

## In a Tidal Wave, China's Masses Pour From Farm to City



Peak travel time at an overwhelmed rail station in Guangzhou, China.

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**B**EIJING — Anyone who has visited China's ballooning, chaotic cities cannot help but notice the construction cranes. It is not unheard of to count 50 cranes, maybe more, rising between new concrete apartment towers or thickets of half-built skyscrapers. They twist in the twilight haze like enormous insects. Less obvious are the armies of migrant workers toiling below: the soot-faced men in yellow hard hats pouring cement at infinite work sites; the farmers arriving at bus or train stations, often hundreds at a time with possessions bundled in nylon sacks; the girls flooding out of thousands of dying villages to fill the humming factories along China's southern coast.

But it is the workers that history is likely to notice. The tide of these migrants, surging for years yet still gathering speed, has now reached historic dimensions: China is in the midst of the largest mass migration the world has ever seen. Not that the rest of the world is paying much attention, because this migration does not involve crossing borders.

But its scale already dwarfs the migrations that reshaped America and the modern Western world. China, by official count, has 114 million migrant workers who have left rural areas, temporarily or for good, to work in cities, and that doesn't include tens of millions of family members who moved with them. Government experts predict the number will rise to 300 million by 2020, eventually to 500 million. Today, Shanghai alone has three million migrant workers; by comparison, the entire Irish migration to America from 1820 to 1930 is thought to have involved perhaps 4.5 million people.

"This is the largest movement in human history," said Cheng Li, a government professor at Hamilton College, in Clinton, N.Y., who specializes in China. "It is far bigger, and the speed is unprecedented." For now, the government is encouraging migration to promote its immediate goal of providing cheap factory and construction labor and its long-term goal of urbanization. Every wealthy modern nation has had to shift from a rural-based economy to an urban one in order to prosper. China is trying to make this

transition - which involves a fifth of the world's population - in record time. How well, or poorly, the government handles this migration will determine whether these workers help create a middle-class society or just form a permanent underclass in a country that has already become sharply divided between rich and poor.

The Chinese are also trying to do it with a political system that once isolated farmers in a virtual apartheid and remains among the most oppressive in the world. Even as restraints ease, migrants often live as outcasts in cities; they lack full residency rights and are often denied basic services like schooling and health care. In September, Zeng Peiyan, a member of China's state council, or cabinet, announced that migrant workers at thousands of construction projects, many of which are authorized by the government, were owed \$43 billion in unpaid wages. "Some have remained unpaid for up to 10 years," he said, according to state media.

But they keep coming because poverty in the countryside is hopeless. In this way, China's migrants are like the illegal immigrants in the United States. The farmer from Ecuador who pays a trafficker to smuggle him to a job in an American chicken plant is not much different from a peasant from rural Henan Province who follows a construction boss to Shanghai. Both are exploited and work with few legal protections. Both share crowded apartments with other migrants. But both send back much of what they earn to relatives left behind. Last year, China's migrants sent back \$45 billion. The countryside would die without it.

Even as China has succeeded in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, the Asian Development Bank recently estimated that 583 million of its 1.3 billion people still live on less than \$2 a day; 203 million of those live on less than \$1 a day. Most are in the countryside.

For America's defining domestic migrations, history has recorded specific triggers: the 300,000 people who headed west in the California Gold Rush were chasing the news that a small gold nugget had been discovered in a valley of the Sierra Nevada. The "Okies" who flooded the West Coast during the 1930's were running from the Depression and the Dust Bowl. And the blacks who went north early in the 20th century were escaping Southern prejudice and Jim Crow laws. The seminal events in China were Deng Xiaoping's decision in 1978 to focus on economic development, and the booming growth that followed. But the triggers have been small bureaucratic adjustments that have gradually loosened the draconian control levers of the Maoist era, when a system of household registration essentially shackled people to their villages or cities.

Huang Ping, a sociologist with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said an early step was the introduction in the 1980's of national identification cards, which allowed people to travel and find work more easily. Before, he said, any traveler needed a letter from local officials as well as a household registration card. Later, he said, a system of food coupons that could be used only at local markets was abolished. And, gradually, the household registration system has been loosened. During the 1980's, most migrants sought work in midsize cities in their home provinces. These cities still absorb many of the migrants. But millions now travel 1,000 miles or more to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other huge cities, where economic growth is fastest.

Experts say at least 7 million to 10 million new migrants leave the farm each year, in a trend that is expected to continue. This perception of a limitless labor pool is occasionally contradicted; last month, officials in Guangdong Province, in the south, complained of worker shortages. But some analysts say the problem is not shortages but horrific conditions and unlivable wages that have caused the workers to move on.

Technically, this is a "seasonal" migration, since most workers return home briefly, once or twice a year, to visit family and plant or harvest crops. But more migrants are moving permanently with their families as the urban transition rushes forward. Of course, allowing people to move has been the easy part. Now China's leaders face the job of providing migrants with legal protections, affordable housing, access to schooling and health care. These expensive building blocks are needed to create a real middle-class civil society. The government has started taking some small steps, but major changes will not come easily for a Communist Party rife with corruption and loath to open its political system.

THERE is also the challenge of keeping people employed. If China's economy slowed too much, tens of millions of migrants would be out of work. With so many more people expected to move, the economy will need to roar for a long time. Scott Rozelle, a University of California at Davis professor who specializes in China's rural economy, said much credit for China's prolonged growth belongs to migrant workers who have added value to the economy.

Rural China, now home to about two-thirds of the population, may one day have barely 10 percent. "That means about 800 million people have to move," he said. "But 150 million already have."