

Summary of Professor Liyong Dai's Presentation "Urbanization in China: Migrant Workers, Hukou and Land" on Tuesday, March 21, 2017 by Yany Siek

There was palpable excitement in the air as members of the Canada-China Friendship Society and the broader Ottawa community gathered in the Christ Church Cathedral for Professor Liyong Dai's highly anticipated presentation on rapid urbanization, the Hukou system, and the unique experiences of migrant workers in China.

Speaking to an audience of fifty individuals, Professor Dai began by describing the unprecedented scale of urbanization in contemporary Chinese society. China is home to twenty-five of the world's largest cities and from 2000 to 2015, its urban share of the population grew from 35.85% to 55.60%; by 2030, this proportion is expected to rise to 60%. Migrant workers compose a substantial segment of this population, often travelling long distances from home in search of better opportunities. In their pursuit, they take on the most dangerous factory and construction occupations, receiving low remuneration for their hard labour. Furthermore, they confront a myriad of challenges ranging from a lack of access to the local, urban welfare system to unequal rights. Fundamentally, they are a *dislocated* people.

According to Professor Dai, the primary obstacle to improving welfare system coverage for Chinese migrants and achieving equal rights is the Hukou system. Established in the 1950s and in the context of a planned economy, *Hukou* refers to China's household registration system which manages the movement of populations and establishes an individual's residency. Since the 1980s, despite high levels of rural-urban migration, many peasant migrants have been unable to obtain urban Hukou and thus, cannot access state-provided benefits and welfare programs. For example, they cannot vote, have limited employment opportunities, and are restricted in purchasing real estate in the urban area where they work. Furthermore, without access to urban welfare and education systems, many migrants must abandon parents and young children in the countryside, contributing to the "386199 army." These factors have produced significant inequalities between urban residents with Hukou and those without, resulting in a vulnerable migrant population. Despite efforts to reform the system, progress has varied from region to region, province to province.

In addition to discussing the Hukou system, Professor Dai highlighted other issues related to urbanization. He addressed inequalities between geographical regions, noting that from 2005 to 2013, Western China's income, education, and middle class outcomes declined in comparison to increases in Eastern China. This trend is indicative of elite populations travelling eastwards and reflects an uneven process of urbanization. With respect to land ownership, peasants have little ability to resist urban expansion conducted by local municipal governments whose incomes are increasingly dependent on land finance.

Professor Dai's stimulating presentation on migrant workers, land, and the Hukou system, contributes to the broader debate among scholars and pundits regarding the opportunities and challenges posed by China's rapid urbanization. Looking to the future, reformation of the Hukou system will likely be long-term due to its connection to the social welfare system and deep entrenchment in Chinese society. In addition, Professor Dai's presentation raises a series of important questions: What are the prospects for reforming the Hukou and land systems? How can China's leadership manage the continuing phenomenon of rapid urbanization? What are the

broader implications for China's future prosperity and what role can Canada play? Although these questions are difficult to answer, they provide a useful starting point for exploring contemporary issues that China faces today.