

# Class: Population Mobility, Urbanisation and Social Stratification in China

Flemming Christiansen

Version: May 23, 2005

Prepared for CNRS-CASS Conference, Lyon, 20.-21.06.2005

## Abstract

While the population mobility—migration—that has characterised Chinese development during the recent 20-25 years has not yet reached its climax, and although it continues to go in multiple directions and is premised on many diverse causes, it represents, in essence, an urbanisation process.

The rural-urban boundary is in flux, as the dividing criteria continue to change during the economic reforms. Accordingly, what is normally discussed in terms of rural-urban migration might better be considered as movement between geographical locations situated at different positions on a rural-urban continuum—from a more rural to a more urban place. As the spatial, jurisdictional and political economy barriers become blurred or wither away, new social divisions gain importance. The migrants cannot only be perceived as people moving from one place to another in a narrow, spatial sense, but must be regarded in their roles within a society that experiences simultaneous processes of social stratification.

The present paper seeks to place population mobility within the contexts of social stratification and urbanisation. It argues for shifting the perspective away from the mechanics of migration and towards processes of class differentiation. It explores how migration processes in themselves help generate strata, both in terms of exclusion/inclusion, in terms of opportunity paths, and in terms of labour market roles. It proceeds to explore the dynamic interplay between urbanisation and class formation, considering the differences between various forms of urbanisation and the diverse roles in the political economy of urban places.

It concludes by exploring how class redefines social identities; the rights and roles of migrants in the urban context expand and change, while the changing urban social environment generates opportunities for consolidation of new class structures: Educational selection, consumption, and taste set parameters for class distinctions, while the linkages to the rural past are recast from remittances to reminiscences.