





inequality is the system of hukou or household registration. Since the 1950s, hukou has cleaved the population into urban and rural categories, allowing China's ruling elite to better control the lives of the country's vast rural population in a planned economy.

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Today much of China's economic life has been transformed, but key elements of hukou remain. This means that rural migrants who have lived and worked in a city for many years, contributing enormously to its prosperity, do not have the same access to employment, housing, education and healthcare as officially registered urban residents.

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Roughly two-thirds of the migrant workforce is aged under 35. I've interviewed dozens of men like Liu and Jin in Shenzhen, and most have little interest in rural life in villages that have been left behind by China's economic boom. But their prospects for settling in big cities are little better than those of previous generations.

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They're unlikely to earn enough to own a home or even a car, prerequisites to be considered marriage material by the urban middle class. Access to the tertiary education which can unlock better paying jobs is restricted by fiercely competitive entrance exams, where many young rural men are unsurprisingly outshone by their well-resourced urban counterparts.

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Increasingly, even workers in their late teens and early 20s are feeling the pressure. "These days, the only reason my parents call me is to tell me to hurry up and find a girlfriend. I've stopped answering their calls," says Jiang, a 22-year-old Foxconn worker from Sichuan province.

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Lacking financial independence, young rural migrants rely on their parents for emotional and practical support more than their urban educated counterparts. They're less likely to object to their parents arranging speed dates, or ultimately choosing them a partner and negotiating the caili (dowry payment).

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This old tradition, banned in the era of Mao, has made a comeback in rural China. There are a number of reasons: the embrace of capitalist and entrepreneurial values; the imbalanced ratio of men to women, which drives a sellers market; and the persistence of patriarchal values which consider women to be properties, owned first by their parents and then their husband.

