

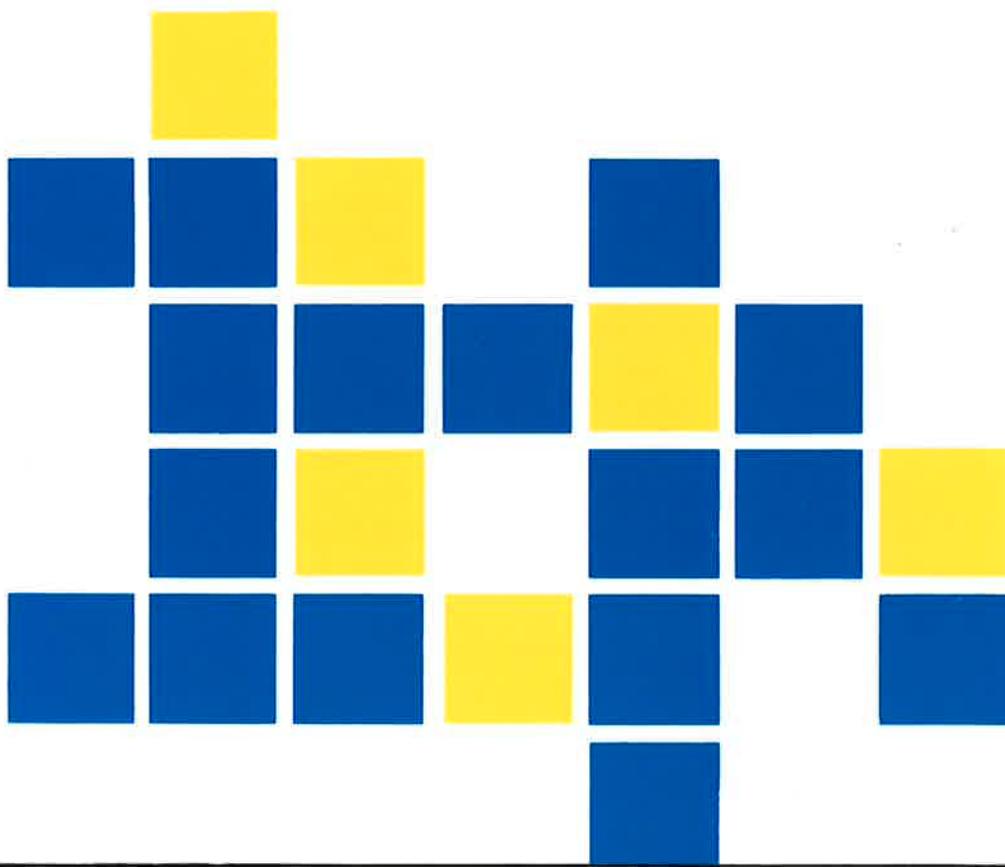


INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES
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Rural Labor Flows in China

EDITED BY

Lorraine A. West and
Yaohui Zhao





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Contents

- Forewordvii
Stephen J. McGurk
- Introduction.....1
Lorraine A. West
- 1. Rural-to-Urban Labor Migration in China:
The Past and the Present15
Yaohui Zhao
- 2. Agricultural Labor and Rural Population Mobility:
Some Observations34
Hein Mallee
- 3. Rural Labor Migration in Contemporary China: An Analysis
of Its Features and the Macro Context67
Ying Du
- 4. Diversification of Household Production in Rural China:
Determinants and Outcomes.....101
Lina Song
- 5. The Effect of Labor Migration on Agriculture:
An Empirical Study129
Nansheng Bai
- 6. Labor Migration as a Rural Development Strategy: A View
from the Migration Origin.....148
Denise Hare and Shukai Zhao
- 7. Chinese Labor Migration: Insights from Mexican Undocumented
Migration to the United States.....179
Kenneth D. Roberts
- 8. Organizational Characteristics of Rural Labor Mobility
in China.....231
Zhao Shukai
- 9. Regional Wage Gap, Information Flow, and Rural-Urban
Migration251
Xin Meng

10. Migrants and the Media: Concerns about Rural Migration in the Chinese Press	278
<i>Delia Davin</i>	
11. The Relationship between Foreign Enterprises, Local Governments, and Women Migrant Workers in the Pearl River Delta	292
<i>Shen Tan</i>	
12. “Insider” and “Outsider” Community Strategies toward Migrant Workers.....	310
<i>Xiaodong Ma</i>	
Contributors	333

Foreword

The large-scale flow of labor out of rural China in the wake of China's economic reforms and its acceleration after 1990 are matters of great concern for central and local authorities. To avoid the heavy pressure on public services and excessive open unemployment in urban areas that might provoke social unrest, authorities have restricted rural-to-urban mobility. However, reform and rapid development have greatly reduced the effectiveness of administrative controls over migration, and now rural labor migrants number more than eighty million. These labor flows have generated new demands for services outside of existing channels, exercising both state and nonstate organizations concerned with outreach and service.

For most rural households, labor migration affords opportunities to raise and diversify household incomes, smooth consumption, and build assets. This labor movement has necessitated new policies and household strategizing for which there are few precedents. Some substitution of capital for labor is occurring, however, largely within the household. Few land transfers are observed, and plots remain small and dispersed. There are limits to the amount of substitution of capital and labor possible within households, and further substitution will require land transfers between households. However, there appear to be significant obstacles to land-use transfers and the development of land-use rental markets. Subleasing of land under insecure tenure may lead to collective appropriation as it signals that the household does not need the land. Alternatively, cadres may impose restrictions on transfers to retain control over land allocations for political or personal objectives. Excessive and random fee collections tied to land-use allocations lower the value of land use, while insecure tenure limits investments in land. Both contribute to lower land values and disincentives for transfers. Insecure land tenure can also distort household labor migration decisions,

particularly where there are few other off-farm employment opportunities. These distortions are evidenced by widespread Chinese patterns of temporary labor migration and long-term conjugal separation.

In rural villages where men have migrated, their absence is having enormous implications for the feminization of agriculture, the nature of intergenerational relations, the education of children, and the structure of household incomes and assets. As families turn over more cropping duties to women to allow men to seek wage jobs, cropping demands restrict the time available for rural women to raise young children. Traditional authority structures are changing as rural women are increasingly responsible for contacts with village officials, post office officials, and teachers. Domestic relations are also transformed as women spend more time with their natal family in their husband's absence and take over much responsibility for negotiations with their husband's family and management of household income. These factors play a dominant role in rural women's decisions about reproductive health, sexuality, health care, and educational aspirations for children.

China's government, recognizing that large state enterprises and agencies and producer and manufacturing sectors are likely to continue shedding urban workers and staff, has given priority to promoting economic and employment growth for laid-off urban workers and staff in the small-enterprise and service sectors. Firm managers, however, often prefer migrant workers, who are paid less, work longer hours and in harsher conditions, and are not entitled to the health care, schooling, housing, or pension benefits associated with state-sector employment. For their part, most laid-off state-enterprise workers and state-agency staff are averse to the risky entrepreneurial activities that characterize the small-enterprise and service sectors. Instead, these sectors are dominated by migrant entrepreneurs and supervised by state authorities who hold different goals regarding migrant control and growth and employment.

Migrants face a host of urban adjustment issues. Young rural women labor migrants in Chinese cities are more apt to be sexually active before marriage than rural counterparts. Most women migrants leave rural areas in their teens with limited schooling, and many without even rudimentary knowledge about health, reproductive physiology, and contraception. They are at greater risk of incurring unwanted pregnancies and induced abortions

with serious consequences. Many migrants leave children with relatives in rural communities, but others bring the children with them to urban workplaces. Perhaps as many as a hundred thousand of Beijing's estimated more than two million rural labor migrants are school-age children, of whom less than a tenth attend school. Such schooling as they get is in primitive, crowded, and unregistered migrant-operated schools. Yet authorities, fearing an influx of migrants, have limited the scope of experimentation with migrant education in urban areas through fee discrimination and harassment. Not surprisingly, in recent years there has been a visible increase in the number of children on the streets in Chinese cities, around markets, railway stations, and bus stations. These children live nomadically in slum areas on the urban periphery and work under loose adult supervision in the informal economy.

These chapters report some of the results of the first systematic effort to address this complex transformation. Included among the authors are the leaders of study groups spanning the critical central Chinese government sectoral agencies, think tanks, research academies, and private market-research firms. Thus, this volume contains an authoritative account of Chinese voices on these important themes. The Ford Foundation is proud to be associated with their efforts and hopes that this English publication will encourage further research, experimentation, and advocacy on the needs of migrants and the empirical basis of key policy debates in urbanization, migration, and rural and urban labor policy.

Stephen J. McGurk
Ford Foundation, China Office

Introduction

LORAIN A. WEST

The escalation of rural labor flows that China has experienced over the past fifteen years is credited with contributing to China's record pace of economic growth, but at the same time, it is posing challenges to the economy and society. These voluntary labor flows are largely rural to urban, although rural-to-rural flows have been substantial in some regions as well. The physical and human consequences of this increase in migration on the migrants themselves, their place of origin, and their place of destination is of increasing concern to policy makers.

High rates of rural-urban migration have not been seen in China since the 1950s, when people migrated to escape famine, to participate in resettlement programs, and to seek employment (Cheng and Selden, 1994). The urban population increased from 10.6 percent of the total population in 1949 to 19.8 percent in 1960, representing a net population gain of 73.1 million (State Statistical Bureau, 1991, p. 79). Of this urban population increase, just over 60 percent was attributed to net migration (Wu, 1994, p. 688), the result of nearly 44 million rural migrants entering the cities and towns. Migration in the 1950s was largely voluntary and commonly initiated by the household, although the government also promoted migration through resettlement programs and its focus on urban industrial development during the Great Leap Forward.

In the early 1960s, with the collapse of the economy following the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the famine, there was a large outward flow of population from the urban areas. The loss of jobs in the cities and the scarcity of food compelled many

Thanks to Andrea Miles and Ivanna Vladkova for their excellent assistance in editing the chapters in this volume, especially in preparing the graphics, and to the two anonymous referees who read the entire manuscript and made very helpful suggestions.

recent migrants to return to rural areas. The government also expelled many people from urban areas using various institutions and measures that had been initiated in the 1950s, including the household registration system; the grain ration system; and public ownership of land, enterprises, and urban housing. The household registration system and government control of transport, housing, and food supply allowed the government to exercise effective control over rural-to-urban migration flows through the 1970s. The effectiveness of the system can be seen in the decline in the urbanization level in the 1960s and its very slow growth in the 1970s (figure 1). By 1982, only 19.4 percent of the population resided in urban areas, still lower than the 1960 peak. Yaohui Zhao (chapter 1) discusses in greater detail the development of the measures used to control migration during this period and examines their effectiveness.

The introduction of economic reforms—in particular the household responsibility system, which gave households control over the allocation of labor—renewed opportunities for voluntary labor flows (see Yaohui Zhao and Ying Du [chapter 3] for additional discussion on the dismantling of barriers to migration). With the small scale of land holdings and low profitability of grain production, many rural households were eager to seek opportunities to diversify their income sources, including sending labor outside the village to work. The rapid growth of rural industry in the mid-1980s also attracted migrant laborers to rural areas.¹ The government's shift from emphasizing heavy industry to encouraging development of the service sector, along with other policy changes that permitted the private ownership of vehicles and allowed individuals to establish small businesses (*getihu*), expanded the role rural households were able to play in filling numerous economic niches in both rural and urban areas. The reopening of free markets and three successive years of record grain harvests in 1982, 1983, and 1984 increased the availability of food outside the rationing system, making it easier for temporary migrants to obtain food at their destinations. Government control over population flows, especially labor flows, weakened, and the government did not necessarily view this weakened control as undesirable. In fact, the government stressed the development of small and medium-sized cities and authorized an increase in household registrations for these cities (Luo, 1988).

¹ The Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong province was one of the first areas to employ labor from outside the local community in 1980 (Xin, 1991).

ONE

Rural-to-Urban Labor Migration in China: The Past and the Present

YAOHUI ZHAO

Labor migration from rural to urban areas has emerged as a prominent phenomenon in China since the mid-1980s after decades of stagnation. Before then, the household registration system had successfully confined people to their place of birth. There was very little rural-to-urban migration, and it usually occurred under the auspices of the government. Since the mid-1980s, a large number of migrants have successfully entered cities without official approval. Although there is no accurate estimation of the scale of migration, it is commonly believed that tens of millions of rural migrants are residing in cities without the permanent legal status required to be there, and a large proportion of these people are circular migrants, that is, they move back and forth frequently.

The migration has invited concerns from academics and hostility from the government, urban public, and the media (Davin, 1999). How does one explain the dramatic rise in the rate of migration since the late 1980s? What have been government policies on migration? What are the current and potential economic and social consequences of the existing government policies? These are the questions that I intend to discuss in this chapter. I will first look at the history of migration control since the 1950s by examining the issues surrounding the origin of migration control, the apparatuses of control, their effectiveness before the 1980s, and the loss of effectiveness since the economic reforms. I will then examine the government's reactions to the recent migration and the economic and social ramifications of these policies.

Thanks to Dorothy Solinger, Marty Whyte, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions.

TWO

Agricultural Labor and Rural Population Mobility: Some Observations

HEIN MALLEE

Over the course of the reform period, China has experienced far-reaching economic and social changes. One key element of these changes is the rise of large-scale rural labor mobility. Although there was probably more population mobility during the prereform era than is often recognized, the organization of rural society and an elaborate system of migration controls put strict limits on rural out-migration. The reforms initiated during the late 1970s brought about fundamental changes in the configuration of factors stimulating and constraining population mobility. The household responsibility system, under which the peasant family once again became the basic economic unit in the countryside, restored control over labor allocation and management to the household. The restrictions on commercial activities were lifted, and it was recognized that the long neglected service sector needed to be expanded to create employment and to improve the quality of life of urban consumers. The boom in the construction sector and certain segments of the industrial sector (in particular in industrialized rural areas with access to urban assistance and foreign investments) greatly increased the need for un- and semi-skilled labor. At the same time, the slowdown of urban natural population increase, coupled with profound changes in young city dwellers' attitudes and expectations toward work, made it more and more difficult for urban employers to recruit the required labor from among the officially designated urban population. The gradual disappearance of rationing of daily necessities, in particular of food, made it easier to stay in places other than that of one's official registration, and thus removed one obstacle to longer "temporary" stays in urban areas. The government came to

THREE

Rural Labor Migration in Contemporary China: An Analysis of Its Features and the Macro Context

YING DU

This chapter analyzes the macro economic issues in China's rural labor migration and illustrates the basic features of the migration using information from field studies and sample survey investigations. The first part of the chapter concentrates on a comprehensive analysis of the institutional transformation, regional development, and structural contradictions of the rural economy in search of the essential causes, from a macro perspective, of major rural labor migration in the 1990s. The second part of the chapter is a comparative study of migrant and nonmigrant rural labor, drawing conclusions about the features of the migrant rural population and their employment structure and about the social characteristics of this community. The analysis attempts to find a clear answer to the simple and yet equivocal question, What is migrant rural labor after all?

This chapter draws from the report "Studies of Rural Labor Migration in China: Migrant Workers and the Exporting Hometowns," by Research Group of the Flow of Rural Labor, Research Center for Rural Economy (RCRE), Ministry of Agriculture, presented at the International Conference on the Flow of Rural Labor held in Beijing in June 1996. The author was the leader of the team as well as the chief writer of the report. Financial assistance from the Beijing office of Ford Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.

Diversification of Household Production in Rural China: Determinants and Outcomes

LINA SONG

The rural economic reforms begun in 1978 have had a marked effect on the pattern, as well as the growth, of economic activity in China. In particular, the switch from production teams to the household responsibility system has allowed households to diversify, allocating their work time across different productive activities. Before the reforms, strict controls masked the surplus labor in the agricultural sector. Most rural households operated only in agriculture. State control over the factors of production prevented the supply of rural labor to the cities or to nonagricultural activities in rural areas. With the reforms, these restrictions have been partially lifted, and as a consequence many households engage in more diversified production. However, the new freedoms are limited. Peasants can organize their own production, but lack of ownership prevents them from selling their land to specialize in the nonfarming sectors. Peasants can go to cities for any jobs available to migrants, but they cannot register as urban residents.

This work used data collected by the Ministry of Labor, P.R. China, without whose collaboration the paper would have been impossible. The author is grateful to Simon Appleton, John Knight, Francis Teal, and one anonymous referee for their comments and discussion. The Leverhulme Trust (under Grant F/519/C) and Ford Foundation are gratefully acknowledged for their financial support. All opinions and errors are mine.

The Effect of Labor Migration on Agriculture: An Empirical Study

NANSHENG BAI

As rural-to-urban migration takes place on a large scale, what effects does it have on grain production? This is a question of great concern to economists as well as to policy makers. Presumably, the exodus of farm labor implies a reduction in labor inputs, so the answer to the question crucially depends on whether capital substitution is made. The occurrence of the substitution, in turn, depends on the availability of capital, which varies across households. This chapter uses rural household survey data from Sichuan and Anhui provinces in 1994 and 1995 to examine the effects of labor migration on grain production. I first describe the data, then look at the effects of migration on grain production for households with different levels of capital availability. The variations are explained by different responses of capital input to migration across households with different cash availability. The overall effect of migration on grain production is then evaluated by estimating a production function.

This chapter draws from the research report on the flow of rural laborers in China by the Research Center for Rural Economy of the Ministry of Agriculture (RCRE, 1996). The project director was Ying Du, the team leader was Nansheng Bai, and other participants included Zhe Guan, Changbao Zhao, and Jianjun Guo. The author of this chapter wishes to thank the Ford Foundation for funding this research, Ying Du and Jianjun Guo for their helpful discussions and Jianjun Guo for his assistance in data analysis.

Labor Migration as a Rural Development Strategy: A View from the Migration Origin

DENISE HARE and SHUKAI ZHAO

The large-scale flow of labor out of rural China and the ramifications of this movement on the cities and towns to which workers migrate has become a matter of great concern for central and municipal authorities. Many of these communities are not equipped to provide sufficient employment opportunities and adequate living arrangements for the multitude of laborers who arrive looking for work. Because of the escalation of the migratory flows starting from the mid-1980s, the situation of the migrants in their host communities has attracted a great deal of attention from policy makers and the research community, both in China and abroad. However, the economic effect on the sending communities of large waves of out-migration has been largely ignored.

The goal of this research is to investigate the role of out-migration in rural economic development, using data collected from households in the communities from which migration originated. Griffin (1976) presents the theoretical case for positive efficiency and equity effects of migration at the origin. The main points of his argument are that migration relieves the pressure of

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on the Flow of Rural Labor in China, Beijing, June 25–27, 1996. Extremely valuable comments and suggestions were provided by Kenneth Roberts, Loraine West, and an anonymous referee. The authors wish to acknowledge fieldwork support from the Committee for Scholarly Communication with China, the U.S. Information Agency, the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies of the Australian National University, and the Ford Foundation. An exploration of the main themes of this chapter initially was carried out by Hare in collaboration with Sierra Ansley under the support of a Hewlett Foundation Student/Faculty Collaborative Research Summer Grant from Reed College.

Chinese Labor Migration: Insights from Mexican Undocumented Migration to the United States

KENNETH D. ROBERTS

One of the positive aspects of China's socialist development period is that it avoided uncontrolled urbanization and its attendant problems, so visible in the cities of many developing countries. While this outcome was based upon a tightly woven and highly effective system that had restricted population mobility since the mid-1950s, it was hoped that the surge in rural prosperity of the early 1980s, the success of rural industry in the mid-1980s, and the policy of encouraging the development of small and medium-sized cities could together represent a unique model of development "with Chinese characteristics...that ensures that our peasants will never repeat the experience of those farmers who during the early stage of capitalism flooded into the cities after going bankrupt" (Fei, 1986, p. 209).

Nevertheless, China is experiencing a "tidal wave of rural migrant labor" (*mingong chao*) to its cities. It began in the early 1980s with the loosening of the constraints that had prevented rural Chinese from living in the cities, increased each year until the 1989 economic austerity program reduced urban job opportunities, and picked up with renewed intensity in 1991. Since then it has grown to an estimated 80 million laborers, making it the largest flow of migrant labor in history.

Impossible to ignore in the large cities of China, the phenomenon has grabbed the attention of the foreign press: *Newsweek*

This is a revised version of "China's 'Tidal Wave' of Migrant Labor: What Can We Learn from Mexican Undocumented Migration to the United States?" *International Migration Review* 31.2 (Summer 1997): 249-93.

Organizational Characteristics of Rural Labor Mobility in China

ZHAO SHUKAI

The organizational characteristics of rural labor mobility in China have two major aspects: the mechanism of how this mobility comes about and the structural function of the various kinds of informal organizations that exist among the mobile populace. Analysis of organizational characteristics is important in the present literature on rural labor mobility for two reasons. First, although several large-scale research projects conducted before 1995 have also touched upon this subject (Cui and Zhao, 1994; Li and Han, 1994; Zhang, Zhao, and Chen, 1995), they all lack systematic description and analysis, not to mention that this was not the primary focus of their research. Second, there is a great deal of controversy surrounding this issue. Peasants are very often criticized for their "blind mobility" (*mangmu liudong*) or "disorderly mobility" (*wuxu liudong*), and government is strengthening and expanding its role in controlling mobility. Regarding the second point, research on informal organizations of the mobile populace is virtually nil. And on this point there is also much misunderstanding among the public. In view of such shortcomings, the present research on organizational characteristics of mobility is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons.

This research was undertaken by the Department of Rural Studies, Development Research Center, in April 1995 in Shanghai and the southern Jiangsu region. Specifically, the research involved interviews of rural migrant laborers in Changqiao town in Suzhou City, Dongxiang town in Wuxi City, Hutang town in Changzhou City, and the neighborhood of Zhoujiaqiao in Changning district of Shanghai. The research adopts a stratified random sampling method and surveys 706 respondents, with 688 valid cases (see tables 1 and 2). In addition, the research team also

Regional Wage Gap, Information Flow, and Rural-Urban Migration

XIN MENG

China had been known to the world as a country with extremely low labor mobility. Although industrialization had taken place, rural-to-urban migration had been rigidly restricted. The economic reform that started in 1978, however, included gradual relaxation of this restriction. Recently, rural-urban migration has become such an important social-economic phenomenon that it attracts a great deal of attention from policy makers and academics alike. One of the most important functions of this massive migration is to supply labor to the booming areas of China, in particular the more developed coastal regions, thereby preventing dramatic wage increases and allowing relatively sustainable growth in the near future.

Although the stage of economic development varies significantly across China's urban regions, they are all more developed relative to their surrounding rural regions. As a result, many rural residents from all over China migrate to various urban regions where the associated stages of economic development and the degree of marketization differ considerably. Surprisingly, despite the fact that rural-urban migration is no longer explicitly constrained by government regulations or policies, a large wage gap is observed between the migrant labor markets of different

I wish to thank Denise Hare, Paul Miller, Corrie Reiman, and an anonymous reviewer for very helpful suggestions and comments. My thanks also go to the Department of Sociology at Beijing University and the Institute of Population at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for their support in providing data. The Jinan survey, one of the data sets used in this paper, was also supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council to the University of Adelaide and by the Department of Economics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University.

TEN

Migrants and the Media: Concerns about Rural Migration in the Chinese Press

DELIA DAVIN

A cursory look at the Chinese press will easily convey to the reader that the migration of rural people to the urban areas is seen as a problem in China today. Headlines and news briefs constantly associate migrants with overcrowding, chaos, crime, violence, high fertility, and illicit sex. There are hugely varied reports of the numbers of rural migrants, but the message is that there are too many of them, and the imagery evoked through the repetition of such words as *wave*, *tide*, and *flood* is that of the uncontrollable forces of nature. As the grandchild of Irish immigrants, as someone who grew up in Britain in the 1950s, and as a citizen of 1990s Europe, I am familiar with the hostility and discrimination that the immigrant often inspires. I was nonetheless surprised when I first began to notice the type of media images of the migrant that have become commonplace in China. After all, they are concerned with *internal* migrants, that is to say Chinese, and usually Han Chinese, people who share a nationality and, perhaps somewhat more questionably, an ethnicity, language, and culture with the host community.

This chapter sets out to document these negative media images of rural migrants in the cities and then looks at why the arrival of large numbers of their rural compatriots causes so much alarm to the urban population of China. The discussion focuses on rural migration to the city. I am aware, of course, that a substantial proportion of total migration is rural to rural, or rural to small towns or border regions. These movements are not of concern here because they have not attracted the same level or type of media attention. The popular stereotype of the migrant in the Chinese press is of the peasant laborer seeking work in the big

The Relationship between Foreign Enterprises, Local Governments, and Women Migrant Workers in the Pearl River Delta

SHEN TAN

Export-oriented industrial enterprises in the Pearl River Delta (the Delta) in southern Guangdong Province have achieved rapid growth since the 1980s. What has equally made the Delta conspicuous is its high concentration of mobile women workers: more than four million in 41,596 square kilometers. Such a phenomenon is not found in other regions of China and probably doesn't exist elsewhere in the world. These workers come from rural areas all over the country and are thus called *da gong mei* (working girls) by local people.¹

This essay draws from a collaborative project between CASS and Zhongshan University. I want to thank the Bureau of Township and Village Enterprises of Guangdong Province, governments of sample regions, and Zhenglin Guo for assisting with the survey; the Ford Foundation for funding the study; and Maryann Burris, Ye Zhang, Stephen McGurk, Xiaodong Ma, and Dongxiao Liu for helpful discussions.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all the data and materials referred to in this essay come from the Survey on Women Migrants in the Pearl River Delta conducted in June 1994. The survey covered nine townships/districts that belong to six cities. We conducted questionnaire interviews with migrant workers of both sexes and obtained 1,021 valid observations. We randomly chose 80.7 percent of the sample from the streets in the industrial zones where workers were walking away from work and residential areas where migrant workers lived; local governments collected the rest of the sample from local firms. Because our research focus was migrant women, we deliberately chose more migrant women (74.7 percent) than men. Preliminary results show that these migrant workers came from Hunan, Sichuan, other regions of Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Anhui.

“Insider” and “Outsider” Community Strategies toward Migrant Workers

XIAODONG MA

In contrast to the overwhelming visibility of rural-to-urban labor flows in China since the 1980s, rural-to-rural migration from the hinterlands to the prosperous coastal rural regions has been overlooked not only in its volume but also in its characteristics. A major cause of the rural-to-rural flow of labor is the development of township and village enterprises (TVEs). In the eastern coastal rural areas, which produce two-thirds of TVE gross domestic product (Gao, 1993), the proportion of migrant labor has increased rapidly. In many villages and townships in this region, nonlocal workers account for one-half to two-thirds of TVE employees, and thus have become a principal force of TVE development. Among these rural migrant laborers, women comprise a considerable proportion. This chapter examines the status of migrant workers in the community labor market using an intensive case study of Gutingmiao village in Wuxi County, Jiangsu Province. The effect of the entrance of migrants on the “status of residents” in the host community is analyzed. The case study suggests that stratification and segregation of the labor market is strengthened by the entry of migrants. The chapter explores the concepts of “insider” and “outsider” and the underlying community strategy toward migrant workers. The special vulnerability of female migrants as born “outsiders” in the traditional patrilocal marriage sense and as outsiders through their migrant status is examined.

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