

With prices for farmland rising rapidly on the mainland, many university graduates want their rural residencies back. But as **Lulu Chen** reports, it is not that easy

# Rural hukou now a prize for graduates

**F**or many university graduates on the mainland, such as Zhou Jiaozhi, getting a rural hukou – or residency status – is now something to aspire to rather than flee from.

It's a reversal almost unimaginable a few years ago, when acceptance into a university and the granting of a hukou in a large city was a major step toward success.

But with unemployment running well above the official figure of 12.6 per cent for recent university graduates, life back on the farm is looking a lot more attractive. That's especially true since the government allots housing and agricultural land to rural residents – and prices there are rising.

So Zhou, like other country students who were required to relocate their residency permits to their universities' cities, is trying to get his rural hukou back. But he and others are being blocked by murky regulations and village politics.

"I graduate from university, I don't have a job and I also might lose all of my land," said Zhou, summarising his predicament.

"For the 6 million university graduates every year, the key issue is finding a job," said Dang Guoying, who researches rural development at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "For those who want their rural identity again, the issue is rising land prices. They want land."

Residency permits are usually divided into urban and rural, each with various social benefits. Urban citizens have access to a city's education, pension, health care, housing and job benefits. Rural residents are allotted government-owned land for housing and agriculture.

Dang said students should not be deprived of their land if they go to university. "For rural kids, it's not easy for them to get into university, and even harder to find a job. If you take away their land, isn't it too much?"

But Shi Tianjian, an associate professor of political science at Duke University in the US with an emphasis on Chinese politics, has a different view.

Shi said that land was so scarce these days that it was reasonable for students to give some up in return for acquiring urban-citizen benefits.

"What these students really want is not to plant crops," Shi said. "They want it both ways, the job and the land. This is not fair."

The mainland's arable land decreased



4.6 per cent to about 1.22 billion hectares from 2001 to 2008, according to the Chinese land and resources bureau.

If Zhou could find a job in the city, he would earn much more than he would working on a farm.

University graduates earn an average of 2,756 yuan (HK\$3,155) a month, according to MyCOS, a Beijing research company. Zhou said that for the less than four mu of farmland (about 0.27 hectares) where his family plants corn, they make a profit of less than 2,000 yuan a year.

Since Zhou decided he wanted to relocate back to his village, he has had to overcome hurdles, and until now his application has been denied.

Zhou grew up in Datun village in Hebei province (河北). In 2006, he was admitted to the Hebei Institute of Physical Education in Shijiazhuang (石家庄), the capital of Hebei, and studied golf-course management.

Upon enrolling he followed the rules and relocated his permit to his university's city.

"I was not clear about the policies at that time," said Zhou. "Everyone said that it was better to get an urban hukou."

Upon graduation, Zhou went to Beijing in search of a job but the prospects were dim. Because he couldn't find a job in the city, Zhou's hukou was sent back to Nian Ziyou, a town that his village was subordinate to.

But that is still an urban hukou and Zhou said he felt it moved more sense to have his permit moved back to his village and become a rural resident again.

Zhou's main worry is that he will not be able to inherit land that his parents are entitled to, as he lost his rural status. But for now, his family's land has not decreased.

Since 1978, with some variations from village to village, each individual was allotted agricultural land for a contracted period of time, or until they relocated or died.

In 2002, due to the shortage of arable land, the government dictated that a

family's land would not increase or decrease based on the number of people in a household within the contract period.

It took a long time for the policy to trickle down into villages and some still did not strictly follow it, said Peng Jian, the director of the Beijing Huahuan Law Firm.

Zhou said his village began implementing the law right before he left for university. So Zhou's family land, including housing and agricultural land, did not decrease as a result of his relocating.

But Zhou is still worried. Without his rural identity he does not have the right to inherit his parent's land for housing purposes. He can use the agricultural land if his parents die, but only within the contracted time. He would also miss out on subsidies for farmers and any form of compensation if the government took land away from the village.

Another complication was that with the exception of Jiangsu province (江苏), most villages still allotted compensation money by dividing it equally among residents in the village, Peng said. The reason is because the land belongs to the village, legally speaking.

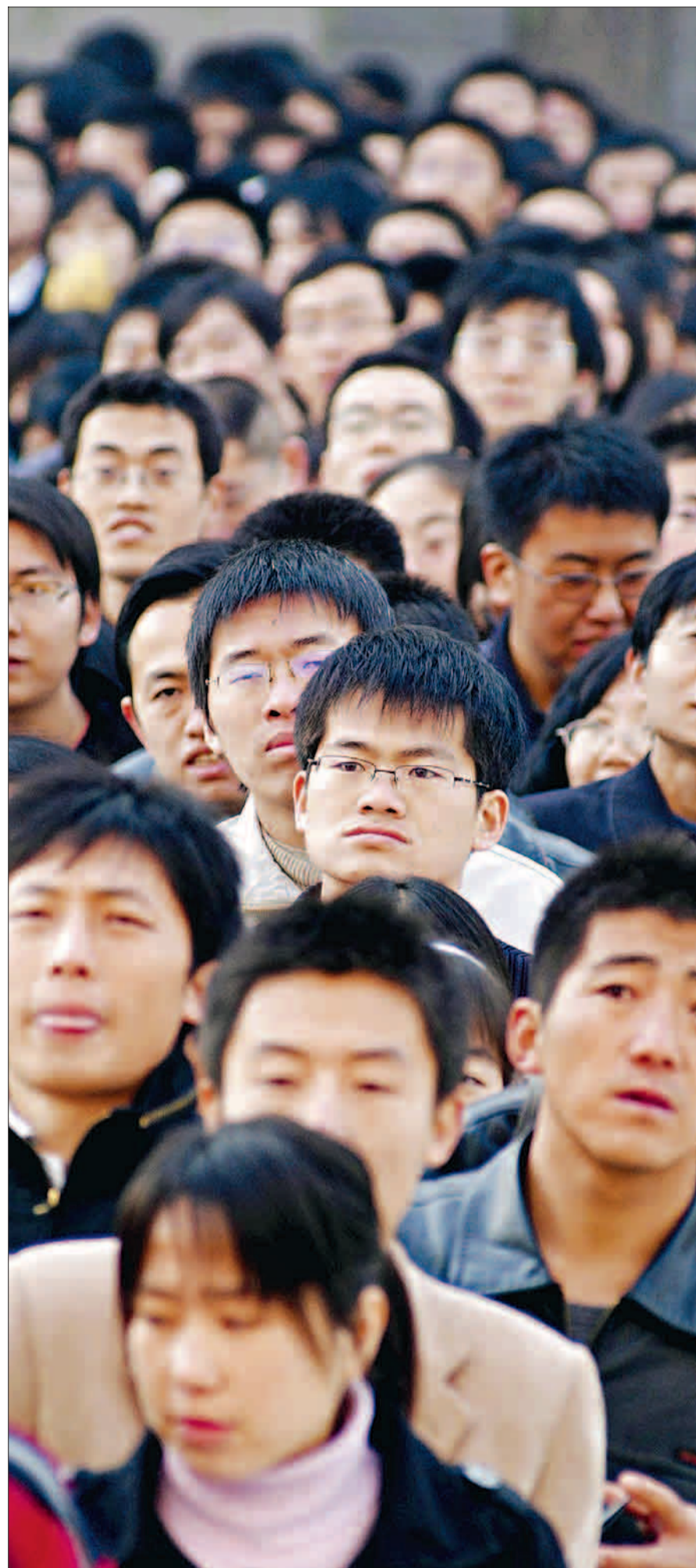
Even though the land and resource bureau issued a notice last month encouraging villages to give compensation directly to the families whose land was taken away, Peng said this new notice contradicted what the law required and might take a long time to take effect around the country.

That means if Zhou's family's land is taken away, very likely the village will divide the money equally among all villagers, rather than giving the money to Zhou's family based on how much land they had. Zhou would not receive any compensation.

Peng said if this happened, Zhou's family might be given some new land in compensation, but very often the regulation stirred conflict. The newly allotted land tended to be less favourable, and people often felt they were not compensated enough for their loss, he said.

The most confusing issue is whether Zhou could inherit his family's house. By law Zhou is entitled to inherit the house even without a rural status, as it is private property. But he is not eligible to inherit the land that the house stands on.

This loophole in the country's legal system is causing a lot of confusion, according to Zhu Xiaoding, a lawyer at Beijing Cailiang Law Firm.



College students line up at a job fair in Taiyuan (太原), Shanxi province (山西). In 2007, almost a third of graduates did not find jobs. Photo: Reuters

someone leaves, the other shares get larger," Peng said. "Of course they don't want people coming back."

It was very hard to calculate how many graduates were facing the same problem, as there were no official data, Zhu said. But he said that he had run into many cases of this kind.

The proportion of urban to rural university students is 82.3 to 17.7, according to Xinhua. That means about 1.08 million students originally from rural regions graduate every year, and a large number of them might run into the same problem.

In 2007, seven students from two different villages in Shandong (山东) sued their villages for refusing to grant them land compensation because they relocated their hukou upon entering university, according to the *Procuratorial Daily*, the official paper of China's top prosecutions office. But their cases were not accepted by the District People's Court of Jinan (济南).

To make matters worse, mainland courts rarely accept cases that involve the clarification of whether a person has rural status, according to Zhu.

In June, a graduate wrote to the Zhejiang province (浙江省) Department of Public Security, requesting his rural identity back. The department replied that according to law, urban citizens are prohibited from becoming rural residents, according to the Zhejiang government's webpage.

Peng said that such a law did exist but it was issued to prevent urban people from grabbing rural land.

He said such cases should be differentiated from students who originally belonged to the villages.

According to the law, the students should have been permitted to become villagers again, Peng said.

The fact that policies in this sector are so vague and that village committees enjoy so much power offers a window for corruption, according to Shi.

"I can give you the land and I can also not, so who decides?" Shi said. "If the village committee decides, then people start giving presents."

Wang Xiaoying, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said laws were seldom regulated for a specific group of people so it was unlikely any new law would change the situation.

Zhou said he had basically given up fighting for a rural identity.

"All I can do now is listen to fate."

**Away from home**  
The proportion of urban to rural university students is 82.3 to 17.7

The number of students graduating each year that were originally from rural areas, in millions, is

**1.08**

"When it comes to reality, it often depends on what the village committee says," Zhu said. "Every village has their own way of handling matters."

Zhou's village head, Tao Qinghai, said that people had never successfully relocated their residency permits.

Asked whether university students could relocate their permits, he said that it was decided on a case-by-case basis.

"It depends on who you are and what your situation is," Tao said.

When asked why a student's hukou application would be denied if he or she wanted to return, he hung up the phone.

Peng said that according to law, Zhou should be allowed to relocate. But he added that in practice, it largely depended on the decision of the village committee, and often because of conflicts of interest, the village committee refused to accept the students back.

"Think of village land like a listed company. The villagers are shareholders; if

# Rush for blogger's magazine a cry for freedom

**Sophie Yu**

The debut of a long-awaited magazine by China's top blogger, Han Han (韩寒) sold out its first print run of 500,000 copies in two days.

Even as hundreds of thousands more were later rolling off the presses, fears were voiced that the pioneering issue of *Duchangtuan* – or "Party" – could be a one-off wonder, with sceptics doubting that censors would allow a second edition from the best-selling author, social rebel and wildly popular blogger.

But one media expert had little doubt the second issue would hit the market on schedule in about two month's time.

Zhang Zhian, assistant dean in the Journalism School at Shanghai's Fudan University, was optimistic. "I think it will come out. Why not? Every character will be censored."

For some on the mainland, who look to Han Han for his outspoken and often iconoclastic and sardonic comments on the Chinese system, the magazine has been something of a disappointment. Hopes had been high of a publication that would break the mould.

That could explain why 500,000 copies sold out within two days of its July 6 launch. The first 22,000 copies to reach Beijing market sold out in 20 minutes.

This is nothing short of a miracle for the first issue of a magazine in the mainland's struggling book market and it was all down to one factor – the name of the editor.

Just 28, Han Han is a top-earning author with 10 books published, and a champion amateur racing car driver. He

ranked second in a poll published by *Time* magazine in May of the 100 most influential people in the world. *Time* said Han, the son of a Shanghai newspaper editor, is widely seen as "a torch-bearer for the generation born after the beginning of the country's opening to the outside world, a group the Chinese call the 'post-80s generation': apolitical, money- and status-obsessed children of the country's explosive economic boom".

The success of his magazine is unprecedented.

Pre-publication sales hinted at the runaway popularity likely to await Han's magazine. More than 30,000 copies were ordered on the top two leading online bookstores Amazon.cn and Dangdang.com. "No book has ever been like this, except some imported pop-literature books like Harry Potter," said Zhang.

The publication of the magazine has been hailed as a victory for Han, since its launch had been repeatedly delayed because some of its bold contents had failed to pass checks by the authorities.

Han, meanwhile, kept a low profile about the publication, giving just one interview to *Southern Metropolis Weekly*, a news magazine in Guangdong. Asked which step during the censoring process was the most difficult, Han laughed and replied: "Every step," adding: "It can't be explained in any detail... or there won't be a second issue," the magazine reported.

Controversy aside, a personal charm helped boost sales. "Half of the magazine's success comes from Han himself," said Pan Caifu, a prominent book commentator for



Every step in the censorship process was difficult. It can't be explained in any detail... or there won't be a second issue

Han Han, mainland author and magazine editor

*The Beijing News*. "For the other half, we have to thank the [restrictions of] the motherland."

Caifu said *The Beijing News* had got notice from the top censorship organisation, the Propaganda Ministry, to keep quiet about the magazine.

There has been much talk about censorship since Han announced in April last year that he would publish a youth intellectual magazine.

*Southern Metropolis Weekly* quoted an insider saying 70 per cent of the original content had disappeared from the first issue, though there was hope that some may resurface in the second issue. Those involved in the magazine were cautious – several writers who submitted stories declined to be interviewed, and an editor at a Shanghai newspaper working with Han on the editorial work said it was "inconvenient" to talk.

Their caution is understandable. The magazine has a book code, not a magazine code. If Beijing is unhappy with it the next issue may never come out.

Book commentator Pan Caifu said the magazine's print run must have reached one million copies because the publishers had run at least two reprints. "Many book wholesalers are building up a stock because no one is clear about the future of this magazine," he said. If the magazine has no next issue then the first issue will become a collectors' item and can be sold at a much higher price.

On Pan's microblog – the mainland equivalent of Twitter, which is banned in the country – he invited internet users to draft promotional slogans for the

magazine. "Every copy is the last copy," one said. Another suggestion was: "Buy it, it might be the last time to buy."

Zhang believes that owning the magazine is a symbolic gesture. "Inside the 500,000 buyers who rushed to buy 'Party' in the first two days are beating 500,000 warm hearts that shout out a message against censorship, refusing authority, longing for freedom, democracy, equality and human rights."

Most chat on the internet focuses on comparing tips on where to buy the magazine and laments about how difficult it is to buy it. Discussions of the content are much fewer.

Zhang said that was because buying the magazine was more important than reading it. The action of buying signalled an opposition to the draconian policy limiting speech freedom of speech, and showed support too, for Han Han. "It's sold so well because it's a magazine by citizen Han Han with an individual bent of mind, not simply writer Han Han," Zhang said.

Han Han gained fame at a young age. In 2000 his novel about middle school campus life *Triple Door* was the best-seller of that year on the mainland. *Triple Door* has now sold more than 3 million legal copies while piracy is rampant, according to Han Han's longtime collaborator and publisher, Lu Jinbo.

Han started writing essays in his blog, located on the mainland's major internet portal website, sina.com, in November 2006. While some concern car racing, the majority focus on social justice. The blog has attracted 400 million hits, making Han the most popular blogger on the mainland.

A China Central Television reporter given the opportunity to ask US President Barack Obama questions at the G20 summit last year asked two questions, presenting the first as being "on behalf of China" and the second "on behalf of the world". In his blog Han heckled: "If he can ask a third question, who will it be on behalf of?"

Han answered that question on behalf of the reporter – logically it would not be Mars or the universe he said sardonically, but that of the paramount (Communist) Party.

The magazine is named "Party" too, though *Duchangtuan* more literally means solo. So why is the English name "Party"? Publisher Lu Jinbo joked that "old comrades can't speak good English", perhaps a good thing since the 120-page magazine contains more than 30 pieces written in English.

Lu said though there were no advertisements in the first issue, and Han paid the contributors record-high magazine remunerations – 2,000 yuan per thousand characters while the usual standard on the mainland is 50 yuan per thousand characters – the profit generated by the magazine was still likely to be more than a million yuan, as it had broken many sales records.

To readers looking forward to reading criticism of social evils – as they were accustomed to reading in Han's blog posts – Han said in a blog posted on June 10 that the magazine would just be a work of literature and could not carry the expectations of people who wanted to change and improve society.