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Social protection for rural-urban migrants in an era of increasing population mobility and socioeconomic transformation: China's experience since the late 1970s



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Social protection for rural-urban migrants in an era of increasing population mobility and socioeconomic transformation: China's experience since the late 1970s

Yu Zhu, Liyue Lin and Bin Wang ¹

1. Research background

China has experienced tremendous socioeconomic development since the late 1970s, and rural-urban migration has been one of the major aspects of such transformation. Before China adopted market-oriented reform and open-door policies in the late 1970s, migration was strictly controlled and cities and the countryside were effectively separated by the invisible wall created by the *Hukou* system and other related institutional arrangements. However, since the late 1970s, migration, especially rural-urban migration, has increased significantly. At the time of the 2005 1 per cent population sample survey, the number of migrants in China reached the enormous size of 147 million, which is unprecedented in the migration history of the world.

The increasing mobility of the population and rapid socioeconomic changes have brought a two-fold challenge to China's existing practices of social protection. On the one hand, market-oriented reform has increasingly undermined the old practices of social protection, which could work only under the system of planned economy; on the other hand, increasing population mobility, especially massive rural-urban migration, has created many new issues. This has made the old policies and practices even less effective, especially for rural-urban migrants who do not have local household registration of the destination areas.

At the beginning of the reform era, what China inherited was a limited social welfare system targeting only a small proportion of privileged people (Cook 2002), who mostly lived in the cities, and rural residents were virtually excluded from this system. One of the important bases supporting this dichotomous welfare system was China's unique '*Hukou* system' (the household registration system), which divided people into two distinct groups: the agricultural population and the non-agricultural population. As most of the non-agricultural population lived in the urban areas, the agricultural-non-agricultural dichotomy was almost identical to the rural-urban dichotomy. While urban residents with non-agricultural *Hukou* status enjoyed many privileges provided by the State, including subsidised food and housing, free education, medical care, old-age pensions and other services, it was extremely difficult for ordinary rural residents to have their *Hukou* status transferred from agricultural into non-agricultural, and hence to move from rural to urban areas. In a similar way, the *Hukou* system also effectively prevented people moving from a place lower in the urban hierarchy to one higher in the urban hierarchy, especially large

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cities, which often provided better welfare benefits to their residents (Zhu 1999: 102-4). Vitality, without urban household registration status, a rural-urban migrant could not survive in the cities, and this effectively controlled the growth of China's urban population, and maintained the urban-centred welfare system before the reform era.

The adoption of the market-oriented reform and open-door policies since the late 1970s has fundamentally changed the foundations supporting the urban-centred welfare system. One of the most important changes of this kind was the gradual erosion of the invisible wall created by the *Hukou* system between the cities and the countryside in the process of various reforms since the 1980s. In the early 1980s, China introduced the household responsibility system and abolished the People's Commune system in rural areas. These measures revealed and intensified the once seemingly invisible problem of rural surplus labour, whose number amounted to 132.3 million in 1980, accounting for 42.5 per cent of total agricultural workers (Taylor and Banister 1991). These rural surplus labourers could no longer rely on the People's Communes for employment and livelihood, as they did before the late 1970s, and many of them entered cities to seek work. At the same time, the government gradually loosened control over rural-urban migration and the agricultural to non-agricultural transfer of *Hukou* status; more importantly, economic development and reform undermined the effectiveness of the *Hukou* system in controlling rural-urban migration. In 1984, the State Council decided to allow farmers and their dependents to move to designated towns (excluding county-level government seats) for permanent settlement, provided they met certain conditions so that they did not create a financial burden to the State (The State Council 1984). In 1985, the Ministry of Public Security promulgated 'Interim regulations regarding the management of temporary residents in cities and towns', symbolising the beginning of legal residential status of migrants without local *Hukou* registration (Liu 2001). Since then, it has become increasingly easier for rural residents to enter urban areas as temporary residents and seek employment and living opportunities, mostly in the non-State sectors. However, these migrants are not entitled to the social benefits only provided to urban residents with non-agricultural *Hukou* status, and this has led to the emergence and development of a disadvantaged migrant population of enormous size in China's urban areas, who are commonly collectively called the 'floating population'.

The new challenges to China's old practice of social protection brought about by rural-urban migration are not restricted to the needs of migrants as new members of the urban society for social protection. The complexity of such needs is another aspect that the old practices of social protection in China were not well prepared for. As revealed by many studies (e.g. Zhu 2007), an important characteristic of China's rural-urban migrants is their highly mobile nature, and this makes it difficult for their needs for social protection to be met by the simplistic approach of extending the residence-based old social welfare system. Furthermore, the socioeconomic

characteristics of rural-urban migrants are rather different from those of local residents of the destination areas. Migrants often have unstable jobs and low income, leave some of their family members behind in their places of origin, and therefore have different needs of social protection from those of local residents of the destination cities (Zhu 2007). All this poses more challenges to the old policies and practices of social protection in China, and calls for new policies and measures to tackle the challenges.

These challenges have been increasingly recognised by governments at different levels in China, and various policies have been made and measures have been taken to provide social assistance and social insurance to rural urban migrants (Zheng and Huang Li 2007). However, there is still a lack of systematic documentation and assessment of such efforts, and even less has been done to explore how to institutionalise social protection for rural-urban migrants in China. Lack of deep understanding of the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection has also made these efforts not as effective as expected.

This project has been proposed in the above context to contribute to the understanding of issues relating to social protection of rural-urban migrants in China, and to tackle the above challenges. It will first identify the needs of migrants for social protection, paying particular attention to the characteristics of migrants and their migration, and their effects on such needs. It will then document and assess various policies, measures and practices that the states, and other institutions in the society have tried, in their efforts to provide social protection to migrants. The main purpose of such documentation and assessment is to provide a clear picture about the effects of these policies, measures and practices, and the reasons behind such effects. The last part of the project will examine the empirical research results in the context of existing policies and theories for further policy recommendation and theoretical advancement, paying particular attention to seeking ways of extending and institutionalising social protection in China as well as in other developing countries in Asia. On the basis of the above work and the results of the Vietnam part of the project, a comparative research will be conducted to see how the two countries' experiences can be shared with each other for better understanding of the issues and relevant policy making. In the following, a literature review will be provided according to the above framework of the project.

2. Literature review – Migrant needs for social protection in China

Four aspects have been identified as key areas of migrant needs for social protection in China through the literature review. They are employment and income, social insurance, housing provision, and migrant children's education.

2.1. Employment and income

Securing employment and a certain level of income is essential for rural-urban migrants to survive in the cities. Many existing studies show that rural-urban migrants are often disadvantaged, and need social protection in this regard. This is particularly evident in the following three aspects:

1. Rural-urban migrants do not have equal access to employment opportunities in the cities. Migrants are mostly concentrated in informal sectors, and often engaged in '3-D' (dangerous, dirty and demanding) jobs that local residents do not want to take (Wang and Zhang 2006; Cook 2008; Du 2008). There used to be an institutional basis for such a disadvantaged position of rural-urban migrants, which was laid down in 'The interim regulations regarding the management of employment of inter-provincial rural-urban migrants' released by the then Ministry of Labour in 1994 (Ministry of Labour 1994). The key guidelines of this document included the principles of 'local job seekers first, migrants second' in dealing with employment issues in the destination cities of rural-urban migration (Li 2002). Under these guidelines, many local governments of migrant destination cities released regulations to set aside certain industries and occupations for local residents and restrict migrant access to them in the 1990s; rural-urban migrants were required to obtain an 'employment certificate' for employment, and such certificates were not easily available to them, unless the employment need could not be met by the local residents (Zhu 1999; Wang 2006). In addition, a study in the early 2000s suggests that a rural-urban migrant worker² needed to pay more than 20 kinds of various fees, and the cost for a copy of the certificate for temporary residence might cost a migrant worker 100-300 Yuan (Chen 2002; Pan 2008). These fees constituted a great burden to rural-urban migrants, given their low level of income. In recent years, governments at various levels in China have taken measures to abolish the above restrictions and fees for migrants' employment, as will be detailed later. However, there are still many problems in the implementation of such measures, and it is still a pending issue to secure the rights of equal employment for rural-urban migrants in the cities (Du *et al.* 2008).
2. Being insecure and unstable in employment is another important characteristic of rural-urban migrants in China, and this often leaves them in vulnerable positions. This has been confirmed by numerous studies regarding rural-urban migrants' employment in the cities. A survey of rural-urban migrants conducted in six migrant destination cities in Fujian Province in 2006 suggested that 57.6 per cent of the respondents were engaged in temporary jobs, 32.5 per cent of them did not know how long their jobs would last, and only 9.9 per cent of them

² In some original Chinese literature and documents, the original Chinese term for rural-urban migrant workers can be literally translated as 'peasant workers'. However, for the sake of consistency, we use the term 'rural-urban migrant worker' throughout this paper.

had permanent jobs (Zhu 2007). Another survey conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture showed that 40 per cent of migrant respondents did not have stable jobs. The average duration of their jobs was eight to nine months, and those who had a job lasting longer than ten months only accounted for 7.8 per cent of all migrant respondents (Li and Xu 2006). Adding to the risks caused by instability of employment is the fact that the proportion of rural-urban migrant workers in the cities who have signed contracts with their employers is rather low. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics suggests that only half of migrant workers signed contracts with their employers in 2006 (NBS 2006). Studies by Zheng and Huang Li (2007) and Zai (2007) came to a similar conclusion. Thus, rural-urban migrant workers face high risks of falling into unemployment; and most of them are not properly protected against such risks. Frequent changes of jobs and residence also make it difficult for rural-urban migrants to be included in the conventional residence-based social insurance programmes or social benefits against unemployment, as will be seen later.

3. Low income levels, unequal pay, and excessive work overtime are also important characteristics of the rural-urban migrant situation in China. A telling piece of evidence in this regard is that the wage level of migrant workers in some coastal areas increased less than ten per cent in the last ten years; if the factor of inflation is taken into account, their wage level actually decreased (Project team of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2006a). Jian and Zhang's study (2005) also indicates that rural-urban migrant workers' average monthly income in the Pearl River Delta increased only 68 Yuan between 1993 and 2004, which is in strong contrast to the fact that the salary level of local urban residents doubled between 1998 and 2004 (Wang 2006). At the same time, payments to migrant workers were often delayed or in arrears (Zheng 2003). Although the situation has improved significantly since 2003 when the government took measures to deal with issues of delayed and outstanding payments to rural-urban migrant workers, they have not yet been fundamentally resolved (Zhang 2006; Song and Wang 2007; Project team of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2006a).

A common phenomenon accompanying the low income level of rural-urban migrant workers in the cities is their excessive work overtime. China's employment law stipulates that the maximum overtime of a worker should be less than three hours a day and 36 hours a month. However, a survey by the National Bureau of Statistics suggests that rural migrant workers in the cities worked on average 8.93 hours per day, 6.29 days per week (NBS 2006). This is equivalent to at least 64.7 hours of overtime per month. It is acknowledged that too much overtime can cause great damage to migrant workers' health, and there has already been a case where overtime caused the death of a migrant worker (Sun 2003). It is important to note that working overtime for rural-urban migrant workers in the cities should not be regarded as their voluntary choice, as some employers of migrant workers may claim. In fact,

excessive overtime of rural-urban migrant workers in the cities can be partly attributed to their low wage level. Some employers even deliberately reduce the wage level of normal working hours, making it necessary for rural-urban migrant workers to work overtime to increase income. In some cases, in refusing to work overtime, a migrant worker may face the consequences of being dismissed by the employer (Luo 2003). Besides, rural-urban migrants face many problems in occupational health in their employment. According to Zheng and Huang's survey in 2004-2006 covering Beijing, Shenzhen, Suzhou and Chengdu, 27.4 per cent of migrant workers thought they were engaged in dangerous, poisonous, and harmful work; moreover, there was often a lack of basic occupational health protection against the risk of work-related injuries (Zheng and Huang Li 2007: 62-67). Excessive overwork and risks in occupational health and injuries puts rural-urban migrant workers in an even more disadvantaged position, in addition to their low income level.

2.2. Social insurance

In a society with a well established social security system, the above needs of social protection for rural-urban migrants may be at least partly met by their inclusion in social insurance programmes. However, as already mentioned in the previous section, China is still in the process of transition from the pre-reform social welfare system targeting a limited group of people with urban *Hukou* status to a more inclusive social security system, and the coverage of social insurance for rural-urban migrants is still rather low. This has been confirmed by numerous studies (e.g. Project team of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2006b; Zhu 2007). Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that the proportions of rural-urban migrants covered by old-age insurance, insurance against work-related injuries, medical insurance, and unemployment insurance were only 26.63 per cent, 32.54 per cent, 26.23 per cent, and 15.35 per cent respectively in 2006 (NBS 2006). Two points arising from the above figures are particularly worth noting. One point is that although instability of employment is a major characteristic of rural-urban migrant workers, their coverage by unemployment insurance is the lowest among the four kinds of social insurance programme. The other point is that although there is the over-concentration of rural-urban migrant workers in the cities in the '3-D' jobs, implying that they face greater risk of work-related injuries and other health problems than local urban residents, they are poorly covered by social insurance programmes against these risks, as indicated by the above figures and many other studies (e.g. Zheng and Huang Li 2007).

It is also important to note that while the coverage of rural-urban migrant workers by various social insurance programmes is already low, the non-portable nature of the conventional residence-based social insurance programmes further reduces their effectiveness in their social protection functions. In recent years, a major problem in social insurance for rural-urban migrants has been that many of them have withdrawn from the social insurance programmes they joined, because they cannot take the

insurance benefits with them when they move from one place to another, making the insurance invalid in later life. Furthermore, when they withdraw from the insurance programmes, they can only take away their own contribution to the insurance funds; however the contribution of their employers will remain in the funds (Gao 2006; Li and Yang 2007). This further violates the interests of rural-urban migrants. Thus, what China's rural-urban migrants need is not only various social insurance programmes, but the portability of such programmes, so that their itinerant nature can be accommodated.

2.3. Housing provision

Housing is another important aspect of basic needs for rural-urban migrants in the cities. However, such needs have been largely neglected in most destination cities in China, especially in social housing provision of these cities.

The disadvantaged situation of rural-urban migrants in terms of their housing is first reflected in the fact that they are excluded from all sources of government subsidised housing provision, and have very few choices in meeting their housing needs in the destination cities. As Wu (2002) notes, urban residents are able to obtain accommodation through one of three methods: buying the property outright, or paying higher rent for their apartments, which were public housing assigned to them; acquiring commercial housing through market mechanisms, and participating in Affordable Housing Projects. A limited number of low-income urban families have the further option of obtaining subsidised low-rent housing. Except commercial housing through market mechanisms, all the other ways of housing provision mentioned above are subsidised by the government; and they are *Hukou*-status based, and therefore virtually exclude most rural-urban migrants from access to them (Wu 2002). Given the very high price of commercial housing and the limited financial capability of rural-urban migrants, obtaining accommodation from the source of commercial housing through market mechanisms is actually not realistic for most rural-urban migrants either. Thus, many studies reveal that the most common housing choice for rural-urban migrants is rental housing, followed by dormitories provided by their employers (e.g. Wu 2002; Lin and Zhu 2008). A survey in six major migrant destination cities in Fujian Province shows that 92 per cent of rural-urban migrants obtained their accommodation through the above two ways, which was in strong contrast to the local urban residents, 64 per cent of whom had owner-occupied housing. The above situation shows that the current system of urban housing provision in China takes little consideration of the housing need of rural-urban migrants into account, making it difficult for them to settle down in the destination cities, or even live decently in the cities on a temporary basis.

The disadvantaged situation of rural-urban migrants' housing is also reflected in their housing conditions in terms of both size and quality. Most studies show that the *per capita* useable area of migrant housing is significantly lower, and their housing quality

is significantly poorer, than those of local residents of the destination cities (e.g. Wu 2002; Lin and Zhu 2008). A survey in six coastal cities of Fujian Province in 2006 showed that the *per capita* useable area of migrant housing was only 10.69 km², while that of local urban residents in Fujian was 24.8 km². In Fuzhou, Xiamen, and Quanzhou, the three major cities of Fujian Province, the quality indices of migrant housing were 0.68, 0.65 and 0.56, compared to 0.85, 0.79 and 0.70 for those of local resident housing (Lin and Zhu 2008). Such gaps were even bigger in Shanghai and Beijing, where the quality indices of migrant housing were 0.53 and 0.48, while those of local resident housing were 0.84 and 0.82, for the years of 1999 (Shanghai) and 2000 (Beijing) respectively (Wu 2002). Migrant poor housing quality is clearly reflected in the lack of basic housing facilities. As Wang's study (2005) shows, the proportions of migrant families who did not have a kitchen, any bath facility, or a toilet in their living places accounted for 59 per cent, 82.3 per cent, and 66.8 per cent of the total number of migrant families in Beijing. All this suggests that much needs to be done to ensure the basic housing needs of rural-urban migrants.

2.4. Migrant children's education

The significant increase in rural-urban migration has led to the needs of social protection for not only migrants themselves, but those of their children as well. Relevant figures suggest that the sheer magnitude of migrant children deserves great attention. At the destination cities, the number of migrant children amounted to 14.10 million according to the 2000 census; at the rural places of origin, the size of migrant children left behind by one or both of their parents was even bigger, amounting to 24.43 million according to the 2000 census, and even 58.61 million according to the 2005 1 per cent population sample survey (Duan and Liang 2004; Duan and Yang 2008).

Migrant children at both ends of the migration process are in great need of social protection, especially in terms of their rights for education. Once they have arrived at the destination city, migrant children are often denied access to the public education system, or do not enjoy equal treatment in the schools they attend. China's current educational resources are allocated according to the size of the schooling population with local *Hukou* status; this makes it necessary to have the *Hukou* status of the place where the school is located for getting admission to the school. As most migrant children do not have such *Hukou* status, this used to be one of the biggest obstacles for migrant children to attend the schools at the places where they lived with their migrant parents. Facing this issue, the central government has recently established the principle that migrant children's education should be mainly based on the public schools of the destination areas, and governments at local levels have made great efforts to accommodate migrant children in public schools based on such a principle. In recent years, significant progress has indeed been made in this regard. However, the full admission of all migrant children to public schools is still difficult to achieve, because the allocation of educational resources is still *Hukou* based. This is one of

the reasons for many children of rural-urban migrants being left behind in their places of origin. For those migrating with their parents, many still do not have the good fortune to be admitted to public schools.

Apart from the limited access to educational resources in the destination cities for migrant children, another problem is the high extra fees they have to pay for their schooling. Even if there are places in public schools for migrant children, many of them cannot take up the opportunity, because they are often charged extra fees called '*Jiedufei*' (Guest student fees). The amount of such fees varies from place to place; it could be as high as 20,000 Yuan and as low as 50 Yuan (Zhao 2003; Xie and Zhu 2004). Even the lowest amount represents a significant and sometimes prohibitively heavy burden for migrant families, given their low income level mentioned earlier (Liang and Chen 2007). An alternative to public schools for migrant children are schools for the children of rural-urban migrants, which are operated by NGOs and/or the migrant population itself. However, the conditions of these schools are often poor and their teaching quality often cannot be guaranteed, given the fact that they are poorly funded, and in the long run migrant children will suffer from the consequences of such education not meeting the basic national standard (Han 2001). Given many difficulties in schooling in the destination cities, some migrant children simply drop out of school or cannot attend school in time, and many of them have to be left behind in their places of origin. According to a sampling survey of China's migrant children in 2003, 9.3 per cent of migrant children at schooling ages failed to attend schools, and 46.9 per cent of migrant children of six years old could not attend schools, although they had already reached the schooling age (Su 2003).

Migrant children left behind by their migrating parents face great difficulties and are in great need of social protection too. Analysis on the data of the 2000 census suggests that 56.17 per cent of left-behind migrant children were separated from both parents, and that they mostly lived with their grandparents or other relatives (Duan and Zhou 2005). This leads to the lack of proper supervision of their daily lives, negatively affecting both their academic performance and their psychological development, and even causing much deviant behaviour (Duan and Yang 2008; Xiang 2007). The separation of left-behind migrant children also gives rise to the need for developing boarding schools at the places of origin to meet the needs of left-behind children who cannot find relatives to look after them. These schools already exist in some migrant places of origin; however, similar to migrant children's schools at the destination cities, they have the problem of lack of resources, poor quality of teaching, and poor management. Taking into consideration the needs of migrant left-behind children is a new and important task in social protection for rural-urban migrants in China.

3. Recent programmes, policies and practices pertaining to social protection for rural-urban migrants

As mentioned earlier, the above needs of social protection for rural-urban migrants and their families have been increasingly recognised by the whole society in China, and various efforts in the forms of policies, insurance programmes, and other practices have been made to meet such needs. Similar to the previous section, these efforts can be summarised in the following four aspects.

3.1. *Employment and income*

Efforts to provide social protection to rural-urban migrants in terms of employment and income can be summarized in the following three aspects:

1. There have been gradual policy changes from restricting and controlling rural-urban migration and migrant employment in the cities to encouraging rural-urban migration and treating rural-urban migrants equally in urban employment (Song, *et al.* 2002; Liu 2005; Song and Hou 2007). In 2003, the State Council gave the instruction to abolish the requirement for approval when enterprises recruit rural-urban migrants, and the restriction to the access of rural-urban migrants to the industries and occupations previously set aside for local urban residents (General Office of the State Council 2003a). In March 2006, the State Council released 'the guidelines on solving problems relating to rural-urban migrant workers', asking government departments at various levels to 'respect and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of rural-urban migrant workers, abolish any discriminatory regulations and institutional barriers concerning migrant employment in the cities, and ensure that they enjoy the same rights and obligations to those of urban employees' (The State Council 2006). According to the guidelines, rural-urban migrant workers should not be dismissed or excluded from employment in the name of solving urban employment problems. These guidelines undermine the institutional basis for the discriminatory treatment of rural-urban migrants in urban employment, and have resulted in the abolishment of local regulations restricting migrant employment in many migrant destination cities (Drafting group of the final report on rural-urban migrant workers 2006). Accompanying the above changes, the State Council instructed in 2004 that all employment agencies should be open to rural-urban migrants to provide employment information, guidance, introduction, and policy consultation, and all the services should be free of charge (General Office of the State Council 2004). Another important and related development was that the All China Federation of Trade Unions released the 'Circular on working effectively to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of rural-urban migrant workers' in 2003, in which trade unions at various levels were asked to organise migrant workers to join the trade unions to protect their rights and interests (All China Federation of Trade Unions 2003). This development not only provides a new platform for social protection of rural-urban migrants, but also serves as an indication of further equal treatment of migrant workers to their native urban counterparts.

2. The Law of the People's Republic of China on employment was enacted at the beginning of 2008, and this created an important legal basis for the social protection of rural-urban migrants in terms of their employment and income (Standing Committee of the People Congress, PRC 2007). Many needs of rural-urban migrants in this regard are addressed in this law. For example, the law imposes restriction on work overtime, and provides guidelines regarding minimum wages. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security requires all employers to sign contracts with all migrant workers; significantly increasing the proportion of migrant workers signing contracts with their employers was listed as a key task of the Ministry in 2008 (Sun 2008).
3. Since 2001, all provinces have promulgated the minimum wage standards; subsequently, 29 provinces increased the standards by 30 per cent to 60 per cent in 2006 (Hong 2003; Liu 2007). Given the unstable and temporary nature of migrant employment, the minimum wage standards on an hourly basis was also promulgated in 2006 (Liu, 2007). These standards have played an important role in improving the migrant situation in terms of their income. At the same time, governments at various levels have taken measures to abolish unreasonable fees imposed on rural-urban migrants, and directly intervened to solve the problems of delayed payment and payment in arrears to rural-urban migrant workers, which involved a total amount of 43.32 billion Yuan between 2003 and 2007 (National Development and Reform Commission and Ministry of Finance 2001; General Office of the State Council 2003a; National Development and Reform Commission *et al.* 2004; Liu and Zhou 2007). A further step is that the wage deposit system for migrant employers has been established in 27 provinces to ensure that full and punctual payment to migrant workers is based on a solid mechanism (Bai and Zheng 2006; The Portal Websites of National Government 2007). All the above efforts have produced significant and positive effects, and an indication of such effects is that the monthly wage level of migrant workers increased substantially in the last few years, reaching 1000 Yuan for the first time in 2007 according to the results of a survey by the Ministry of Agriculture (Beijing News 2008).

3.2. Social insurance

Social insurance for rural-urban migrants in China was close to non-existent until the late 1990s. Since the beginning of the new century, this issue has attracted increasingly more attention. In 'Opinions of the State Council about solving the problems of rural-urban migrant workers' (The State Council 2006) released in 2006, the central government provided the guidelines for addressing this issue, i.e. 'providing guidance tailored to the situation, making progress gradually, putting priority on insurance against work related injuries and major diseases, and gradually

solving the problem of old-age insurance for migrant workers'. Recent development in social insurance for rural-urban migrants has indeed followed the above principles, and two approaches have been taken to serve these purposes: direct extension of the existing social insurance programmes, and relatively independent social insurance programmes tailored for the needs of rural-urban migrants.

Direct extension of the existing social insurance programmes

The first approach is to extend the coverage of the existing urban social insurance system to rural-urban migrants, so that they can be directly included into the system (Peng and Qiao 2005). The social insurance programmes of this kind mainly cover the areas of old-age insurance, and insurance against work-related injuries and major diseases, and have only limited coverage for general medical insurance and unemployment insurance.

The old-age insurance of this kind was introduced first in Guangdong in 1998, and then in many other cities, such as Xiamen, Shenzhen, Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Zhengzhou, and Hangzhou. In these places, the existing old-age insurance system originally only serving local urban employees has been extended to cover rural-urban migrant workers, although some distinctions exist between migrant workers and urban employees in terms of the insurance benefits (Peng and Qiao 2005). The system is composed of two joint components, i.e. the overall pooling of social funds (*Shehui Tongchou*) and individual accounts (*Geran Zhanghu*), and both rural-urban migrants and their employers contribute to the funds of the system. The individual account of a migrant can be withdrawn on a lump sum basis and transferred from one place to another with the migrant (Lan and Ren 2004). The results of the implementation of these programmes so far show that the proportion of rural-urban migrants joining the programmes is low, and that many who had joined the programmes subsequently withdrew from them. This suggests that the old-age insurance programmes of this kind have not been well accepted by rural-urban migrants so far (Song 2007).

The inclusion of rural-urban migrants into the existing insurance programmes against work-related injuries did not occur until 2004 when 'Regulations regarding insurance against work-related injuries was enacted and implemented (Jia 2006). On 1 June 2004, against the background of frequent accidents of rural-urban migrant workers in the construction industry and their low coverage of insurance against such accidents, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security issued a circular with stipulations concerning the participation of rural-urban migrant workers in social insurance against work-related injuries (Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2004). Subsequently, local governments in many places, such as Beijing, Anhui, Hebei, Chongqing, Shanxi, Nanjing, and Dalian, took measures to include rural-urban migrant workers into insurance programmes against work-related injuries. A review of local policies shows that the insurance for rural-urban migrants against

work-related injuries is basically the same as that for local urban employees in terms of premiums and the respective contributions of employers and employees; however, there are some differences between local urban employees and rural-urban migrant workers in the way of benefit payment (Peng and Qiao 2005). For example, while the benefits for local employees are usually paid on an incremental basis, interprovincial rural-urban migrant workers have the choice between lump-sum payment and long-term incremental payment for the disability levels of 1-4.³ Most rural-urban migrant workers tend to choose the former because of the concern that their employers may escape their obligations in the future; however this may jeopardise their interests if problems caused by their injuries recur and generate further costs, because their employers no longer have obligations in such circumstances (Liu 2008).

There have been also efforts to extend medical insurance programmes to rural-urban migrants. The first of such efforts was made in Beijing in 2004; subsequently, Shandong, Shanxi, Sichuan, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, Dalian, Jinan, and Nanjing followed suit (e.g. Peng and Qiao 2005; Yang 2006; Financial World 2007; General Office of Dalian Municipal Government 2006; Nanjing Bureau of Labour and Social Security 2006). Adjustments to the existing programmes have been made to accommodate the floating and low-income nature of rural-urban migrants, according to the principles of 'low premium, insurance against major diseases and current needs, and funded mainly by employers', and as a result the adjusted programmes are different from the original programmes (Peng and Qiao 2005). For example, rural-urban migrants are often exempt from paying premiums, which is the responsibility of their employers; at the same time, the coverage of their insurance programmes is often limited to major diseases (Peng and Qiao 2005). There are also regional variations in terms of both premiums and benefits of this kind of insurance programme (Shenzhen Municipal Government 2006; General Office of Tianjin Municipal Government 2008). Apart from the above, since 2007 there have been some limited attempts in some places (such as Xiamen, Henan, and Guangzhou) to provide childbearing insurance for rural-urban migrants (Li 2007; Lin 2007; Li 2008).

³ Persons with level 1 disability refer to those with the condition of losing an organ or its functions, which cannot be replaced by other organs, leading to the need of special medical care and complete nursing for maintaining life and basic living.

Persons with level 2 disability refer to those with the condition of serious loss and damage or abnormality of an organ, leading to serious dysfunction or syndromes so that special medical care and nearly complete nursing is needed.

Persons with level 3 disability refer to those with the condition of serious loss and damage or abnormality of an organ, leading to serious dysfunction or syndromes so that special medical care and partly nursing is needed.

Persons with level 4 disability refer to those with the condition of serious loss and damage or abnormality of an organ, leading to serious dysfunction or syndromes so that special medical care is needed but no nursing is required.

The inclusion of rural-urban migrants into the existing unemployment insurance programmes has been a recent development. According to 'Regulations regarding unemployment insurance' enacted in 1999, monthly unemployment benefit only applies to urban employers; for rural-urban migrants, only those 'rural contract workers' working in an urban enterprise for more than one year can get a lump sum payment of living subsidy if they are unemployed (The State Council 1999a). Such regulations exclude most rural-urban migrant workers from the unemployment insurance system, and only provide limited and informal benefits to those migrant workers who meet the conditions. However, in 'Regulations regarding unemployment insurance of Fujian Province' enacted in 2006 (Fujian Provincial Standing Committee of the People Congress 2006), it was stipulated for the first time in China that rural-urban migrant workers can pay 1 per cent of their monthly wage to join unemployment insurance on a voluntary basis, and enjoy the same benefits to those enjoyed by urban employees (Jiang 2006). This was regarded as a breakthrough in protecting the rights and interests of rural-urban migrants, and in the next two years, more cities have followed suit (e.g. Jiang 2008). Another welcome trend is that in some cities, rural-urban migrant workers can get some subsidies for unemployment if they meet certain conditions (Pan 2006). However, the above development is still in its early stage; rural-urban migrants still cannot enjoy the same unemployment insurance as urban employees in most cities.

Relatively independent social insurance programmes tailored for the needs of rural-urban migrants

The second approach in providing social insurance for rural-urban migrants is to establish relatively independent programmes tailored for the needs of rural-urban migrants. These programmes are independent in the sense that their premium levels, operation of funds, and levels and payment methods of benefits are different from those of insurance programmes for local urban employees, and that they take into special consideration the mobile nature and low income level of rural-urban migrants (Peng and Qiao 2005). So far, these programmes were only implemented on a trial basis in Shanghai (2002) and Chengdu (2003). They only provide insurance against work-related injuries and accidents, insurance against hospitalisation, and old-age insurance, and both the level of premiums and the level of benefits are lower than those of urban social insurance programmes. Another characteristic is that these programs involve commercial insurance companies in their operation, and that their ways of premium payment are more flexible (Shanghai Municipal Government 2002; Chengdu Municipal Government 2003). A similar approach is adopted in Xiangfan (Xiangfan Municipal Government 2007); and there are differences in the details of the programmes between the above three places.

In general, both the independent approach and the direct extension approach are at the initial stage of development, and the former is much less developed than the latter. Much is desired to improve both approaches so that they can play significant roles in

protecting rural-urban migrants (Wang *et al.* 2004; Lin 2007). So far the participation rate of rural-urban migrants in both kinds of social insurance programmes is still low, the coverage of these insurance programmes is limited, the premium level is too high, and the benefit level of these programmes is insignificant in serving the purposes of protecting rural-urban migrants. This suggests that there is still a long way to go to solve the issue of social insurance for rural-urban migrants in China (Cao and Su 2007).

3.3. Housing provision

In the last few years, migrant housing needs have started to attract attention in China. In 2005, migrant housing was listed as a key priority for the Ministry of Construction. This was the first time that the issue of migrant housing had become part of the agenda of the Ministry (Liang 2005). In the same year, in a document issued by the Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Finance and People's Bank of China, it was stipulated that rural-urban migrant workers can join the public reserve fund for housing if certain conditions are met (Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Finance and People's Bank of China 2005). In 'Opinions of the State Council about solving the problems of the rural-urban migrant worker' released in 2006, the State Council gave the instruction 'to improve housing conditions of the floating population' (The State Council 2006). The State Council asked relevant government departments to enhance surveillance and administration to ensure that the living places of the floating population met basic sanitation and safety standards. At the end of 2007, the Ministry of Construction and four other ministries jointly issued a document entitled 'Guiding opinions on improving migrant workers' housing conditions', in which, for the first time, it is stipulated that work units or enterprises are the main institutions responsible for improving the housing conditions of rural-urban migrant workers, and that governments at various levels should incorporate the housing issue of rural-urban migrant workers who will live and work in the cities on a long term basis into the housing planning of cities (Ministry of Construction, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and Ministry of Land and Resources 2007). In the meantime, avoiding the development of slum areas is still part of the policies of the central government, as reflected in the response of Qiyi, Vice-Minister of Housing and Urban-Rural Construction, to the suggestion of Professor Hui Qing of Tsinghua University to allow the development of slum areas in Shenzhen (Sun 2008). These recent documents and views at the level of the central government have laid down the principles for the measures taken by governments at local level to meet the housing needs of rural-urban migrants. These measures can be divided into the following three categories, i.e. the inclusive approach, the independent approach and the hybrid approach.

The inclusive approach

The inclusive approach attempts to include rural-urban migrants into the existing

urban housing security system, which is composed of the components of low-rent housing, affordable housing, and the public reserve fund for housing. As mentioned earlier, such an approach has been indicated in some government documents at the State level; however, no concrete regulations have been enacted for the implementation of policies adopting such an approach. Despite this, some local areas have taken initiatives in this regard, and their policies can be summarised in the following aspects:

Low-rent housing

In most cities, low-rent housing has not yet been made available to rural-urban migrants. However, in a few cities, a limited group of rural-urban migrants have been given the entitlement to this housing benefit. For example, in Guangdong Province, it has been stipulated recently that 'excellent rural-urban migrant workers' who meet some conditions are entitled to low-rent housing (Jiang, Luo and Wang 2008). In Fuzhou and Xiamen, it was stipulated in 2007 that rural-urban migrant workers who have worked in the city for certain period of time, or serve as key figures of the enterprises, can enjoy low-rent housing (Lai 2007). In Laiwu city of Shandong Province, rural-urban migrant workers who have worked in the city for more than three years can enjoy the same housing benefits to those for local urban residents (Li 2007).

Affordable housing

Similar to low-rent housing, affordable housing has not yet been made available to rural-urban migrants in most migrant destination cities. However, in a few places, policies have been made to grant migrants the entitlement to participate in affordable housing projects. For example, policies were made in Fujian Province in 2006 to give some rural-urban migrant workers meeting certain income conditions the entitlement to participate in affordable housing projects (Li 2007). Similar policies were also made in Chongqing in 2007 (Jiang 2007). However, concerns have been raised about the implementation of these policies. For example, although affordable housing provides many benefits, it may still be too expensive for most low-income rural-urban migrants; the mobile nature of rural-urban migrants makes it even more complicated for them to participate in such projects (Wu 2007).

The public reserve fund for housing

In 2007, the Ministry of Construction gave the instruction to extend the coverage of the public reserve fund for housing to rural-urban migrant workers with permanent jobs in the cities (Ministry of Construction 2007). In some local places like Huzhou in Zhejiang Province, measures were taken to establish the public reserve fund for housing for rural-urban migrants in 2003, even before the above instruction from the central government was given (Zhao 2008). So far, similar policies have been made in many other places, such as Guangxi, Liaoning, Anhui, Fujian, and Shanxi Provinces, and Changchun, Dongguan, Haerbin, Xian, Taiyuan, and Zhengzhou cities. However, these policies are attached with strong conditions; they are not

compulsory, and are not legally enforceable (Zhu and Zhu 2007). Concerns are also raised about their compatibility with migrants' mobile nature (Fu 2007; Lin, Zhu and Li 2008).

The independent approach

The independent approach deals with the housing needs of rural-urban migrants separately from those of urban local residents. In co-operation with local governments, employers take the main responsibility to meet the housing needs of rural-urban migrant workers, usually in the form of developing low-rent or free housing compounds provided only to rural-urban migrants and their families. This approach has been successfully adopted in the southern Jiangsu area and Chongqing city; recently it has also been attempted in some other cities, including Shanghai and Beijing (Zhu and Zhu 2007). At the same time, building, sanitation and environment standards for migrant housing have been set up and implemented in many provinces and cities (Project team of the Ministry of Construction 2006). For the majority of rural-urban migrants who rent private housing, regulations have also been enacted to enhance the management of rental housing, and in some places services for rental housing are provided to rural-urban migrants (Project team of the Ministry of Construction 2006).

The hybrid approach

Apart from the above two approaches, a recent interesting development has been the attempt to establish a housing security system, which is similar to that for local urban residents, but is tailored for and targets only rural-urban migrants. An example of this is the views of the General Office of Fujian Provincial Government issued at the beginning of 2008 when the Office forwarded the 'Guiding opinions on improving migrant workers' housing conditions' from the Ministry of Construction and four other ministries mentioned earlier. In these views, Fujian Provincial Government asked governments at various levels to make preferential policies and take concrete measures to solve the problems related to migrant housing in terms of the provision of funds and land, and explore ways to establish 'migrant housing security mechanisms with Fujian characteristics' (Luo 2008). In fact, the Province's Department of Construction had started the efforts to solve the problems of migrant housing on a trial basis from 2007, and had completed the construction of migrant housing with a total floor space of 7 million square metres (Cheng 2008). The practices adopted in Fuzhou, Xiamen and Quanzhou so far have been for the local governments to develop low-rent or free housing in the industrial parks for rural-urban migrants, in cooperation with migrant employers, with funds allocated for such housing projects (Du 2008). In a way such an approach is a variation of the independent approach, and the difference is that the governments rather than the employers take a more active role in housing provision for rural-urban migrants.

3.4. *Migrant children's education*

Among all the difficulties faced by rural-urban migrants and their families, those faced by their children have attracted the most attention from the whole society, including governments at various levels. Various policies have been made and measures have been taken to solve their problems, and great progress has been made.

Migrant children's rights and obligations regarding compulsory education, and their rights for equal access to educational opportunities, are stipulated in China's constitution and relevant laws, including 'The educational law of the People's Republic of China' (National People's Congress, PRC 1995) and 'The compulsory education law of the People's Republic of China' (National People's Congress, PRC 2006). To accommodate the difficult situation of migrant children, in recent years relevant ministries, especially the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Security, have released various documents with new policies and measures aimed at solving the problems faced by migrant children. These policy documents include 'Provisional measures for migrant children's schooling' enacted jointly by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Public Security in 1998 (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Public Security 1998), 'The decision of the State Council regarding reform and development of basic education' with specific statements regarding the compulsory education of the floating population's children in 2001 (The State Council 2001); and 'Opinions regarding further effective work on compulsory education of rural-urban migrant workers' children' released by six ministries led by the Ministry of Education (General Office of the State Council 2003b). These policies and measures are collectively reflected in 'Opinions of the State Council about solving the problems of rural-urban migrant workers', in which it is stipulated in principle that children of rural-urban migrant workers should have equal access to compulsory education, and governments of the destination areas should take the main responsibility for this (The State Council 2006). According to this document, the education of rural-urban migrant workers' children should be included in local educational planning and educational budgets; local public schools should take the main responsibility for accepting migrant children; and the public funds allocated for schools should be based on the actual number of students. Urban public schools should treat rural-urban migrant workers' children equally to local students in terms of school fees and administration, and should not violate relevant regulations of the state to collect extra 'guest student fees' and any other fees. Governments at the destination areas should support and provide guidance to private schools entrusted with the responsibility of compulsory education of rural-urban migrant workers' children in terms of funds and teachers' training, and with improving the quality of the schools. Governments at the places of origin should solve problems pertaining to the education of left-behind children of rural-urban migrants.

Based on the above guidelines, governments at local levels have made many efforts to meet the needs of migrant children for education, and to give them equal treatment in school. For example, since September 2004, all public schools for compulsory

education in Beijing have cancelled 'guest student fees' for rural-urban migrant children 'who meet certain conditions'. District- and county-level governments are responsible for ensuring operational funds for these schools, and allocate funds according to the actual student numbers of these schools (Guo, 2004). In some cities, a dynamic approach for the administration of student status has been adopted to accommodate the floating nature of rural-urban migrants, so that their children can be admitted or can leave the school at any time in the semester. At the same time, the administration and support for private schools for migrant children has been greatly enhanced (Li 2004). Examples of this kind can be found in many main migrant destination areas, including Beijing, Guangzhou, Fujian, Jiangsu and Shandong (e.g. Wang 2003; Li 2004; Guo 2004; Office of the leading group for work on rural-urban migrant workers in Jiangsu province 2006), and this suggests that great progress has been made to improve the situation of migrant children's education in China in recent years. A survey on the situation of rural-urban migrant children in nine cities in 2002 suggests that 96.8 per cent of school-age migrant children were able to go to schools for compulsory education; among them 96.8 per cent were admitted to public schools (Zhu *et al.* 2005).

However, details of the measures taken in different places in China, and the extent to which policies of the central government are implemented at local level, varies from place to place. In many places, the supply of school places still far exceeds the demand, and therefore many conditions, such as stable jobs of migrant children's parents, evidence of lack of care at the places of origin, and even satisfactory examination scores on a competitive basis, are still required for migrant children to get access to public schools (Song and Li 2006). The 'guest student fees' are still in place in many migrant destination areas. They are not regarded as discriminatory against migrant children and against the relevant instructions of the central government, because these fees are collected for schooling in a place different from where the student *Hukou* is, and apply to both local urban residents and rural-urban migrants. Besides, so far, less has been done to solve the problems of the left-behind children of rural-urban migrants (Duan and Yang 2008).

4. Social protection for rural-urban migrants in China: a preliminary assessment

As reviewed above, so far governments at various levels, and other circles of society, have made great efforts and achieved significant progress in social protection for rural-urban migrants in China. However, many problems exist in the relevant programmes, policies and practices, and many issues still need to be addressed in future research and policy making. The following is a preliminary assessment of the progress and problems so far, and this provides a conceptual basis for our future research.

The institutional and legal bases for social protection of rural-urban migrants: re-defining the rights of migrants and the obligations of governments and other social institutions

The gradual establishment of the institutional and legal bases has been an important aspect of progress in the social protection of rural-urban migrants in China so far. As mentioned earlier, the pre-reform rural-urban dichotomous social benefit and security system in China was an institutional arrangement based on the *Hukou* system, which excluded all residents without urban *Hukou* status. To provide social protection for rural-urban migrants, new institutional arrangements need to be established, so that the rights and entitlements of rural-urban migrants for social protection can be recognised. Since the reform era, especially the new century, significant progress has indeed been made in this regard. This is particularly important and evident in migrants' equal access to urban employment, and migrant children's equal access to urban educational resources. However, such bases are still not solid and complete. As can be seen from the above review, currently clear institutionalised distinctions still exist between residents with and without urban *Hukou* status in most areas of social protection. Policies and measures of social protection for rural-urban migrants from the central government are often given in the form of 'opinions' or 'guidelines'; they are not as enforceable as laws, often presented in general terms, and could be easily compromised at local level. Thus an important area for improvement in social protection for rural-urban migrants is further development of relevant institutional and legal bases, especially a clear legal framework under which rights of rural-urban migrants and the obligations of governments at various levels and other social institutions can be clearly defined. It seems that the central government, and the government at superior levels, should bear more responsibility in providing social protection for rural-urban migrants in some areas; this is especially the case in children's education. At the same time, the current practice for employers to take the main responsibility of providing housing security for rural-urban migrants is not reliable, and governments of the destination cities have the obligation and great potential to play a major role in this regard. Even in the area of social insurance, the State has a bigger role to play as a financial source (Zhao 2007). As can be seen below, clearly defining responsibility is also a necessary step for addressing other important issues, including the issues of financing for social protection of rural-urban migrants.

From the Hukou-based urban social insurance system to its coverage of rural-urban migrants: progress and limitations

Another aspect of progress in social protection in China so far has been extending the social insurance system from covering only residents with urban *Hukou* status to protecting rural-urban migrants as well in migrant destination cities. Attempts have been made to introduce almost all kinds of social insurance to rural-urban migrants; and various approaches have been used to achieve this purpose. However, the above development is still in a rather preliminary stage. As reviewed earlier, the majority of rural-urban migrants are still not covered by various insurance

programmes; rural-urban migrants' enthusiasm to join the social insurance programmes is rather low, and many of them have a high tendency to withdraw from the insurance programmes they have joined. Furthermore, some aspects of the needs of rural-urban migrants for social insurance are still poorly developed. Currently, the most developed kind of social insurance for rural-urban migrants is old-age insurance (currently called 'social insurance'), and now priority is put on insurance against work related injuries and major diseases. However, rural-urban migrants are also in great need of insurance against other risks, especially unemployment. Unfortunately, unemployment insurance for rural-urban migrants is the least developed among all kinds of insurance programmes for rural-urban migrants, partly because of the perception that migrants can go back to their rural places of origin if they become unemployed. Besides, the premium levels for both migrant workers and their employers are too high, and this is a contributing factor leading to a low participation rate of rural-urban migrants in various insurance programmes (Zhao 2007). In general, the current status of social protection for rural-urban migrants in the form of social insurance still cannot play a significant role in protecting them against risks in their migration processes.

Social benefits or social assistance for rural-urban migrants: later start and slow progress

There has been a relatively later start and slow progress in extending social protection in the form of social benefits or social assistance to rural-urban migrants in the cities. This is mainly reflected in the areas of housing provision and minimum living standard protection (*Dibao*). As reviewed earlier, housing security for rural-urban migrants has been considered only recently, and migrant employers still take the main responsibility for migrant workers' housing. Although there have been some local initiatives in providing housing security for rural-urban migrants in various forms, they are still at a rather preliminary stage and often have strong conditions attached, and therefore not many rural-urban migrants can benefit from them.

Similarly, the minimum living standard protection (*Dibao*) is another form of social protection that is still exclusively provided to urban residents with local *Hukou* registration (The State Council 1999), and rural-urban migrants have no entitlement to this social benefit, although they are among those in the cities who are most vulnerable to below-poverty level income unacceptable to society. They may have the further dilemma of having no entitlement to minimum living standard protection (*Dibao*) in their rural places of origin, as their income in urban areas may be higher than the income criterion in the rural places of origin for this entitlement.. The above two examples of housing provision and minimum living standard protection show that the urban-centered dichotomous approach based on the *Hukou* system still plays an important role in social protection in China, and they are also evidence that further reform in institutional and legal frameworks is still needed so that rural-urban migrants will no longer be disadvantaged in their urban destinations.

Regional differences in the needs of rural-urban migrants for and the provision of social protection: uneven development

In a vast country like China with a migrant population of 147 million, it is important to realize that there are some major regional differences in the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection, and in the provision of such protection for them. Providing a complete picture of such differences remains an important research task in the field and is beyond the scope of this project; however, some understanding can be obtained from the existing literature in this regard. In recent years, it has been identified that major regional differences exist between the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta, two most important migrant receiving areas in China (Li and Tang 2006; Wang *et al.* 2006; Wang and Liu 2007). According to a survey conducted by Wang *et al.* (2006), migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta were in a much more disadvantaged situation than those in the Yangtze River Delta in terms of wage level, proportion of those protected by working contracts, coverage of social insurance, and benefits from their employers, and so forth. These differences were attributed to the differences in human capital endowment and institutional environment between the two regions. In terms of the difference in human capital endowment, migrant workers in the Yangtze River Delta were younger and better educated than those in the Pearl River Delta, and this put them in a better position in the labour market and also made them better protected. This also suggests that there were differences in the need for and actual effects of social protection among different groups of rural-urban migrants with different characteristics. In terms of the difference in institutional environment, more migrant workers in the Yangtze River Delta were employed in the state-owned enterprises and collectively owned township and village enterprises, which encompass more socialist or community-based tradition in dealing with the capital-labour relationship, than those in the Pearl River Delta. In contrast, in the Pearl River Delta more migrant employers were owners of small and medium private or foreign funded enterprises, and they tended to treat migrant workers in a worse way (Wang *et al.* 2006).

Another major regional difference in social protection exists between different cities. For example, in Xiamen Municipality of Fujian Province, a major migrant destination area, local government started to explore ways of providing social insurance for rural-urban migrants as early as the 1990s, and has enacted a series of local regulations in this regard. In contrast, in Quanzhou Municipality of Fujian Province, another major migrant destination area, similar actions have been taken only recently. Such difference is an important contributing factor to the fact that the coverage rate of social insurance for rural-urban migrants is much higher in Xiamen than in Quanzhou (Lin and Zhu 2009). Another important difference among the cities is that some major extra-large cities, especially those in the eastern area, such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Nanjing, still impose more restrictions on rural-urban migrant employment, than other cities, especially those in the central part of China, such as Wuhan and Xian (Xie 2007). Thus, regional difference in social protection is another area deserving more attention in relevant research and policy making.

Beyond the extension of urban- and residence-based social welfare and/or insurance systems: the mobility of migrants and the portability issue of social protection programmes

In the efforts to provide social protection for rural-urban migrants, extending the coverage of the conventional urban- and residence-based social welfare system or its post reform variation to rural-urban migrants is still the dominant approach. Such an approach is based on the theoretical framework of social exclusion and inclusion, focusing on the disadvantaged conditions of rural-urban migrants and difficulties of their integration into the destination cities, and the role of the *Hukou* system in causing such difficulties and conditions (e.g. Solinger 1999; Zheng and Huang Li 2007). While this approach is necessary and has played an important role in reshaping the institutional bases for a more inclusive system of social protection in China, and has indeed achieved some success so far, its results are not as ideal as expected, as the above preliminary assessment suggests.

The limitation of this extension approach lies in the fact that it has not taken into full account the characteristics of rural-urban migrants, especially their frequent mobility and multi-local status, which make their needs different from local urban residents (Zhu 2003, 2007). The low participation rate of rural-urban migrants in various social insurance programmes and their frequent withdrawal from them can be partly attributed to this limitation (Zheng and Huang Li 2007). The inclusive approach in providing housing security to rural-urban migrants reviewed earlier has similar limitations, and can benefit only a small group of rural-urban migrants, if no major improvement is made (Lin and Zhu 2008). Thus the conventional conceptualisation of migration, which assumes rural-urban migration is a one-way process and settlement and integration into the destination cities as the final destiny of rural-urban migrants, is not adequate in providing guidance for the practices of social protection. Providing portable social protection programmes to rural-urban migrants without relying on the old residence-based mechanism such as the *Hukou* system, and prioritising the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection on the basis of taking into consideration their mobility, are two key issues in making further progress in social protection for rural-urban migrants in China. The above reviewed independent social insurance programmes tailored to the needs of rural-urban migrants, and the independent approach in providing housing security to rural-urban migrants, which may carry some elements of new approaches to social protection, but they are still immature and need to be further examined through more field-work based research. Very recently, there has been some interesting developments in the design of a new and portable social insurance programme unified at the national level, and this should be closely followed and assessed (Yang 2008)

Seeking new financing mechanisms for non-residence-based social protection programmes

Another crucial issue in the design of non-residence-based social protection

programmes is their financing. Recently, there have been several cases of failure in the efforts of some migrant destination cities trying to grant local household registration and the related social welfare to migrants, due to the lack of capability in covering the lack of budget capability. This is not surprising, as the fund allocation mechanisms, which are inherited from the era of planned economy and do not take rural-urban migrants into consideration, still play a role, and the contributory social protection programmes are not well developed. Thus, it is unrealistic to rely on the conventional state financial sources and financing mechanisms to fund social insurance programmes for rural-urban migrants, and new ways of financing are needed (Lan and Ren 2004). This involves both the financing mechanisms for the coverage of rural-urban migrants by universal benefits or services and means-tested benefits, such as those relating to migrant children's education and minimum income protection; and the financing and benefit-payment mechanisms of contributory programmes, such as various insurance programmes. The new financing mechanisms should be developed in connection with re-defining the rights and obligations of the various parties involved, and well informed by solid knowledge about rural-urban migrants and their needs.

5. Further research agenda

Based on the above literature review and preliminary assessment on current policies, programmes and practices of social protection for rural-urban migrants, we will continue our research under the following framework.

Fieldwork-based further investigation into the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection and assessment of relevant policies, programmes and practices

So far, our understanding of the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection and the assessment of relevant policies, programmes and practices has been mainly based on the literature review. Such understanding needs to be verified and complemented through further field research. Particular attention will be paid to the following:

- The needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection: a questionnaire survey will be conducted to identify more details of the needs of rural-urban migrants for social protection not covered by the above literature review. Particular attention will be paid to the more detailed views of rural-urban migrants for their needs of social protection, such as priority ranking of various forms of social insurance for them, the priority ranking of the provision of various educational opportunities, including public and private schools in both the places of origin and destination; and the priority ranking of various forms of housing provision, such as low-rent housing, affordable housing and so on.
- Assessment of policies, programmes and practices of social protection for

rural-urban migrants: a questionnaire survey and an in-depth interview will be conducted to verify and complement the preliminary assessment of policies, programmes and practice of social protection for rural-urban migrants through the above literature review. Particular attention will be paid to the following:

- The implementation, coverage and effectiveness of policies, programmes and practice of social protection in the eyes of rural-urban migrants.
- The implementation, coverage and effectiveness of policies, program and practice of social protection in the eye of officials of various government departments.
- The role of NGOs, migrant social networks, migrant home communities and resources (including the land) in serving the function of social protection, which is not well covered by the literature review.

New ways to further the development of social protection for rural-urban migrants and new approaches in its financing

As the above preliminary assessment suggests, social protection for rural-urban migrants is still in its early stages of development, and much still needs to be done to meet their needs. Our next step of research will explore the ways for further development of social protection for rural-urban migrants, focusing on the new approaches in its financing in connection with the further development of its institutional bases. This will involve the exploration of the following sub-issues.

- Further examination of the institutional and legal bases for the recognition of rural-urban migrants' rights for social protection, and the re-definition of the state role in providing such protection, and the division of labour among governments at various levels.
- The creation of new sources of financial revenues for social protection of migrants. This involves the financing issues identified in the previous section, paying particular attention to the relative role of financial revenues from various levels of the State; and the relative roles of employers and rural-urban migrants in contributory programmes.
- The restructuring of the system for the distribution of financial revenues. This will be examined in connection with the mobile nature of migrants, and the following exploration regarding portability issues in social protection for rural-urban migrants.

Dealing with portability issues in social protection for rural-urban migrants

Based on the above work, a next step of research will be focused on the portability issues of social protection for rural-urban migrants, as one of the major problems in

current social protection programmes identified earlier is that they are residence-based, and therefore incompatible with the nature of migrant mobility, seriously affecting their effectiveness in social protection and dampening the enthusiasm of migrants to join the social insurance programmes. We will approach this issue by examining the following questions:

- Migrants' needs and expectation in terms of portability of social protection programmes. This will be examined through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews.
- Major obstacles in ensuring portability of social protection programmes from the perspective of relevant government departments. This involves the investigation of the current division of labour in the social protection of migrants among relevant government departments at different levels and in different regions, their different practices and conflicting interests, and the difficulties in coordination among them.
- Ways forward to move from the residence-based social protection programmes to portable social protection programmes. This question will be answered on the basis of the answers to the above two questions, the above assessment on current policies, programmes and practices of social protection for rural-urban migrants, and our discussion with rural-urban migrants, their employers, and relevant government officials and practitioners.

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