

ZE1-WS23-560c.

1. Organisational characteristics of rural labour flows in China

Zhao Shukai, *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.1, 1997

Based on statistics and case study material collected in surveys, the article delineates the organisational features in rural labour flows in China through descriptive analyses. The author states that the flow is voluntary (a basic feature) and self-organised (a major form). The organisational structure of migrant workers can be classified into three types, namely, that aiming at production and management, at enhancing daily contact and friendship and that following secret society traditions. Government departments themselves also face problems of poor organisation and inefficiency in managing rural labour flows. The article discusses three main ways of adjusting management styles: arriving at a clear definition of the term 'ordering' [1], to establish a people-oriented administration directive, to emphasize the active role played by informal networks. The article is divided into three parts:

The first part looks into the mechanism that triggers the flows. The first departures from home villages are usually organised by the migrant workers themselves, who leave en masse. The focus of these self-organised drifts is family connections. The first departures are movements from villages to cities; when the immigrants face some kind of exploitation and see their rights harmed in the urban workplace, they will move on to a new workplace where they hope to seek new interests. New work relations and independent information channels - play a part in this process, whereas formal intermediary employment agencies diminish in their influence on this group of people.

The second part analyses unofficial organisations set up by migrants. These groups are maintained internally by simple social relations and have not acquired a full organisational structure, but nonetheless possess members that are relatively stable in number. The author classifies such organisations into three types, and pinpoints their different organisational characteristics, member formation, internal structure and functions.

The third part of the article suggests possible improvements in rural labour flow management. The author believes in the adoption of a three "single" managerial method, that is, a single agency, a single document, and a single fee. The government has to set up a specific migrant worker management unit to fight against various licence charge abuses made to migrant workers, and also to sensibly channel migrant worker flows.

2. The surge of migrant workers in China and its impact on the country's economic development

Wang Hongchun, *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.4, 1997

This article is divided into two parts:

The first part analyses the waves of migrant workers, how they stand today, the reasons for them and future trends. The principle reasons for the rural exodus are: the prospect of a higher income, the acquisition of skills and aspirations to urban life. These are direct and personal factors, but other reasons include excessive growth in the agricultural labour force, insufficient agricultural resources, slow rural development, inadequate investment in agriculture, an excessive burden on farmers and feeble profits in agriculture compared with other sectors. Floods of migrant workers may entail three consequences all of which are likely to be correlated with future state strategies and will determine the gap between urban and rural socio-economic development. The first possibility is that the gap will widen, resulting in a bigger influx of migrant workers into the cities; the second is that the gap may shrink, thus curbing the rush; and the third possible outcome is the persistence of the present situation.

The second part of the article examines the consequences of this surge. To start with, it alters the family income and financial situations of migrant workers. It also provides the local economy with capital and a trained labour force. Moreover, the phenomenon boosts the development of the market economy, which not only favours the country's gradient development strategy[2], but also promotes the growth of the labour market and accelerates the structural adjustments of industry. Lastly, the influx of migrant workers may change the government's administrative policies, notably the household registration (*hukou*) system[3]. This migratory surge has become the third remarkable phenomenon in recent history following the householder's responsibility system (HRS)[4] and township enterprise development[5], and for the first time marks the active participation of rural workers in the process of urbanisation and industrial reform.

3. Existing institutions for, and identity recognition of, migrant workers in China

Chen Yingfang, *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.3, 2005

This article starts off with the notion of 'citizen's rights' and looks into the institutional background and identity construction mechanism of the rural newcomers and their "non-citizenship" in the cities. The article argues that the government should maintain the existing household registration system in the long run and a system for migrant workers. At present, the decentralising politics of the central government and self-serving local administrations do not help promote migrant workers' rights. Meanwhile, migrant workers have become 'the third rank'[6] in Chinese society. As this particular group is taking form and their presence becoming widely recognised, this not only constitutes a legal basis for the current institutional system for them, but also helps shape their awareness of their rights and encourage them to stand up for their interests.

The author believes that the widely maligned household registration system segregating the urban and the rural populations is being sustained primarily to fulfil government needs. This system plays an essential part in maintaining social order on behalf of the national and local administrations at all levels. Not only does it limit the free movement of citizens and control the size of urban population, but it also plays a crucial role in social resource distribution. The government can reduce the financial burdens of education, medical care and social security by excluding the agricultural population[7] by means of the household registration system.

In recent years, along with the advance in market reforms, the government has introduced a series of new policies necessitated by from the same market reforms. The Party and the government urge local administrations at all levels, municipal governments, functional departments and government organs to 'ensure the rights of migrant workers'. Yet the state neither abolishes the Household registration system nor provides the migrants with financial support for compulsory education and social security. The government has designated regions and municipalities in which to implement measures for protecting the rights of migrant workers. Consequently, this reduces their status and the quality of their treatment, descending from more privileged 'nationals' to less privileged 'citizens'. However, since municipal governments usually act first and foremost in their own favour, there has been slow progress in changing the household registration system policy.

The article also points out that there is a widespread sense of injustice among migrant workers. However they can only remain a 'silent majority'. When faced with the municipal government, they generally neither complain nor voice their opinions, and content themselves with a nebulous status between the 'rural population' and 'city-dwellers'. Since the 1980s, migrant workers have acquired a 'third identity' built by the Chinese system and culture. For the migrant workers to obtain their rights, the issue of 'civil rights' must first be brought to the fore and dealt with, because these "floating" rural workers deserve an improvement in their rights and fairer treatment.

4. Analysis of migrant workers' social support networks

Wang Yi and Tong Xing, *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.2, 2004

This article regards migrant workers as a 'transitional group', who are being transformed from 'rural people' into 'city-dwellers'. Their social support network is a social network by which fellow workers draw resources from network members rather than themselves, to resolve day-to-day problems and to ensure a normal daily life. For these migrant workers, stepping into an unknown urban world means leaving their beloved rural community behind. This article looks into the social support network of migrant workers who undertake manual jobs or small businesses in Nanking, and compares this network with the social network of urban and rural residents in Tianjin. The conclusions are as follows:

First, the size of social support networks of migrant workers is smaller than that of city-dwellers and rural residents. They tend to be smaller in scale, closer in connections, with high homogeneity and low heterogeneity.

Second, although various aspects of rural community life have changed, the social network that is woven by family links and local connections has kept its original social nexus and has not transformed. This phenomenon can be explained by the indifference and disregard (at best) of the municipal departments and city dwellers towards migrant workers who are at the bottom of the social ladder.

Third, compared to the rural residents' networks, the role of local connections (e.g. through neighbours and fellow countrymen) in providing support to migrant workers diminishes. Also, unlike urban dwellers, the professional connections of migrant workers are not as prominent as their

family relations. It is therefore not a traditional, rural practice to rely on a strong family bond, but a rational choice, which is based on financial considerations made within that social structure.

5. Analysis of push and pull factors that influence rural-urban population flows in China

Li Qiang, *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.1, 2003

The 'push-pull' theory states that under certain conditions in a free market economy with free population movements, the reason people migrate is to change their living conditions through relocation. Improved living conditions in host cities constitutes the pulling force for migrants while unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions at home become the pushing force. The core assumption of this article is that the Chinese push-pull model is very different from the rest of the world. The model has been deformed because of the household registration system.

First, using this theory to analyse rural population flows in China, we can see that the major drive that has compelled massive worker migrations is the immense economic attraction of the cities. The Chinese model shares certain similarities with the international model, such as unemployment rates in rural areas, resource distribution policies in favour of cities, and factors affecting travel distance. However, certain phenomena found in the international model, such as rural violence, uncontrolled growth in the rural population and farmers losing their land, do not exist in China.

Second, the household registration system is the crucial factor that influences the Chinese push-pull model. The system is a major institutional obstacle to rural-urban migrations in China. Not only does it act against the normal push-pull forces, it also runs counter to the model.

Third, this loss is due to transformations in both labour force flows and workers' attitudes. This article suggests that notions of migrant workers such as 'expectations in life', 'goals in life' and 'psychological positioning' explain this psychological deformation.

Fourth, because of the factors mentioned above, a particular 'life cycle' has emerged among migrant workers. Those seeking work in cities at a young age later return to their home villages to farm or start a business, giving rise to a continuous diversification and constant turnover in is the case of those who are prepared to return to do so, whereas others who have no intention of doing so - and prefer to settle in the cities instead. Consequently, two different kinds of survival strategies have emerged, according to the respective choices made.

Last but not least, factors like higher education, being female, distance from one's home village, a lower living standard at home, or longer stays in the cities, all contribute to the reluctance of some workers to return to their village, and to the affinity that they form with a group whose aim is to settle in urban areas.

6. From survival rationale to rational social choices: a sociological study on the driving forces

behind the Chinese rural labour force seeking jobs in cities today

Wen Jun *Sociological Studies*, Issue no.6, 2001

The article draws on the rational choice theory[8] used in sociology and starts off the study from a micro-environment point of view, that is, by observing individual behaviour in rural labour, and projecting this onto a macro-environmental scale to examine rural society drifts and related social changes. The purpose is to rationalize the causes of teleological behaviour in their job seeking migration. The author believes that the rationales behind this outflow are as follows:

First, rural labours outflow in the quest for jobs are, on the whole, a display of rational action. We have observed that overall, rural China has followed a path of agricultural involution[9], which can be explained by various factors. In terms of cultural level, traditional rural populations have not yet acquired sufficient education to be able to compare different ways of earning for livelihoods, and have continued to adopt conventional means of living. In terms of socio-economic reasons, low work productivity and precarious living conditions have compelled traditional rural workers to stay within their survival rationale which they are unable to surpass in order to make rational economic or social choices.

Second, by combining macro and micro factors, we can see that the exodus of contemporary rural jobseekers in China is actually the result of survival pressures and rational choices. Making a rational choice based on survival instincts in order to adapt to pressures in life, is what matters first ; and it is only when the pressures are great enough at home villages and when institutional conditions have changed in favour of rural labour flows that the outflow of job seeking peasants may start.

Third, this exodus also expresses a kind of social rational choice. During the decision-making process, the farmers are likely to follow a logical sequence: first, choices are made under survival rationales, and when the right moment comes, choices are to be made according to economic and then social rationales.

Fourth, before turning their rational choices into a reality, rural workers feel the weight of survival pressures as well as constraints from traditional mentalities and institutional arrangements. They will have to consider the possibility of mobility in the real world, and whether the cost of leaving their village is higher than that of staying behind, despite agricultural involution.

Fifth, if we had the inbuilt resources and regulations, then these enterprising rural workers would not be powerless facing such a social structure. On the contrary, they would first consider their own survival, form concrete objectives, then act accordingly, with due thought, for their own development. In terms of micro-environment, this means that rural workers will have increased their self-awareness and the overall decision-making ability.

Sixth, the poorer the area the more unlikely its inhabitants are to leave or migrate. Apart from each place's unique history and culture, we see that the major reason for staying behind is actually embodied in survival rationales. Rational decisions to climb the ladder are not without conditions,

more specifically, the attainment of financial resources in terms of cost-effectiveness weighing against the choice made more decision-making possibilities and the tangible external environments in which choices are made.

Finally, rural workers in China have not yet awakened to rational choices based on economic considerations, mainly due to the traditional family-oriented culture. Unlike in Western countries, rational decision-making units in China tends to be the families and not the individuals, often compelling the Chinese to make choices after having consulted the opinions of their family, which is generally the ultimate decision making unit.

[1] That is to say, to organise the flows through 1) formal channels i.e. government departments, employment agencies. 2) informal networks i.e. through family relations or local connections 3) no organisation in any way whatsoever: the migrant worker sets off to seek employment in cities without any information or help.

[2] Gradient development strategy refers to the government policy in prioritising certain regions (the so-called ‘up-the-ladder regions’ during the process of economic development by concentrating production factors such as capital, technologies and labour in these areas. Regions not in immediate attention are regarded as ‘down-the-ladder regions’.

(source: <http://www.wanfangdata.com.cn/qikan/periodical.Articles/lldk/lldk2001/0101/010107.htm>)

[3] A “hukou” refers to residency permits (household registration) issued in China that officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such the name of the person, date of birth, the names of parents, and name of spouse, if married. (source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukou>)

[4] An asset-specific contract form that concerns collective property rights and land tenure in rural China.

(source: <http://202.114.9.36:8001/xwlv/detail.jsp?channelid=65015&record=289>)

[5] The term refers to the different types of enterprises that are established in townships (including the villages under their jurisdiction) with the bulk of their capital being invested by rural economic collectives or farmers and that undertake the obligations to support agriculture. (source: Law of the People’s Republic of China on Township Enterprises, Article 2)

[6] A new social stratum between rural- and city-dwellers.

[7] As opposed to the non-agricultural population. (source: <http://chinadatacenter.org/newcdc/BookListDetail.asp?ID=1391>)

[8] The theory assumes that individuals choose the best action according to stable preference functions and constraints facing them. (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rational_choice_theory)

[9] The process of agricultural involution occurs when labour absorption has increased while labour productivity has declined in agriculture. (source: <http://www.economics.ucr.edu/papers/papers02/02-02.pdf> page 3)

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