.

On arrival in Shenzhen, armed with these documents, he thought he could become a 'legal' migrant worker and could begin working without a problem. But the factory demanded 300 yuan as a deposit before it would give him the job. He then had to spend 40 yuan for a work permit and another 300 yuan for a temporary residence permit. In short, on arrival at his destination he had to spend a further 640 yuan. In all, without including transport costs, he had to spend almost twice as much as the monthly wage. Most new migrants, therefore, are usually in debt when they first arrive in a city.

According to official statistics, each of the 3 or 4 million migrants in the Shenzhen Economic Zone spends on average 600 yuan a year on certificates, amounting to almost 10 per cent of their total annual income (Yangcheng Wanbao, 30 March 2001). For local governments, allowing the migrants to come in is, thus, a lucrative business. Migrant workers generate wealth for the local population, but, because of the HRS, local people have no responsibility to redistribute anything to these temporary sojourners, who are not eligible for any of the medical or other welfare benefits available to urbanites. Nor are the workers from the countryside allowed to bring their families with them, and thus the urban government has no additional educational expenses to meet. Employers benefit by not having to provide labour insurance, maternity leave or family accommodation. In addition, the HRS helps to regulate unemployment, letting in more labourers when needed, and driving them out when there is an excess, or when their numbers stretch local facilities to the limit.

The deposit that our migrant needed to pay to the employer is symptomatic of the desperate situation of most migrant workers. Paying a substantial deposit has become a common practice at the foreign-funded factories in Guangdong province. At first sight the practice seems paradoxical. Instead of the employer paying workers
for work performed, the workers first have to provide a payment to the employers as surety for the job. The deposit obliges the workers to remain at the factory, or they forfeit it. To all intents and purposes, the worker is bonded (Chan 2000: 260–81).

Another practice used by many unscrupulous employers is to withhold a portion of the monthly wage, promising to pay it at the end of the year. In this situation, the longer a worker has worked, the more money he or she is owed by the employer, and the more difficult it is for the worker to leave. Deliberately owing wages in this way often has nothing to do with financial insolvency. One Chinese newspaper article describes it as having become a ‘custom’ in Guangdong (Gongren Ribao [Workers’ Daily], 9 May 2001); while another described it as an ‘incurable disease’. In 2001, Shenzhen City received 51,000 cases of labour complaints, and, of these, 43 per cent were related to unpaid wages (Zhongguo Laodong Baozhang Bao [China Labour and Social Security News], 19 February 2002).

Finally, and perhaps most effective of all, a widespread practice is for employers to take away the migrant workers’ documents. Without these, the workers cannot look for another job under China’s ‘pass system’, even when the work conditions are intolerable and they desperately want to quit. The migrants have to carry these documents with them at all times. If caught without them, they may be thrown into detention, and thus some workers whose documents are in their employer’s possession are afraid even to go outside the factory grounds.

Workers’ hostels, usually located on factory property, extend management control over workers’ lives beyond normal work hours. Their time away from the factory shop floor can be monitored and controlled. Disciplining workers becomes easier because there is near-total control over them. In particular, in some of the Chinese factories managed by Taiwanese and Koreans, the discipline is so fierce that the management style can be described as militaristic—in some of the bigger factories workers are even marched to and from meals and to and from hostels in tight military-style squads (A. Chan 1997: 12–15; 2001: 46–77).

In South China, about 80 per cent of the production-line workers are female, and they are therefore the largest group subjected to this dual shop floor/dormitory discipline (Tan 2000: 292–309). As a whole, there are more migrant male workers than migrant female workers in Chinese cities, at roughly a 3:2 ratio, but many of the men work and live on construction sites in makeshift structures (Solinger 1999: 243–4). Despite crude living conditions, the advantage of this arrangement is that, after work hours, the men have freer personal lives. Factory hostels in China may provide a sense of common fate and community, but little beyond that (Gao 1998: 76–7). The protest actions that have exploded with increasing frequency in China in the past decade have, therefore, tended to be isolated incidents targeted against management, and without any political overtones.

While the large number of strictly controlled migrants pouring into the cities helps drive down wages and conditions, those who do not quickly find jobs face arbitrary detention by the police if caught without the necessary papers. Much as in apartheid South Africa, the behaviour of the police toward migrant workers has become associated with corruption and abuses of power. The detention-and-deport-
tion centres in China have tended to be worse than China's prisons, and stories abound of mistreatment, physical violence, and bribery simply to be released from detention (Human Rights in China 1999). With so many migrants pouring in, the arrests are often random. People who look like rural arrivals are simply pulled off the streets and roughed up. In a pilot study that one of us conducted with ten young migrants, the police had picked five up within the several months they had been in Shenzhen, some more than once, and nine of the ten knew of a friend or relative who had been detained.

Many migrants do not have all the right papers because they are not aware of what they need. Others are too poor to buy them all. But often, through no fault of their own, their documents are kept by the employer they are working for, or they have left a factory without being able to get their documents back because the employer does not want them to leave. As a result, the borrowing of documents from friends and the purchase of forged ones has become very common (Chan 2002: 163-88), as it was in South Africa. According to one survey conducted by a government labour bureau in Guangdong, 80 per cent of the foreign employers openly admitted that they did not care whether the documents were fake or not, as this did not affect production. This widespread infringement of the regulations implies that tacit approval has been granted by the local authorities and police.

Yet this did not stop the police from detaining migrants arbitrarily. Police stations have considered it a lucrative business. For each detainee, fines and extorted bribes have been worth up to several hundred yuan, almost a worker's monthly wage, a heftier sum than was extorted out of migrants under apartheid. Not surprisingly, the numbers detained grew dramatically. In Shanghai, there were 40,000 detentions and deportations in 1993; the number rose to 80,000 in 1996; and rose again to 100,000 in 1997 (Unger 2002: 119; Zhao 2000: 102). As the practice got ever more out of hand, the Guangdong provincial government declared, in March 2002, that detentions should be restricted to beggars, and not applied to migrant workers who do not have the right papers on them (Nanfang Ribao [Southern Daily], 29 March 2002). Rather than obediently comply with the new regulation, the provincial police responded by stating that they have not been misusing the regulation, and they reaffirmed the necessity of rigorously implementing the pass system, without mentioning that they were continuing to detain and abuse large numbers of migrant workers (Yangchang Wambao [Canton Evening News], 22 April 2002). Those who gain from the system of detentions have no intentions of desisting.

The central government needed to step in to stop the abuse. But it took the recent death of a university-educated migrant—not an ordinary production-line manual worker—in a Guangdong detention and deportation centre, and a nationwide outcry, before the State Council finally acted. A new regulation was issued specifying that migrant workers could no longer be arrested for not possessing the right papers. Reverting to the original reasons for establishing the HRS in the early fifties, now only beggars and vagrants were to be taken into the renamed Welfare Relief Stations. The name change was accompanied by taking the detention and deportation centres out of the hands of the police and placing them under the custody of the Civil Affairs
Department, the government agency that is in charge of welfare cases (Kwan 2003). It is still too early to tell whether local police forces are now desisting from shaking down migrant workers. Notably, though, the HRS continues firmly in place.

There are therefore no genuine efforts to do away with the HRS because it has been useful in keeping wages attractively low, so as to attract FDI. All of the new measures issued by various levels of the government bureaucracies to reform the system have been designed to simply tinker around the edges in ways helpful to employers—such as allowing the educated, the skilled and the wealthy to acquire an urban hukou more easily. Employers do not have to go through as much red tape to employ people with much-wanted skills.

Will the HRS collapse or be rescinded in China in the foreseeable future? We do not think it likely. The security minister was emphatic in 2002 about the need to perpetuate the HRS; it is ‘an important component of our country’s administrative system and will exist for a long time. ... The hukou will not be abolished—not now and not in the future’ (South China Morning Post, 26 February 2002). At a practical level, the oversupply of labour and the enormous pressure upon Chinese local governments to compete for investment in a globalised economy will ensure the HRS remains intact for years to come.

Comparing the Pass and Household Registration Systems

For South Africa, we are principally concerned with the period from 1952, when the apartheid pass laws were introduced, through to their abolition in 1986. While there were important continuities from the preceding era, the pass laws were much more strictly enforced during apartheid as part of a pressing concern to rigorously limit the influx of African peoples into South Africa's urban areas. It is this influx control aspect of the pass laws that is of particular interest, because from about 1979 the Chinese HRS was adapted to serve the same purpose. The need to use the HRS to patrol rationing had evaporated, and the control of urban-urban migration had declined. But the desire of the government and employers to control rural-urban migration remained intact in the new economic setting. Before drawing conclusions, though, we need to assess the similarities and differences between the two systems.

The origins of the two pass systems were clearly different, with dissimilarities of purpose rooted in divergent social formations. On the one side, in South Africa state intervention in the economy was coupled with racial domination and, on the other, in China state control over the economy was coupled with party power. Yet there was a convergence. In South Africa, from 1948 onwards, state intervention in society and in the economy intensified, whilst in China, post-1979, it declined. In both instances, the outcome was a mixed economy combined with a strong, profoundly undemocratic state. In China, economic policy has been driven by the quest for foreign investment, while in South Africa the mining of gold, which sold at a fixed rate, and a desire to strengthen Afrikaner capital, provided the main dynamics. Although there were differences of emphasis, the bottom line was about how to maximise output whilst relying on labour-intensive production.
For both countries, the extensive use of cheap, relatively unskilled labour was
linked to the existence of vast reservoirs of potential migrant workers in the rural
areas. In China, as in South Africa, the cost of employing such workers could be less
than that of employing regular urban workers. This was justified in terms of migrant
workers retaining a home in the countryside where they could live for large parts of
their lives, and where their dependents could remain. Given the low levels of output
per capita in the rural areas of both South Africa and large parts of China, this
rationalisation has often been at odds with the grinding poverty of sub-subsistence
survival, but the element of truth has had real implications. That is, the essence of
Wolpe's analysis could also be applied to contemporary China. Wages paid to
migrants are generally lower than those paid to urbanised workers. The cost of hostel
accommodation for single migrants, with many workers sharing one room, is
considerably less than providing a small house or apartment for an urban family,
and there is little or no need to provide invalidity benefits, pensions and the like for
such migrants, nor to provide schooling for their children.

At the same time, however, industrial production also requires a settled, more
highly skilled workforce, and the function of pass laws is not only that of helping to
perpetuate migrant labour, it is also that of clearly distinguishing between rural and
urban workers (the Hindsom thesis). In the process, in China, as was true in South
Africa, pass laws have additional benefits for profitability and policing, notably the
enhanced possibilities they provide for dividing and dominating the working class.

The details of the two systems are remarkably similar. With both, there is the
requirement that permission must be obtained before rural people leave for the
towns. In both cases, there is a ban on taking children to the towns and, for the
migrant workers, discouragement of urban births and prohibitions on an urban
family life. With both, there is also some form of housing linked to employment,
separating migrant workers by sex and segregating them from urban workers
(typically this is in the form of hostels). In both countries there is periodic
migration, generally annual, back to the rural areas. And, of course, in both
countries the maintenance of the system is dependent on the authorisation of passes.
Policing of these documents leads to further similarities, such as bribery, harassment,
fines, and deportations to a rural area.

In both countries, this vast panoply of measures is actually incapable of stopping
the influx of rural people into urban areas. Economic pressures in the rural areas are
too great, people are resourceful, officials are corruptible, and many employers are
only too happy to accept the most vulnerable workers. The outcomes are very
similar. The pass systems produced a large underclass of non-citizens living in
constant insecurity, accompanied by daily discrimination, suppression, hardship,
and denial of human dignity.

There were also some obvious differences. Whereas in apartheid South Africa,
each individual had to carry one passbook, in China each migrant worker requires
several documents. In South Africa, the pass included a copy of a labour contract
that legally tied the worker to a particular employer. In China, employers often
resort to illegal techniques—such as retaining workers' documents or making them
pay a deposit at the time of engagement—in order to bring about the same result: in effect, semi-bonded labour. South African passes made an indirect contribution to national revenue collection by including a record of tax payments, whereas in China, where there are multiple passes, the sale of these documents makes a direct contribution to local government revenue. And whereas South Africa’s passbook administration was handled centrally by the national state, China’s various passes are only administered at a local level. This may be partly explained by the disparity of scale between the two countries. Comparing Chinese statistics for 1995 and South Africa’s for 1984, we find that 17 of China’s 30 provinces had a larger population than the whole of South Africa (Omond 1986: 21; Yabuki and Harner 1999: 151). In addition, South Africa’s centralised, computerised, fingerprint-based system made counterfeiting more difficult and surveillance easier than in China. These contrasts make the Chinese HRS look more akin to the less regulated pre-1952 organisation of passes in South Africa, though, as we have seen, in other respects it resembled what has been defined as the apartheid pass system.

These contrasting details are interesting, but in both cases they are about the operation of pass laws in relation to influx control. The really significant difference between the two systems concerns ‘race’. In South Africa, it was not just migrants who suffered from the pass laws, it was all Africans who lived away from the homelands. Yvonne Muthien, who researched the application of the pass laws in South Africa’s Western Cape, captures this well (1994: 209). ‘[P]ass raids and pass arrests,’ she says, ‘were executed with a singular lack of discrimination for the status, education, skill, section 10 status rights or gender differences of African people.’

In China, there is a far milder discrimination against peasants based on language differences and matters of style, such as dress, demeanour and diet, which bears certain superficial similarities to racial discrimination. Sally Sargeson (2001: 60) quotes one of her urban worker interviewees as saying: ‘They are peasants, these people. Everyone knows Anhui people are quite uncivilized. Not like us.’ According to another researcher (Hsing 1998, quoted in Hart 2002: 204): ‘Many Taiwanese industrialists [in China] emphasized that Taiwanese workers were brighter than their Chinese counterparts and … among Chinese workers, the Cantonese were considered brighter than their counterparts from the inland regions.’ But this kind of discrimination, repugnant as it may be, cannot be equated with South Africa’s system of racial supremacy, which affected every aspect of political and social life and treated the country’s African homelands as semi-colonies.

Race also impacts on the different dynamics of resistance. In South Africa, racial repression assisted the development of a popular movement that united working-class and middle-class Africans, and shaped an alliance between Africans and many Indian and coloured South Africans. It also, perhaps more importantly, helped to unite African workers—who, it should be remembered, came from different ethnic backgrounds, and either had a Section Ten or migrant status—adding to the anger and insurgency of class-based struggles (see, for example, Von Holdt 2002).

There may also be an ironic twist, in that under South Africa’s racially restricted
democracy, white, and to a lesser extent coloured and Indian, workers were given legal support for their unions, and this provided black workers with something to aim for (and, on occasions, even to receive support from). Unlike apartheid’s registered unions, which excluded African workers, all Chinese workers, migrants or urban, are eligible to become members of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. But this is an extension of the government bureaucracy. China’s independent trade union movement is only in its infancy, unlike South Africa in the 1980s, where a strong union movement was able to advance workers’ interests by means of strikes. We are not arguing that race alone explains the difference in worker militancy between the two countries, still less the ultimate abolition of the passbook and the continuation of the hukou. Many other factors would need to be considered—but this would take us well beyond the confines of this paper. It suffices here to note that race, a factor missing from the Chinese context, was a key aspect of South African resistance to the pass system. This resistance to the passbook as a potent symbol of racial repression galvanised the workers, but in China the main concern of migrant workers to date has been simply to obtain unpaid wages, reduce excessively long work hours, and seek industrial injuries compensation.

It is possible to draw some salient conclusions. First, the key similarity between the apartheid pass system and the contemporary HRS is that both are concerned, in their essence, with influx control: that is, with restricting urbanisation and sustaining economies that benefit from continued supplies of cheap, migrant labour. However, secondly, the South African system was race-based, discriminating against Section Ten as well as migrant Africans, albeit to a lesser degree. Weighing these similarities and differences, we believe China’s HRS might reasonably be described as a quasi-apartheid pass system. We think this is a balanced assessment. What is particularly interesting, however, is the extent of the similarity between the two societies, rather than the elements of difference. Given the enormous historical, economic and cultural dissimilarities and relatively little contact between the two countries, the differences are hardly a surprise. Why, though, did these divergent societies evolve similar systems of influx control? We hypothesise that these emerged from a combination of four factors. The first of these is a high proportion of industrial production based on relatively unsophisticated techniques; automated industries require fewer workers per unit of output, but these workers need to be more securely employed and better educated than occurs with migrant labour. In China, it is especially the smaller, more ruthless capitalists, often overseas Chinese, who are notorious for their misuse of migrant labour, and conditions in the sophisticated Western and Japanese-owned factories tend to be better. In South Africa, the demise of the pass system was partially related to its declining utility for the more technically advanced producers.

But, secondly, there has to be a ready supply of cheap rural labour. For this to exist there needs to be a significant differential between rural and urban incomes. South Africa and China have two of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. South Africa’s Gini co-efficient, calculated at about 0.58 in 1996 (May 1998: 23), is generally reckoned to be the worst or second worst, but China’s is also high,
calculated at 0.46 in 2000, and still growing (Chinese Reform News, 11 September 2001). For both countries, much of this inequality is a result of differences of income between urban and rural areas. For South Africa, it has been calculated that 71.6 per cent of rural people are living in poverty, compared to 28.4 per cent in urban areas (May 1998: 27). In Mao's China the economy was relatively undynamic, and the state attempted to maintain some balance between rural and urban incomes. In 1985, in the early part of the reform period, urban incomes were calculated to be about 1.7 times greater than those in rural areas on average (Yabuki and Harner 1999: 84); by 2000 the figure had leaped to about 2.8.

Thirdly, influx controls are only regarded as necessary, or rigorously implemented, once the supply of potential migrants outstrips the supply of urban jobs. In South Africa, it was a rapid growth in postwar unemployment, combined with a rural population struggling to exist on increasingly unproductive land, which pushed white politicians, especially those in the National Party, to take influx control more seriously. Similarly, during the past decade, rural incomes in China's massive grain belt regions have declined, pushing increasing numbers of impoverished farmers to leave home in search of work (Unger 2002). (Many experts predict further declines in farm income in the near future, partly because of the impact of cheap imports of subsidised US and European foodstuffs following China's entry into the World Trade Organization.)

Finally, inasmuch as there are a number of other countries that also have high levels of rural/urban inequality plus industrial economies that are similar in structure to our two comparators, we need to add a fourth factor. This is the existence of particularly strong states. For separate historical reasons, both Pretoria and Beijing held the power to maintain draconian controls over the vast majority of their people. Few states in the world would dare institute a comprehensive pass system—and fewer yet could succeed.

The combination of these four factors may explain why China has developed a quasi-apartheid pass system. The fact that it has such a system underlines the reality that China's export-oriented economic growth has been built, in large measure, on the labour of poorly paid and appallingly treated migrant workers. In China today, as in apartheid South Africa, the pass system is associated with massive abuses of human rights, and its retention should be opposed.

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