

Bowdoin Summer Research Fellowship Final Report

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Continuity and Contradiction: The Early People's Republic of China's (PRC) Hukou System from Republican-Era Roots to Constitutional Debate

This summer, my government research examined the historical roots and early development of the PRC's household registration system (hukou system). My central research question asked: How did the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) housing and population registration practices during the Republican era (pre-1949) shape the development of the PRC's hukou system? I was especially interested in how the early PRC leadership justified adopting or discarding earlier policies in light of the 1954 Constitution's explicit guarantee of freedom of movement.

Over the course of summer, I completed extensive readings on related issues and traced the evolution of population control mechanisms from the Nationalist and Communist zones of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) into the first decade of the PRC. My readings ranged from foundational political thoughts, such as Mao Zedong's *On Practice*, to detailed historical analyses of the baojia neighborhood security system, the Chinese Soviet Republic, and the 1958 Household Registration Regulation. These sources revealed that the hukou system was not simply a static bureaucratic structure imposed from above, but rather the product of evolving experimentation at the local level, refined and codified into national policy.

Furthermore, I found clear continuities between pre-1949 governance practices, such as the Nationalist government's fortified baojia system and the CCP's rural control experiments, and the eventual dual rural/urban hukou structure in post-civil war China. My research also showed how constitutional principles could be reinterpreted to align with political priorities based on the regime's governing experience from the civil war period. Primary sources, including a 1953 *People's Daily* editorial condemning "blind migration" to cities, revealed how class struggle and urban-rural divisions became central to legitimizing restrictions on mobility. Mao's own writings emphasized a "guided freedom," framing mobility control as a necessary element of socialist state-building rather than a contradiction of constitutional rights.

Thematically, I explored the coexistence of modern legal language and policy-first governance logic in the PRC's early years. While the 1954 Constitution resembled Soviet and Western legal models, CCP's policy implementation often prioritized political stability, resource allocation, and social control over individual freedoms. In this sense, the hukou system illustrates how the CCP uniquely reconciled ideological commitments with pragmatic governance needs.

In sum, this summer's work has provided a strong archival, theoretical, and historiographical foundation for a deeper dive into the hukou system's constitutional and political paradoxes.

Building on these findings, I hope to develop this research project into my senior honors thesis in Asian Studies, where I will further analyze ways the hukou system embodies both continuity with imperial governance traditions and adaptation to socialist political objectives under its controversial constitution.